

The Mike Gerson I know

by Cal_Thomas

Former White House speechwriter Michael Gerson has been accused of self-aggrandizement and taking credit for speeches he did not fully write, stealing the lines of others and making them his own. The accusations come from his former speechwriting colleague, Matthew Scully, in the September issue of the Atlantic magazine. I have known Mike Gerson for 20 years and have never seen him display symptoms of the twin viruses of arrogance and pride that often infect people who work in politics, government and the media in Washington. Once, at our home for dinner, Mike was asked by a person not as familiar with the profiles of the well placed and powerful what he did for a living. "I work at the White House," he said quietly. There is a way to say this, hoping the questioner will ask for more details so that the person being asked can appear self-effacing, even while he revels in the prestige of the job. That was not the case with Mike. As the questioner probed for more information, which Mike was reluctant to offer, I jumped in and said, "He's the president's chief speechwriter." Mike appeared to blush. He preferred to talk about the president, not himself. When he worked for then-Senator Dan Coats, Indiana Republican, he occasionally helped me with research for speeches and wrote some. He declined payment and recognition for them, but after leaving Coats' office, I insisted on paying him and I recommended him to others. Though he is married and the father of two, to this day I cannot get him to call me by my first name. These are not attributes of a man full of himself whose chief aim is self-promotion. On my first visit to his White House office, I expected to see pictures of him with President Bush, testifying to his access and status. There were none. Instead, he had a cluttered desk in an ordinary-looking office with bare walls. I heard he later got an "upgrade" and maybe there were pictures in that office, but Mike never seemed to me to be the puffed-up type. He quietly campaigned for programs to fight AIDS and poverty, issues not often associated with a Republican administration and unlikely to gain many votes for a party that focuses mostly on abortion, opposition to same-sex marriage and tax cuts. He frequently traveled to Africa to see firsthand the effects of government programs on victims of AIDS and reported his findings without fanfare to the president. All presidential speeches are collaborative efforts. No one person can meet the needs of a president, who must often speak several times a day to different audiences. Most major speeches, such as the State of the Union Address and those about policy initiatives and decisions, must travel through the cabinet agencies as well as numerous advisers. In Gerson's case, the issue isn't whether the president's speeches were fashioned by a team, but whether Gerson took the work of others, made them his own and took the credit to boost his profile. He has sufficient knowledge and talent not to plagiarize others. I have had people plagiarize my work. Rather than saying nothing, or waiting to write an article like Matthew Scully, I immediately contacted the individuals and demanded that they publicly repent. Gerson tells me that Scully never spoke to him about any of the things he writes in the Atlantic article. The man Scully has profiled is not the Mike Gerson I know. Over two decades, one would expect to see signs of an overactive ego and the sin of pride if they exist. I never did. At the 2000 Republican Convention in Philadelphia, I saw Mike at a reception sponsored by National Review. Knowing he had written Gov. George W. Bush's acceptance speech, I asked him if he would be in the hall for its delivery. He said he would not, preferring to walk alone outside. He might have embraced the glory. Instead, he deflected it to the nominee. That was one of many examples I have witnessed of his humility and character. I don't know what motivated Scully to write what he did. It can only help him among the Bush-haters. It can't hurt Mike Gerson, who is a man of integrity and one whose faith, intellectual curiosity and example I admire. (Direct all MAIL for Cal Thomas to: Tribune Media Services, 2225 Kenmore Ave., Suite 114, Buffalo, N.Y. 14207. Readers may also e-mail Cal Thomas at tmseditors@tribune.com.) (c) 2007 Tribune Media Services, Inc.