



# In Our Own Words: Extraordinary Speeches of the American Century

By Senator Robert Torricelli, Andrew Carroll

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**In Our Own Words: Extraordinary Speeches of the American Century** By Senator Robert Torricelli, Andrew Carroll

This bestselling collection of American oratory is the most comprehensive anthology of its kind: a record of twentieth-century America captured in the words that inspired and infuriated, electrified and galvanized its people. Decade by decade, generation to generation, history unfolds in the famous and infamous expressions of Americans from all walks of life: poets and politicians, artists and astronauts, soldiers and sports legends, preachers and pacifists, humorists and hell-raisers.

*In Our Own Words* bears witness to the forces that swept our nation -- two World Wars, Prohibition, the Depression, the Cold War, the Civil Rights era, Vietnam, the Reagan era, and beyond -- and features the voices of **Theodore Roosevelt** \* **Booker T. Washington** \* **Mark Twain** \* **Emma Goldman** \* **Woodrow Wilson** \* **Marcus Garvey** \* **Oliver Wendell Holmes** \* **George S. Patton** \* **Pearl Buck** \* **Orson Welles** \* **Jackie Robinson** \* **Joseph McCarthy** \* **Rachel Carson** \* **Vince Lombardi** \* **Barry Goldwater** \* **John F. Kennedy** \* **J. Edgar Hoover** \* **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.** \* **Malcolm X** \* **Richard M. Nixon** \* **Frank Zappa** \* **Elie Wiesel** \* **Charlton Heston** \* **Ryan White** \* **Duke Ellington** \* **Billy Graham** \* **Barbara Jordan** \* **Bill Clinton** \* **Cesar Chavez** \* **Helen Keller**...and dozens of others who tell the story of their age from their podiums and soapboxes, courtrooms and convention halls.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Stephen Ambrose Senator Torricelli's selection of great american speeches...makes me...glad that we live in America.

Robert Shrum presidential speechwriter *In Our Own Words* is history at its best, because it is neither filtered nor synthesized but is presented in the words of the speakers themselves

*Library Journal* Uniquely textured....There is no comparable one-volume collection of twentieth-century commentary that evokes such a diversity of viewpoints.

*New York Post* A fine snapshot....All of the great moral and social debates can be found here.

Charlie Rose Just amazing....It really is a history of our time.

#### About the Author

**Andrew Carroll** is the editor of three *New York Times* bestsellers, including *Letters of a Nation* and *War Letters*. Visit [www.warletters.com](http://www.warletters.com).

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### Introduction

The center of my early life was my mother's school library. A lifelong teacher, she tended that collection of books as if it were another child. This might have led to a sibling rivalry. But, as the library grew, I soon realized that I was the principal beneficiary; all damaged or duplicate books became mine, and the walls of my room disappeared behind a covering of publishers' promotions.

As technology progressed, publishers no longer simply sent books, but audio tapes and vinyl records as well. Among the first to arrive was a recording of famous speeches. By today's standards of CD-ROMs and compact discs, these 33 rpm records were of poor quality, the clarity of the speeches faintly obscured by a continuous murmur of pops and hisses. Nevertheless, these scratchy voices reached out from the past and eventually became as familiar to me as neighborhood friends.

The lessons of history learned from these orators varied, and the quality of language and delivery was inconsistent. But this was of no consequence, because an essential lesson emerged overall: Words mattered. Words didn't merely chart or record the unfolding drama of history, they *made* history. The spoken word could incite, console, energize, and instruct. For years I have wanted to convey this power, this spirit of purpose and idealism, in a book of speeches.

*In Our Own Words* is that book -- a collection of over 150 extraordinary orations, eulogies, commencement speeches, sermons, public tributes, testimonies, farewells, courtroom summations, and similar addresses given by Americans in the twentieth century. These are the words that have spurred this nation to war, freed the persecuted, tempered simmering mobs, entertained us with wit and humor, launched cultural and environmental movements, heralded breakthroughs in science and medicine, and reminded us of our ideals in periods of moral and political crisis.

In selecting these speeches we have attempted to capture the triumphs, horrors, discoveries, and travails of the last hundred years. "Extraordinary" in no way implies endorsement of the speakers or their beliefs. The stage of history has showcased not only martyrs and social revolutionaries, but scoundrels, bigots, blowhards, and zealots. As appalling as their words may be -- such as Senator Joseph McCarthy's infamous declaration that he held in his hand a list of "card-carrying Communists" or George Wallace's boldly unapologetic defense of "Segregation now! Segregation forever!" -- they are reflections of their times. We may recoil at their invective, but we cannot ignore their influence.

Assembled chronologically, the speeches are introduced with as little commentary as possible. Many have been edited -- some at the request of the contributors, others because the original speeches were, quite frankly, too prolix for a collection attempting to be both inclusive and historically comprehensive. (All cuts have been designated with ellipses.) The notes preceding -- and sometimes following -- each speech are intended simply to introduce the speaker and the circumstances that prompted the speech and, when appropriate, relate any repercussions.

Some anecdotes, however, proved too irresistible to omit. General George "Blood and Guts" Patton, for example, had a high-pitched, squeaky voice. Sarah Weddington, the lead attorney in the momentous *Roe v. Wade* decision, was only twenty-five years old when she argued on behalf of Jane Roe before the Supreme Court. Robert Kennedy's tribute to Martin Luther King, considered one of the most heartfelt and poetic eulogies ever delivered, was an impromptu address given to an African American crowd in the heart of an urban neighborhood on April 5, 1969 -- just hours after King had been slain. Kennedy's aides, fearing for his safety, implored him not to attend the outdoor rally, but he insisted. A potentially explosive moment was defused through the sheer force of Kennedy's impassioned expression of grief and understanding.

Excavating the archives of history produced other gems. We discovered a little-known speech by Mark Twain to a class of young girls expounding on drinking, smoking, lying, and marrying. A budding political activist named Hillary Rodham spoke before her graduating class at Wellesley College in 1969, and, before beginning her scripted remarks, publicly challenged the comments of the Republican senator who spoke before her. (Ms. Rodham, of course, went on to become our nation's First Lady twenty-three years later.) And as America stood on the brink of financial ruin in the early 1930s, Joseph Strauss, the engineer of the Golden Gate Bridge, announced at the bridge's 1933 groundbreaking ceremony that the nautical -- and very expensive -- structure would serve as a symbol of the resilience of the human spirit.

Throughout these past hundred years we also see technology -- most notably radio, film, television, and the Internet -- dramatically transform the presentation, preservation, and dissemination of speeches. A collection of oratory from the 1800s would consist almost entirely of appearances before institutional gatherings and events. Even the twentieth century began with public speaking as the central form of political communication. Businesses, labor unions, political parties, and congregations heard their leaders talking to them in formal and, to our impatient ears, lengthy speeches.

When it suddenly became possible to broadcast messages to millions of people nationwide, the style, length, and content of speeches changed to accommodate the dynamics of the new media. Electronic communication, in effect, shortened the national attention span. (A term was even created -- the "sound bite" -- to describe easily digestible nuggets of rhetoric intended for mass consumption.) Public speeches, as Doris Kearns Goodwin notes in the Foreword, became more colloquial, delivered with substantially fewer rhetorical flourishes. Even on the most solemn occasions, speakers began adopting a more conversational tone.

Speakers, especially those appearing before the television camera's unblinking eye, had to address audiences

with different cultural, economic, and political opinions -- and prove appealing to them all. No longer could the politician or business leader count on the consensus of a self-selected group of individuals assembled in a convention hall united in purpose. Beyond the last row was a more diverse audience of people watching on their living room sofas or listening on their car radios.

If this new exposure tended to encourage ambiguity and doubletalk, it also made speeches more egalitarian. From some more distant perspective the century might appear to be punctuated solely with the grandiloquence of Roosevelt, Kennedy, or Reagan. But the most lasting impression we hope to leave with this collection is that the power of words is not reserved for the powerful. The use of language to effect change or communicate ideas is limited only by imagination, not birthright. Sixteen-year-old Ryan White, who contracted HIV from a blood transfusion, gave the AIDS epidemic a human face and helped dispel the fear and hysteria surrounding the disease through his courageous public appearances. A former drug addict named Patricia Godley virtually silenced a town hall audience in Washington, D.C., after an emotional, unscripted appeal for all Americans to remember that addicts are human beings "worth fighting for." Broadcast live on ABC's *Nightline*, Godley's message was instantly heard by millions. The sound track of democracy, as it is recorded here, emanates from well beyond the Oval Office or the gilded halls of Congress. Indeed, it is all around us.

So this collection begins with these few observations here but presents no conclusions throughout the chapters themselves. It was not our purpose to write the complete history of this century or encumber these speeches with academic analysis. Rather, it was to have you, the reader, experience firsthand and unfiltered the breathtaking sweep of change and the enormousness of the human experience during these past hundred years. In working on this anthology I have confirmed only what my mother led me to discover a long time ago: There is a power in the spoken word. No image resonates longer or more vividly in the human mind than the picture painted by a well-crafted phrase. It is a power to inspire great good or inflict great harm. Oratory in America during the twentieth century seems to have captured it all.

Senator Robert G. Torricelli Washington, D.C.

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