

Interview: Jon Favreau

Host: Maddie Stengel

On March 31, 2022 I sat down (virtually) with President Barack Obama's first Chief Speechwriter, Jon Favreau. Jon served under Senator and then President Obama from 2005-2013. After leaving the White House (where he left his pen in the hands of Cody Keenan), he co-founded Fenway Strategies, a speechwriting and strategic communications firm. In 2017, Jon went on to co-found Crooked Media, a podcast library and political media network. Jon is now a co-host of Pod Save America and host of Offline with Jon Favreau. During the interview, we discussed a wide range of speechwriting best practices, including storytelling, nuance, and relationship building with the speaker. His insight is not only pragmatic and directly applicable to the occupation, but Jon also maintains a commitment to hope and integrity.

Maddie Stengel [MS]: So! I've got some questions about speechwriting from general to nitty gritty. I want to start out by asking - why? Tell me a little bit about if you were interested only in politics or if you also considered the private sector - what led you here?

Jon Favreau [JF]: I didn't know what I wanted to do when I got to college, but I knew I liked writing. I did the high school newspaper, I was writing opinion columns. I did that in college, too, I went to Holy Cross and was the opinions editor at the Crusader. Then junior year, I went down to DC and was in John Kerry's Senate office when he was getting ready to run for president. When you signed up for an internship in Kerry's office, they asked if you either wanted to be a legislative intern or press intern. Legislative interns had to pick an issue and I liked all the issues, but I couldn't really pick one, so I was like, "Well, I like press and I thought maybe journalism was an option for me so I'll just do press intern." And that turned out to be the best decision I ever made. I sat next to the Communications Director, who was also one of [Kerry's] closest aides and speechwriter, this guy named David Wade. I learned a lot during that internship (and later, on the Kerry campaign), from David about politics and writing. When I joined the Kerry campaign after college, I sat next to the campaign's Chief Speechwriter in the office. And I thought it just seemed like the coolest job, so from that point on, I was like, "I really want to be a speechwriter if they gave me the chance."

MS: And they did!

JF: And they did, because they were broke and losing to Howard Dean, and they couldn't hire a real Deputy Speechwriter

mutual laughter

MS: When you sit down to write, how do you get your head around writing a speech that captures someone else's voice and stories, but still persuasively delivers a complex message? How much of your voice and values come through that, how much of theirs - tell me a bit about that introductory process.

JF: One thing I've learned through the years is that to succeed as a speech writer, you can't allow your own voice and values to bleed into the speech. It's not a platform for you to tell people what you actually think through someone else. If you want to do that, run for office yourself. I was lucky with Obama because the two of us actually have very similar thoughts about politics and a similar worldview. There were very, very few issues where we differed over the years. What I did to be successful is read *Dreams from My Father* many times. I went to every single interview he did and if I didn't go, I'd read the transcript. Every single town hall, I'd read the transcript of the questions and the answers. So I got into his head and learned not only how he spoke, but how he thought. Your main client is the person that you're writing for in a political operation. Then you also have policy people who want you to deliver a policy message, you have communications and political people that want you to deliver those messages, so they're sort of your clients too. A lot of times I was the go-between between Barack Obama, who wanted to say one thing, and the consultants that want to make sure that you get **this** message out. You have to balance both. But at the end of the day, I always remembered that my most important client was the guy that I was writing for.

MS: You talked about his books and books inevitably come with stories, so I'm curious about the role of storytelling in the position of a speechwriter. What does it do for you?

JF: I think it's incredibly important, maybe the most important aspect of speechwriting and delivering speeches. We understand the world through stories, we're persuaded through stories. When I heard Barack Obama give that speech in Boston, the 2004 convention speech, what struck me more than anything was that I had come to see speeches from politicians as collections of applause lines and one liners - Obama gets up there and the whole speech is a story from beginning to end. He introduced himself, he introduced his biography, where he came from, he talked about how his life story fit within the larger American story. And then it was a speech about how what makes America great is not only the founding documents, but our journey to live up to those documents when we have fallen short, and the values that connect all of us even when we're very different. I was always cognizant of the fact that with every speech we were writing, we were trying to tell some kind of a story.

MS: What ended up fueling the speeches that maybe weren't as grand or ceremonial, the smaller ones that he would deliver? How did you prepare [the President] with stories and information for the less grand things?

JF: I think you start from “what is the goal of this speech? Who is the audience? What are we trying to persuade the audience of? And then what is the most effective way to do that?” So if we're trying to persuade people that it is important to reform the healthcare system, [but] I'm someone who is not paying super close attention to politics, what is going to most compel me to believe that we should reform this entire system? Maybe it's a story of someone who couldn't afford health care and really needed it. Maybe it's reassuring people that when we do reform the system, they'll still be able to have the things that they like about the current system and we're going to change the things they don't like, and *here's how we do it*. It's credible. All of it comes from, what is the audience thinking? And how do we persuade them? I think the goal of every speech should be to persuade someone to think differently or act differently than they would have otherwise.

MS: When do you think you were most successful doing that?

JF: Pre-White House, it was the Iowa Jefferson-Jackson speech in the primary. Hillary was ahead of us and we were gaining some momentum in the fall. But, Barack Obama was pretty far behind during the early stages of that primary. All the candidates had 10 minutes during the Iowa Jefferson-Jackson dinner to deliver a speech from memory that was their final case for why caucus goers should caucus for them. We worked *really* hard to distill his case down to 10 minutes. He had to make a case for himself, he had to make a case for why it should be him and not Hillary without attacking Hillary openly but also clearly drawing contrasts, AND he had to inspire people to want to brave the bitter cold to go out and sit in a town hall or a gym for a couple hours on a cold February night to caucus for him.

Then once we got to the White House, The Affordable Care Act was almost dead multiple times. I remember in the summer of 2009, after Ted Kennedy had passed away and it didn't look like we would have the votes, [Obama] delivered an address to Congress. The purpose of the speech wasn't really to get any Republicans on-board because we didn't think any would. But there were a lot of Democratic members of Congress who were about to give up, saying “this is too hard, I'm gonna lose my race.” That speech did succeed at getting all the Democrats in Congress back on-board, which allowed us to pass the bill. I credit Obama with this, he said “I want to lay out all of the arguments people are hearing about the Affordable Care Act.” We went argument by argument and rebutted it and then told the story about what the bill would do, how we'd pay for it, and then tried to inspire people at the end with a letter that Ted Kennedy had written to Barack Obama before he died to be read after he passed away - and it worked, which was cool.

MS: Something that stands out to me is the time frame that you have to work with a speech, not to mention all of the different subjects and themes you want to get into that small space. Do you find value in nuance and subtlety when you're writing a speech like that? Or is that something you take out?

JF: No, I find incredible value in nuance and subtlety. In fact, one of my big pet peeves about politics today is that no one does nuance and subtlety very well anymore. *laughter* I do think that's because we're all online so much, and between cable, Twitter, all this shit, we are very good at knowing how people who share our political viewpoints think. AND we're also pretty good at knowing what people on the complete opposite side of us think. We often fail to understand that most people in the country are not rabid consumers of news, especially political news, and therefore their views on a host of issues are nuanced, subtle and complex. If you don't reflect that complexity in your own speeches, it's less likely that people will listen to you. So I actually think it's very important to make an argument with as much subtlety and nuance and complexity as it deserves because I think that's meeting people where they are. That's respectful of the journey that other people are on in shaping their views.

MS: To me, it sounds like you really credit the audience - I interviewed Cody Keenan last week, and something he said was "you are not smarter than your audience." Is that something he picked up from you?

JF: Respecting the audience is important. That's another thing that drives me nuts today, when you tweet something, and a group of people on Twitter will be like, "well, that's not gonna work because voters are dumb or voters don't pay attention blah, blah, blah" And it's fine to be frustrated and to complain about other people's views and actions, but at the end of the day, we're all stuck together in this country. The only way we win is to convince a majority of people (because of structural imbalances in politics, a supermajority of people at this point) that we're right.

MS: Yes.

JF: We can complain about the Electoral College, the Senate, gerrymandering all we want - the only way to change that, again, is to convince a whole supermajority of people that we're right. To do that, you really do need to meet people where they are. You need to respect them. And not just out of the goodness of your heart, but just from a purely Machiavellian standpoint - how often are you persuaded by someone who talks down to you, yells at you, talks about shit that you're not familiar with? [Our] job is to persuade. That's what democracy rests on, the ability to persuade, and the way you do that in a democracy is with argument. And the core of an argument is words, right? So that's what we're in the business of as speechwriters.

MS: I'm going to shift a little bit. Personally, I am fascinated by the Ukrainian President Zelensky, as many of us are now, but something that grabs me is his ability to engage people across languages. I am wondering how a speechwriter can or even *should* keep an awareness of words translating languages?

JF: That's an interesting question. I do think that what we try to do as speechwriters and people who deliver speeches, like President Zelensky, is constantly think about what brings us all together. We think about universalism and universal values that connect people across distance, race, identity, geography, and gender. One of the figures that inspired Obama and inspired me, is Martin Luther King Jr. When you look back at King's speeches, King could have easily chosen to be divisive. He could have spoken specifically about the Black experience in America and *only* the Black experience in America. In a way he did, he spoke about subjugation, discrimination, prejudice, brutality. But when he talked about where he wanted to go, and where he wanted to see the country go, he spoke about ideals that should be universal. He leaned on those founding documents, not because [they] were widely representative of all races and fair to all races and genders, they weren't, but because buried in those founding documents is a promise that we have never reached as a country. It is a promise that should speak to everyone: that we are all created equal, that we should all be allowed to pursue our own happiness. I think the masters of persuasion throughout history spoke to universal values and aspirations. I worry sometimes today that, because of the division and the tribalism that plagues our country and all around the world, we don't aspire to those universal values and aspirations in our speech.

MS: I spoke to Dan Schwerin from the Clinton world, and he said something that I'm holding on to, about how the landscape is changing given the internet and the way things are clipped into little soundbytes. That makes me think about permanence. So I'm wondering, given the internet, given that kind of permanence, how do you see the global responsibility of a speechwriter?

JF: Our global responsibility is to craft speeches that persuade, that represent a sort of a set of universal ideals and aspirations that anyone can hang on to. I think social media and the way the media covers all this today, it incentivizes hot takes, it incentivizes one liners, it incentivizes pithy quotes. But when you look back 5, 10, 15 years from now, you're not going to be proud of a line that was a really sick burn of Donald Trump. You're going to be proud of a line, hopefully a whole speech, that can speak to people across the ages, no matter what changes. I worry about speechwriters moving away from telling a cohesive story from beginning to end thinking, "I've just got to get out the five or six bytes that will be tweeted." Because I think once we do that and we lose the sense of story, you lose context. You lose complexity, subtlety and nuance, like we talked about. I think all of those are ingredients necessary for persuasion. We've said this on the Pod all the time, "Make America Great Again" on its own would never have worked had it not been the distillation of Trump's entire message about what he was actually pining for. We all knew what it was. "Make America Great Again" was a good distillation of that, just like "Change We Can Believe In" or "Yes We Can" were good distillations of Obama's message. On their own, those words didn't really mean much. You need the story and in order to have the story, you need to have a time and space and complexity to tell it.