



**THE BLOG** 07/30/2009 05:12 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

# The Best Speech I Ever Wrote



By Marty Kaplan

Elie Wiesel wagged a bony finger at me. “History will be watching you, young man,” he warned. We were on the tarmac at Geneva International Airport, and yes, I was a young man, not yet 29, though after the week I’d just been through, I felt the age I am today, almost exactly 30 years later.

“Give him a copy,” Vice President Walter F. Mondale instructed me, and I handed a few typed pages to Wiesel. It was the draft of a speech that Mondale would deliver the next day, to the United Nations Conference on Indochinese Refugees.

In the four years since the last U.S. helicopter, crowded with evacuees, had lifted off from a Saigon rooftop, hundreds of thousands of “boat people” — those who hadn’t been killed or imprisoned — had been fleeing Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, crowded onto pitiful crafts, starving, shark-bait, on the South China Sea. The lucky ones who made it to the shores of other nations were largely being turned back or interned in barbed-wire camps.

Mondale hadn’t been scheduled to go to Geneva. We — his staff — were spending the week with him flying all over the country, with Mondale giving speeches trying to persuade wavering senators, via their constituents, to ratify the second Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty with the Soviets. I had worked on those speeches for months, not knowing of course that the Senate would ultimately balk, and I had been staving off exhaustion until the last draft of the trip’s last speech, in Philadelphia, had been delivered.

But soon after we took off on the trip, we were ambushed by the news that President Jimmy Carter had fired his Cabinet. This was in the wake of his mysterious retreat to Camp David, where — instead of giving the energy speech the country had been promised — he summoned teachers and preachers and people from every other segment of society to confer about the country’s spirit. Finally he returned to the White House and gave a speech about America’s “crisis of confidence,” which became known — though he never used the word — as the “malaise” speech.

All this was going on in the days before our SALT II trip, and there was a glimmer of a chance that the country would react well to Carter’s speech, but those hopes hit the rocks when the president asked all his Cabinet secretaries to

offer their resignations, leading Americans to wonder whether something weird and unstable was going on in the White House.

It was only a matter of hours after we heard about the firing — I think we were in Sioux Falls, South Dakota — that we learned that President Carter was not going to Geneva, as had been planned, to speak to the U.N. conference, and that Mondale would need to fill in. Right after his speech to the Philadelphia World Affairs Council, we were to fly overnight to Geneva.

The problem for me — I was Mondale's chief speechwriter — was that there was no Carter speech that he could simply give, only a sheaf of memos and briefings that had languished while the President was holed up at Camp David. My job was to digest the background material and come up with a draft on the flight to Geneva that the State Department and the National Security Council would clear.

Mondale had been active on the boat people problem. He had already convinced Carter that the Sixth Fleet should rescue them on the high seas, and that the U.S. should take in 14,000 refugees a month. The problem was that that was barely enough; what was urgently needed was a massively generous response by the potential nations of asylum in the region.

Luckily, I had terrific people to school me in the policy stuff — Dick Holbrooke and David Aaron — in the couple of days I had to absorb the files. But as Air Force Two headed out over the Atlantic, as far as I could tell I was the only one awake besides the people in the cockpit. What came out of my IBM Selectric II was what Mondale handed to Wiesel — a member of the U.S. delegation to the conference — when we arrived.

I'll never forget the moment when Mondale finished delivering the speech. I'd been told that the most we could hope for, as a reaction from the delegates, was a smattering of polite applause; instead, there was a sustained standing ovation. I caught Wiesel's eye, and he nodded. Maybe there was a glimmer of a smile there as well, but it's the nod I remember; I pretended that it was his way of saying, You did good, kid.

The speech made a difference. The nations stepped up to the crisis. It was one of those rare occasions when words may actually have saved lives.

I would never have had the chance to write it, were it not for Vice President Mondale. Every speech is of course a collaboration, and the speechwriter's code is to abjure authorship. But today I read an article by law professor and historian Joel K. Goldstein calling it "one of the truly eloquent speeches in American history," and since I could use a jolt of ego this morning, and since enough years may have passed, maybe it's okay for me to tell this self-aggrandizing story. Whether the speech deserves Professor Goldstein's kind words, you decide. Here's an excerpt:

### ***Evian and Geneva***

***By Walter F. Mondale***

***July 21, 1979***

*Some tragedies defy the imagination. Some misery so surpasses the grasp of reason that language itself breaks beneath the strain. Instead, we grasp for metaphors. Instead, we speak the inaudible dialect of the human heart.*

*Today we confront such a tragedy. In virtually all the world's languages, desperate new expressions have been born. "A barbed-wire bondage," "an archipelago of despair," "a flood tide of human misery": With this new coinage our language is enriched, and our civilization is impoverished.*

*"The boat people." "The land people." The phrases are new, but unfortunately their precedent in the annals of shame is not. Forty-one years ago this very week, another international conference on Lake Geneva concluded its deliberations. Thirty-two "nations of asylum" convened at Evian to save the doomed Jews of Nazi Germany and Austria. ON the even of the conference, Hitler flung the challenge in the world's face. He said, "I can only hope that the other world, which as such deep sympathy for these criminals, will at least be generous enough to convert the sympathy into practical aid." We have each heard a similar argument about the plight of the refugees in Indochina.*

*At stake at Evian were both human lives - and the decency and self-respect of the civilized world. If each nation at Evian had agreed on that day to take in 17,000 Jews at once, every Jew in the Reich could have been saved. As one American observer wrote, "It is heartbreaking to think of the ...desperate human beings ... waiting in suspense for what happens at Evian. But the question they underline is not simply humanitarian ... it is a test of civilization."*

*At Evian, they began with high hopes. But they failed the test of civilization.*

*The civilized world hid in a cloak of legalisms. Two nations said they had reached the saturation point for Jewish refugees. Four nations said they would accept experienced agricultural workers only. One would only accept immigrants who had been baptized. Three declared intellectuals and merchants to be undesirable new citizens. One nation feared that the influx of Jews would arouse anti-Semitic feelings. And one delegate said this: "As we have no real racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one."*

*As the delegates left Evian, Hitler again goaded "the other world," for "oozing sympathy for the poor, tormented people, but remaining hard and obdurate when it comes to helping them." Days later, the "final solution to the Jewish problem" was conceived, and soon the night closed in.*

*Let us not re-enact their error. Let us not be heirs to their shame.*

*To alleviate the tragedy in Southeast Asia, we all have a part to play. The United States is committed to doing its share, just as we have done for generations. "Mother of Exiles" it says on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty at the Port of New York. The American people have already welcomed over 200,000 Indochinese. Their talent and their energies immeasurably enrich our nation.*

*We are preparing to welcome another 168,000 refugees in the coming year. The governors and the members of Congress in our delegation - as well as outstanding religious and civic leaders throughout America - are a symbol of the enduring commitment of President Carter and the American people. Many nations represented here have risen to history's test, accepting substantial numbers of refugees. The ASEAN states, China, and Hong Kong have offered safety and asylum to over half a million refugees from Vietnam, Laos and Kampuchea since 1975. And others have opened their doors.*

*But the growing exodus from Indochina still outstrips international efforts. We must work together, or the suffering will mount. Unless we all do more, the risk of fresh conflict will arise and the stability of Southeast Asia will erode. Unless this conference gives birth to new commitments, and not simply new metaphors, we will inherit the scorn of Evian. It is a time for action, not words.*

*The freedom to emigrate is a fundamental human right. But no nation is blind to the difference between free emigration and forced exodus. Let us impose a moratorium on that exodus. Let us have a breathing spell during which all of us - governments, voluntary agencies, and private individuals alike - mobilize our generosity and*

*relieve the human misery. And let us urge the Government of Vietnam to honor the inalienable human rights at the core of every civilized society.*

*Our children will deal harshly with us if we fail. The conference at Evian 41 years ago took place amidst the same comfort and beauty we enjoy at our own deliberations today. One observer at those proceedings - moved by the contrast between the setting and the task - said this: "These poor people and these great principles seem so far away. To one who has attended other conferences on Lake Geneva, the most striking thing on the eve of this one is that the atmosphere is so much like the others."*

*Let us not be like the others. Let us renounce that legacy of shame. Let us reach beyond metaphor. Let us honor the moral principles we inherit. Let us do something meaningful - something profound - to stem this misery. We face a world problem. Let us fashion a world solution.*

*History will not forgive us if we fail. History will not forget us if we succeed.*

**Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/martykaplan](http://www.twitter.com/martykaplan)**

*Do you have information you want to share with HuffPost? Here's how.*



**Marty Kaplan** 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director