

POLITICO

Obama's safety net: the TelePrompter

By: Carol E. Lee

March 5, 2009 01:04 PM EST

President Barack Obama doesn't go anywhere without his TelePrompter.

The textbook-sized panes of glass holding the president's prepared remarks follow him wherever he speaks.

Resting on top of a tall, narrow pole, they flank his podium during speeches in the White House's stately parlors. They stood next to him on the floor of a manufacturing plant in Indiana as he pitched his economic stimulus plan. They traveled to the Department of Transportation this week and were in the Capitol Rotunda last month when he paid tribute to Abraham Lincoln in six-minute prepared remarks.

Obama's reliance on the teleprompter is unusual — not only because he is famous for his oratory, but because no other president has used one so consistently and at so many events, large and small.

After the teleprompter malfunctioned a few times last summer and Obama delivered some less-than-soaring speeches, reports surfaced that he was training to wean himself off of the device while on vacation in Hawaii. But no such luck.

His use of the teleprompter makes work tricky for the television crews and photographers trying to capture an image of the president announcing a new Cabinet secretary or housing plan without a pane of glass blocking his face. And it is a startling sight to see such sleek, modern technology set against the mahogany doors and Bohemian crystal chandeliers in the East Room or the marble columns of the Grand Foyer.

"It's just something presidents haven't done," said Martha Joynt Kumar, a presidential historian who has held court in the White House since December 1975. "It's jarring to the eye. In a way, it stands in the middle between the audience and the president because his eye is on the teleprompter."

Just how much of a crutch the teleprompter has become for Obama was on sharp display during his latest commerce secretary announcement. The president spoke from a teleprompter in the ornate Indian Treaty Room for a few minutes. Then Gov. Gary Locke stepped to the podium and pulled out a piece of paper for reference.

The president's teleprompter also elicited some uncomfortable laughter after he announced Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius as his choice for Health and Human Services secretary. "Kathy," Obama said, turning the podium over to Sebelius, who waited at the microphone for an awkward few seconds while the teleprompters were lowered to the floor and the television cameras rolled.

Obama has relied on a teleprompter through even the shortest announcements and when repeating the same lines on his economic stimulus plan that he's been saying for months — whereas past presidents have mostly worked off of notes on the podium except during major speeches, such as the State of the Union.

Ari Fleischer, a former spokesman for George W. Bush, said while it's entirely a matter of personal style, using a teleprompter at these smaller events has its drawbacks.

"It removes you from the audience in the room," Fleischer said. When speaking from notes, Fleischer said, the president can pick up his head and make eye contact with those in the audience, as opposed to focusing on the teleprompter to his left and right.

Bush, Fleischer added, "would use the teleprompter for his major big events, but when he would travel around the country or do events, he would almost always work off of large index cards."

The White House says Obama's point of reference is insignificant.

"Whether one uses note cards or a teleprompter, the American people are a lot more concerned about the plans relayed than the method of delivery. This is not always true of the media," said Bill Burton, deputy press secretary.

Obama has never tried to hide his use of a teleprompter. It was a mainstay during the final months of his campaign. He brought it to county fairs and campaign rallies alike — and once had it set up in the ring at a rodeo.

In a break from his routine, Obama did not use a teleprompter during his pre-Inauguration speech at a factory in Bedford Heights, Ohio — and his delivery seemed to suffer. He paused too long at parts. He accentuated the wrong words. And overall he sounded hesitant and halting as he spoke from the prepared remarks on the podium.

As president, the stakes in what he says are higher. Governing is not campaigning, and, as a former first-term senator, Obama has not held a previous elected position where his words carried even close to this level of influence.

"In this kind of environment, you don't want to make mistakes — on the economy you're talking about doing things that affect the markets," Kumar said.

But be it extra precaution, style or a mental crutch, Obama has shown in the past that he needs the teleprompter. And while he still has his prepared remarks placed on the podium in a leather folder, the White House has shown no sign of trying to wean him off of it.

Before Obama entered a room in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building on Wednesday to announce his crackdown on defense contracts, a CNN reporter asked an Obama aide if the teleprompter could be moved further away from the podium or lowered. The answer was an unequivocal 'no.'

"He uses them to death," a television crewmember who also covered the White House under Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush said of the teleprompter. "The problem is, he never looks at you. He's looking left, right, left, right — not at the camera. It's almost like he's not making eye contact with the American people."

Wednesday's event posed another scenario photographers and television crews have to work around. Obama had five others join him at the announcement, including Sen. John

McCain. The takeaway shot was of Obama and McCain. But the teleprompter on Obama's left was almost directly in front of McCain.

"You couldn't get a good angle on him with McCain," said a White House photographer who also covered Bush. "So if there's someone else important in the frame, it's hard to get a shot without the teleprompter."

© 2009 Capitol News Company, LLC

