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The Common Copying of Political Lines

Trump campaign can learn plagiarism lessons from those who've been there

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In her much-anticipated GOP convention speech, Melania Trump called U.S. citizenship “the greatest privilege on planet Earth.” So, that’s at least one line we know wasn’t stolen from Michelle Obama, who was never “really proud” of America until 2008.

Social media trolls and the media are exploding with glee over the paragraph in Melania’s speech that closely mirrors a paragraph in Michelle Obama’s 2008 convention speech. The paragraph wasn’t a Shakespearean sonnet, but rather a few strung-together clichés. But that’s still no excuse. I was an English professor at Georgia College for 7 years. I wouldn’t let this slide in my class, and— given that it embarrasses MSM public enemy Donald Trump — the media certainly isn’t going to let it slide. Now, it’s up to the Trump campaign to handle the situation gracefully.

Here’s a few other plagiarism scandals he might learn from:

1) Biden’s Five Pages of Flub

Law school is tough, but Joe Biden made it tougher for himself by getting his plagiarism on. During his 1988 presidential bid, a faculty report from Syracuse University School of Law released by Biden said he “used five pages from a published law review article without quotation or attribution.” As plagiarism goes, that rates pretty high on the steal-o-meter.

There were academic consequences for Vice President Biden’s plagiarism. He received an F in the class — but, fortunately for him, he was able to retake the course and replace the F with a B. Without that bit of mercy he wouldn’t have been able to pull out his 76th place finish in a class of 85.

Alas, Biden must not have learned anything from his (what's the opposite of Draconian?) punishment because his political speeches on the trail were also heavily plagiarized. This time, from a British Labor Party politician named Neil Kinnock. Biden was forced to withdraw from the 1988 presidential contest. According to Dr. Larry Sabato in *The Washington Post*:

"A barrage of subsidiary revelations by the press also contributed to Biden's withdrawal: a serious plagiarism incident involving Biden during his law school years; the senator's boastful exaggerations of his academic record at a New Hampshire campaign event; and the discovery of other quotations in Biden's speeches pilfered from past Democratic politicians."

2) Obama Flips His Own Plagiarism on Hillary

President Obama emerged from his much less serious brush with plagiarism controversy with more political grace than Biden. During the 2008 Democratic primaries, right before the Wisconsin and Hawaii contests, Hillary Clinton accused Barack Obama of plagiarizing former Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick. Clinton's argument was, "If your whole candidacy is about words, then they should be your own words."

Obama responded by downplaying the transgression, taking responsibility for it, and pointing out Clinton's hypocrisy on the issue.

"Deval and I trade ideas all the time. He has occasionally used lines of mine and at the dinner in Wisconsin I used some words of his. On occasion, Senator Clinton has used words of mine as well."

When pressed on whether he should have credited Patrick, he responded, "I am sure I should have."

President Obama went on to win in Wisconsin and Hawaii and, of course, later locked up the Democratic nomination.

3.) Throwing Wikipedia at the Book

Like the kid who would rather party than go to class, Rand Paul was accused of plagiarizing from a source universally despised among English teachers — Wikipedia. It was also revealed that parts of his book were pilfered and used word-for-word content lifted from The Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute.

Democrats are the last people who should be bringing up plagiarism

According to The Washington Post, Paul's plagiarism seemed "to be more about sloppiness."

Luckily for Paul, people had a couple years to forget about his plagiarism before his presidential run, so his lackluster bid in the 2016 primaries had more to do with the Trump juggernaut rolling over him than his long-forgotten plagiarism scandal.

Compared to these three examples, the plagiarism charges facing the Trump campaign are minor. First of all, like the accusation against Obama, it's only one instance of plagiarism as opposed to a pattern. Second, this is one degree removed from Trump. If Trump himself had plagiarized, the media talking heads would fly off their necks and the Twitter monster would step out of cyberspace and launch a Godzilla-like attack on Cleveland. But, since Trump himself is in the clear on this one, it will vanish into the 24-hour news cycle ether in a few days — as long as there are no further revelations and as long as he doesn't use his recently retired tactic of putting

out fires with gasoline. If it's handled with a simple apology and assurances that the similarities were accidental, there's no reason the Trump campaign can't put this in the rear-view mirror.

Hillary Clinton might try to pull it out against Trump later, but compared to what she's done — mishandling classified information and lying about it for a year, among other things — Melania's speech is — to borrow a phrase from the public domain — much ado about nothing.