

Melania Trump and the Issue of Plagiarism

by Michael Curtis

Originality in any form does not come easily. Few politicians can claim the mantle of Demosthenes, the 4th century B.C. perfect orator of ancient Greece, or Cicero, his later Roman counterpart, or Winston Churchill in our own times, for their utterances. Few writers can forge a unique prose voice like Ernest Hemingway. Few jazz musicians can devise a new style such as that of Charlie Parker, with his revolutionary and challenging harmonic ideas.

Plagiarism is common in all areas of life. It is so frequent that one cannot argue that by this sin of plagiarism fell the angels, to plagiarize Shakespeare writing on Thomas Cromwell. Appropriation of another person's language, thoughts, and even ideas is unfortunately familiar to many high school and college teachers who grade the papers of students. This form of dishonesty is not limited to the academic world but is all too common in the literary field, as one knows from the case of Doris Kearns Goodwin and Stephen Ambrose, and frequently in the political world where utterances are made without proper acknowledgment.

No one should be surprised by the degree to which politicians today, perhaps because of demands on their time or their dependence on inefficient staff, or their inherent dishonesty, help themselves to the words of others without acknowledgment.

The U.S. mainstream press again was guilty of pious hypocrisy in stressing the fact that one paragraph in the speech of Melania Trump, the wife of Donald, and an inexperienced speaker, at the Republican Convention in Cleveland on July 18, 2016 resembled a similar paragraph in the speech by Michelle

Obama at the Democratic National Convention in Denver in 2008.

The few words plagiarized were little more than simple or banal homilies. It doesn't need an intellectual giant to suggest that people should be treated "with respect" or talk of the strength of the dreams of children and their willingness to work for them. Ironically, the mainstream press forgot to mention that Michelle Obama in her own speech had plagiarized a number of lines from Saul Alinsky's book, *Rules for Radicals*.

Politically, plagiarism is worse than a crime, it's a mistake for which the perpetrators have sometimes had to pay a price. To take only the last few years, evidence of plagiarism, or intellectual dishonesty, has led to the resignation, among others, from office of the following: the German Defense Minister in 2011; the Hungarian President in 2012; the Romanian Prime Minister in 2012; the German Education Minister in 2013; and Senator John Walsh of Montana in 2014.

Some offenders have been fortunate after their behavior has been discovered. Perhaps the best known recent case is the U.S. Vice-President. Joe Biden as a student had plagiarized a legal article in a paper he wrote for a course in law school, but was not expelled. But Biden, as Delaware Senator in 1987 and a presidential candidate plagiarized a considerable part of a moving highly personal speech by Neil Kinnock, then leader of the opposition British Labour Party. After Michael Dukakis, the presidential candidate rival of Biden at the time, released a video of the Kinnock and Biden speeches, Biden was obliged to end his campaign.

In similar fashion, the revelations that two recent presidential candidates had been guilty of plagiarism may have been a factor in their loss. Ben Carson had taken material from various sources including conservative historians to use in his 2012 book, *America the Beautiful*. Rand Paul in his book *Government Bullies* had used a number of pages from a Heritage

Foundation Case Study. Interestingly, candidate Barack Obama survived the correct accusation by Hillary Clinton in 2008 that he had plagiarized a speech by Deval Patrick, Governor of Massachusetts.

At a higher level there are the instances of plagiarism by world political and religious leaders, Vladimir Putin and Martin Luther King, Jr.

As a student the Russian leader wrote a dissertation in 1996 on strategic planning for a degree equivalent to a Ph.D. in economics. The dissertation is virtually inaccessible, but two researchers at the Brookings Institution were able to see it.

They discovered that Putin had taken more than 16 pages paper from a book, *Strategic Planning and Public Policy* by two American economists, William King and David Cleland, published in 1978 and translated into Russian.

Rather sadly, after accusations had been made, a committee of scholars appointed by Boston University in 1991 reported that the doctrinal dissertation and some other academic papers written by Dr. King contained passages taken, intentionally or not, without authorization from a number of authors including Paul Tillich.

The case of Melania Trump can now be put rest. In spite of the adverse criticism about her, the Republican campaign is unlikely to take disciplinary action against any member of the staff who might be responsible for the controversy. It is more appropriate to recall the words of Joe Biden when his plagiarism was revealed in 1987: the incident was just "a tempest in a teapot."