

Tell the Second Story



It was November 1963. Most White House reporters were packed together, waiting for official updates so they could file another story about the death of President Kennedy.

Except one.

Jimmy Breslin was across the river at Arlington National Cemetery, interviewing Clifton Pollard, the man who dug the President's grave. Pollard made \$3.01 an hour. When asked about the assignment, he said, "You know, it's an honor just for me to do this."

That article became one of the most famous pieces of journalism from that week. It stood out not because of the headline but because of the perspective. Breslin didn't write about the main story—instead, he wrote the second story.

That idea, the second story, is worth remembering every time you step up to speak.

With Memorial Day approaching, elected officials across the country will be asked to give speeches. Most will say something respectful about sacrifice and service, and there's nothing wrong with that. But it won't stick with the audience.

Instead, find the second story.

The Second Story

The second story is the quieter, more human angle. It's usually found just outside the spotlight but makes you feel the emotion of the moment.

It's often a person one step removed, a detail most people overlook, or a question no one thought to ask. You find the second story by shifting your focus from the big event to the people it touched.

There's always a second story you can find. Here are three examples.

The Last Soldier

It's hard for an audience to feel the weight of thousands of lives lost. But they can connect with one. Zoom in on a single life. Tell the story of the last soldier from Warren County to die in Vietnam.

Give a name, an age, a moment. Let the audience see the sacrifice through one person's story.

"Clarendon GI Is Killed In Vietnam"

This announcement – the death of Lance Cpl. Steven A. Rickerson – would be the last such headline in Warren County.

"Lance Cpl. Steven A. Rickerson died in action in Vietnam Sept. 15 while serving with Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Division," the paper reported. "He was on patrol five miles north of Vandergrift Combat Base when he was killed by hostile small arms fire."

Rickerson was just 18-years-old when he was killed.

Telling a Second Story

A Mother's Loss of 5 Sons

Maybe you want to highlight the sacrifice not just of soldiers, but of the families who sent them.

You could read a letter from a mother who lost five sons in a single day during World War II. Then, share President Roosevelt's response to her. Her words show the quiet anguish of waiting, while his words show a nation trying to honor what can never be repaid.

Waterloo, Iowa
January 1943

Bureau of Naval Personnel

Dear Sirs:

I am writing you in regards to a rumor going around that my five sons were killed in action in November. A mother from here came and told me she got a letter from her son and he heard my five sons were killed.

It is all over town now, and I am so worried. My five sons joined the Navy together a year ago, Jan. 3, 1942. They are on the Cruiser, U.S.S. JUNEAU. The last I heard from them was Nov. 8th. That is, it was dated Nov 8th, U.S. Navy.

Their names are, George T., Francis Henry, Joseph E., Madison A., and Albert L. If it is so, please let me know the truth...I hated to bother you, but it has worried me so that I wanted to know if it was true. So please tell me. It was hard to give five sons all at once to the Navy, but I am proud of my boys that they can serve and help protect their country... I remain,

Sincerely,
Mrs. Alleeta Sullivan
98 Adams Street
Waterloo, Iowa

The Last Letter Home

Or focus on a small, relatable moment.

Tell the story of the last letter from a New Castle soldier, sent to his wife just before D-Day. In it, he wrote about how he wished he could take their three-year-old daughter to her first movie.

"Darn it, darling, I would certainly like to be on hand when Dee goes to see her first movie ...

Take her to Youngstown, Pittsburgh or Cleveland to one of those theaters with a long impressive lobby with candy counters and attractive posters...I'll bet she will love it. Don't postpone her enjoyment until I come home, but let me know how she reacts to all the glamour of Hollywood's productions. Love, Frank."

The second story is one step removed from the headline. It's quieter. But it pulls people in because it feels so real.

That's what made Breslin's piece powerful. It reminded people that someone had to dig the President's grave. And that man showed up, did his job with dignity, and called it an honor.

If you're speaking this Memorial Day, tell a second story that carries the weight of what they gave.

The Bottom Line

The second story helps your audience connect with the sacrifice—not just understand it, but feel it. To honor those who gave everything, find the story that moves people.