

“Beneath of the rule of men entirely great the pen is mightier than the sword.”

- Edward George Bulwer-Lytton, *Richelieu*, 1838 II, ii

There are approximately one million words in the English language, each with their own unique flair and connotation. For instance, “saunter” is a synonym for “walk” but paints an entirely different mental image of someone with a certain self-assured air. The same applies to “good” and “delightful,” “youthful” and “childish,” “chatty” and “conversational.” When woven together, words create a tapestry powerful enough to rouse a nation into battle or to ensure peace. They can be the inception of a country or alter the purpose of an individual’s life.

Last June, my parents and I went on a whirlwind college trip, hitting five colleges in the DC area in three days. Naturally, we penciled some time into our hectic schedule to play tourist and visited the memorial of one of my favorite presidents: Abraham Lincoln. His “Gettysburg Address” is a mere 272 words, barely lasting two minutes. However, every word was chosen with such careful consideration of the connotation that it is considered the epitome of speeches. These words, carved in stone on the National Mall, inspired the nation during one of the darkest times in history.

Although he lacks a catchy three-initial name, Lincoln’s rhetoric has a lot in common with that of JFK, MLK and FDR. Their skillful use of language shaped the course of American history. MLK’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” provided logical reasoning for the Civil Rights movements and influenced many moderates to take a stance against discrimination. JFK’s Inaugural Address is well acknowledged as a masterfully written speech. His accessible vocabulary, historical allusions and compelling images of hope united a fractured people who

began to believe they entered a new age. Likewise, FDR's *Fireside Chats* gave hope to Americans when the world seemed dark and was spiraling to war.

It is remarkable how persistent language is. Those great American leaders are all modern compared to the history of the written word. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, dating to pre-Renaissance times, is still studied by literary aficionados and reluctant AP Euro students. Martin Luther's famous phrase, "Here I stand; I can do no other" (Coffman) reverberates to modern day in the steeples of Protestant churches. Thomas Jefferson, a master of eloquent expression, wrote the Declaration of Independence over 200 years ago. This document, simply comprised of parchment and ink, was the catalyst for revolt and founded our country on the proposition that "all men are created equal" (Jefferson). Consequently, the blood of over 50,000 Patriots was spilled in the fight for independence. It was Jefferson's quill scrawling words across a page, not his physical prowess or fighting ability, which sparked our country into revolution.

Not only can words have a profound impact on an entire country of 316 million souls, they can alter a single person's life. My first introduction to the power of language was even before I could read. My late grandmother sent my older brother cassette tapes of the *Harry Potter* series, written by JK Rowling and narrated by Jim Dale. I listened to those tapes so often that I rendered *Goblet of Fire's* tape ten, side B, unusable. More than ten years later I can recite entire passages from the books, word perfect. These words have imprinted themselves in my mind, and as a result, I now spend what little free time I have transcribing episodes for the Potterhead podcast *Alohomora!*

Even esteemed British comedians Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie recognize the power of words. On their SNL-esque show, *A Bit of Fry and Laurie*, they created a sketch entirely about the English language and its originality. Although intended as humor, it struck a chord in me. I

began to wonder, how many more unique sentences might there be, hiding in the thesaurus? For instance, the phrase, "I'm fine," is incredibly hackneyed. But the sentence, "I am feeling rather fine, although I may have received a grade slightly lower than my average test score in my incredibly arduous Calculus class" may be entirely original and never before uttered in precisely the same tone or context. The fact that we, as English speakers, have an almost unlimited supply of thoughts and expressions is somewhat incredible. Why, then, do we insist on repeating the same, uninspired phrases like "I'm fine?" Perhaps it's laziness. Perhaps it's a lack of creativity. Or perhaps it's a lack of confidence in our own beliefs. So many beautiful and original sentences go unheard because people don't feel their unique combinations of speech are worthy of note. Let me make it clear: we are given language to express our thoughts and change the world.

Nothing embodies that so much as the United Nations. The UN is founded on the principle that words carry more weight than force. In my experience at Model UN conferences, I can certainly attest to that. Guided by our assigned country's foreign policy, we craft solutions to real world problems such as terrorism, torture and transnational trade. Once, I represented the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, better known as North Korea. Armed only with my (admittedly quite verbose) verbal assaults against the West, I vehemently pushed for censorship, national sovereignty and the ejection of the so-called South Korea from committee. And despite considerable Western opposition, I was able to fashion a resolution allowing individual countries to determine checks on free speech without regulation by the UN. It passed.

Diplomats, politicians and writers all continue to write because people respond to their work. They understand the complete control of society that they have in their ink stained hands. Their words can directly cause powerful changes such as revolt or a sense of rebirth, or even fill the free time of someone with an obsession of a children's series. Words are our lifeblood, and

we must therefore keep watch over how language is used, as it may alter history textbooks not yet written.

Works Cited

Coffman, Elesha. "What Luther Said." *Christianity Today*. 8 Aug. 2008. Web. 29 Jan. 2015.

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*"In war there is no substitute for victory. ... Whoever said the pen is mightier than the sword
never saw a machine gun."*

- General Douglas MacArthur

Revolutionary War

- America did not secure independence through words; it required soldiers actively fighting in battles

Actions speak louder than words

- President Lyndon B. Johnson promised to end the Vietnam War; however, the war did not end until Nixon was president
- A student may promise his teacher that he won't be late tomorrow, but he still shows up late. His actions show he did not truly mean his words
- Lincoln could not persuade the South to rejoin the Union through his rhetoric. Instead, the Civil War was fought until the South militarily surrendered at Appotomax Courthouse

Franklin D. Roosevelt

- FDR combined his speeches with deeds, such as creating social security, the Public Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration to combat the Great Depression
- His words did not end the Great Depression; political action was required to fight the battle