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THE PRESIDENT AS
INTERPRETER-IN-CHIEF

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*To the memory of Bill Davison,
who liked fairy tales*

To laugh often and love much;
To win the respect of intelligent persons and the
affection of children;
To earn the approbation of honest citizens and
endure the betrayal of false friends;
To appreciate beauty;
To find the best in others;
To give of one's self;
To leave the world a bit better, whether by a
healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social
condition;
To have played and laughed with enthusiasm and
sung with exultation;
To know even one life has breathed easier be-
cause you have lived—that is success.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

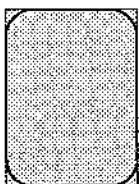
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itude. Once again, I thank them for their encouragement, support, and pride in me.

At Chatham House, my thanks to Chris Kelaher for all his hard work and to Edward Artinian for his guidance and support.

This book is dedicated to the memory of William I. Davison, who touched the lives of many students, scholars, and colleagues in ways that will never be forgotten. Thank you, Bill.



Introduction: The President as Interpreter-in-Chief

THE PRESIDENT has become the nation's chief storyteller, its interpreter-in-chief. He tells us stories about ourselves, and in so doing he tells us what sort of people we are, how we are constituted as a community. We take from him not only our policies but our national self-identity.

The president's talk has become the central focus of our political attention, and he talks to us mainly through the medium of television. American presidents, like all political actors, live in and adapt to complex political environments. Television is an increasingly important part of those environments. As the nation has increased in size and complexity, as the franchise and our notions of what and who constitute the American polity have changed and expanded, and as traditional linkages between the leaders and the led have eroded, public and persuasive features of the presidency have gained in relative importance to more traditional and explicitly constitutional functions. The argument of this book is that the medium of communication, interacting with historical and social pressures, influences presidential decisions about what to say and how to say it.

The presidency is a fluid institution. At any point in time the office is a combination of constitutional mandate, established practice, and the personal style and preferences of the current occupant. Not all presidents exhibit all the changes discussed in this book all the time. Personal proclivities and preferences affect how each president adapts to the evolving institution. Presidents respond to the legacies of their predecessors (lega-

cies that are subject to changing interpretations), to prevailing political problems and possibilities, and to their understanding of the "final" judgments of history. Increasingly, a large part of the prevailing political problems and possibilities involves television.

How past presidents used the communication media constrain their successors in the office. Presidents prior to Franklin Delano Roosevelt had a wide degree of latitude in deciding whether or not to maintain a high public profile; since FDR, that choice has diminished. Presidents can no longer choose whether to engage in public leadership, only what form that leadership will take. As presidents increasingly emphasize the ceremonial aspects of the office, its deliberative possibilities have eroded. This in turn limits the presidents' rhetorical options and opportunities.

Initially, presidential images were transmitted through a variety of media and were the distillation of a variety of factors: past reputation, party affiliation, previous offices held, and so forth. As television comes to dominate other forms of political communication, the images it projects become the dominant images of the president and presidential candidates. Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman seem more complex, more dynamic than current presidents because our images of them were more varied, our sources of information more rich. As television images dominate, presidential images flatten, become simplified.

The American mass media, and the news reporters that represent them, are the most visible and constant link between the leaders and the led. Most Americans receive most of their political information, develop most of their relationships with political actors, through the media. Television has supplanted print and radio as the primary source of information about politics, and presidents increasingly rely on television to communicate with the American people. This change in the medium of communication brings with it important changes in the president's environment and contributes to changes in perceptions and conduct of the office of the presidency.

These changes can be seen most clearly through a close analysis of presidential speech. By beginning with the administration of Franklin Roosevelt, we can observe the changes in the media and in the conduct of presidential speech as they unfold and develop over time. As the television cameras intrude ever more deeply into the presidency, the fact of television becomes an ever more critical element in the complex environment surrounding the presidency. Television does not simply mean that presidents talk more. It also means that they talk differently. This has consequences for both the presidency as an institution and the American pol-

ity in which that institution is embedded. This book presents an analysis of those differences and seeks to discover how presidential communication has changed with the inception of the modern presidency and its interaction with the modern mass media, especially television. This analysis is based on the belief that the medium through which a president communicates affects the nature of the communication and that understanding television's relationship to presidential communication is a vital component in our understanding of the current presidency.

The dominance of television as a forum for presidential communication has meant changing the strategies involved with creating, maintaining, and directing public support. Presidents who communicate over television tend to adopt strategies that lead to diffuse support for the person who is president, rather than specific support for the policies espoused by a president. This does not mean that there was ever a golden age of presidential communication when presidents communicated in a sane, rational way solely about policy proposals (it is not even my purpose to inquire whether and how such communication might or might not be desirable), but I do suggest that the balance has shifted away from the substance of policy making and toward generalized support.

Something valuable has been lost in making this shift. In deemphasizing the president's deliberative role in favor of the ceremonial role, our notions of community, of what it means to be a member of a polity, have been eroded, and cheapened, have become less authentic because our beliefs are increasingly divorced from our practices. Our political life has suffered from the degradation of our political language. As presidential interpretations have shifted from the long argumentative and premise-laden discourses of earlier years to the visually privileged assertive discourse that characterizes modern televised communication, the American polity is prompted to lose sight of its origins, its philosophical grounding, and its self-understanding.² Presidents continue to celebrate our national identity through ceremony; they increasingly fail to apply it publicly through deliberative rhetoric. This failure undermines the public understanding of our national ethos.

Presidents alone are not responsible for this impoverishment. Nor is television technology. The interaction of the two, with the consent and often the enthusiastic support of the American public, has helped to create a situation in which certain kinds of communication are privileged above others. Few presidents are fools. Most of them are fully cognizant of and capable of adapting to specific strategic imperatives. Communicating with the American public through television has become one of those impera-

tives. The ways in which presidents and presidential candidates currently adapt to that imperative has led to an impoverishment of our political language and a corresponding impoverishment of our political understanding.

Presidential Speech as a Category for Study

Scholars in the field of communication studies have long been interested in presidential speech and presidential speech making.³ The interest of political scientists is of more recent vintage.⁴ Using a variety of methods and approaches, these scholars have found that presidents not only talk more but that they increasingly emphasize ceremonial occasions and eschew policy discussion in favor of symbolic appeals and stances (sometimes even transforming the latter into the former).⁵ This is particularly clear in a campaign environment.⁶

The authors of the Constitution feared precisely these aspects of the presidency and sought to curb the public, and potentially demagogic, features of the office. As the electorate expanded, beginning in the early nineteenth century, and as Progressive reforms opened the political process to that expanded electorate, the public became an increasingly important part of presidential calculations. Presidential communication was no longer restricted to a relatively small group of homogeneous elites. Presidential audiences grew and diversified.

At the same time, presidential responsibilities also grew and diversified. As the office became more central to the governing process and the public imagination, scholars and presidents developed and articulated new understandings of presidential power. Richard Neustadt, for instance, began a shift away from formal, functional, and constitutional understandings of the presidency toward an informal model of bargaining and persuasion.⁷ But the broad focus remained on the president's relationship with other governing elites.

This understanding of the presidency was supplemented, in the 1980s, by a new scholarly focus on the president's relationship with the public. Jeffrey K. Tulis and Samuel Kernell offer both descriptive and evaluative analyses of the increased presidential focus on public support rather than elite consensus.⁸ For them, the deliberative processes of the presidency are being eroded,⁹ and policies are serving the president's rhetorical needs.¹⁰ The strategies involved with strengthening public support for the individual who is currently president lead to a weakening of the institution of the presidency. When the president depends upon public support, his rhetoric will be designed to maintain that support.

Presidents communicate to the mass public more than ever before. In addition, they increasingly engage in this communication through television, which in turn alters the form and the content of presidential communication.

Televised Communication

One of television's most important effects is the creation of a "dramatised society":

For the first time a majority of the population has regular and constant access to drama, beyond occasion or season. But what is really new—so new I think it is difficult to see its significance—is that it is not just a matter of audiences for particular plays. It is that drama, in quite new ways, is built into the rhythms of everyday life.¹¹

As the world "out there" becomes more complex, more unknowable, we increasingly resort to dramatic forms—storytelling—to make that world intelligible. Humans have always relied on stories to render the world meaningful,¹² but television, in rendering drama so pervasively, places extraordinary emphasis on the person of the storyteller in a way that is not merely an expansion of the previous role.

The president has become a presenter; public argument has been largely supplanted by public assertion. This change is a matter of kind as well as degree, and is related to changes in society as well as technology.

"Television is very much a poor man's medium: the interest-poor, the education-poor, and the information-poor."¹³ Given that "television gives considerably more attention to politics than most viewers feel they need or want,"¹⁴ politicians know that behaving in ways that increase their dramatic impact will help keep audiences interested and more supportive. They must feed into the dramatic demands audiences are accustomed to having fulfilled through television drama. Solutions must be found quickly, presented dramatically, and fulfilled completely.¹⁵

One result of the new technology in the age of information is what Sidney Blumenthal calls the "permanent campaign."¹⁶ This is a new kind of politics in which "issues, polls, and media are not nearly separate categories. They are unified by a strategic imperative . . . the elements of the permanent campaign are not tangential to politics: they are the political process itself."¹⁷

The history of presidential campaign rhetoric is full of examples of evasiveness, vagueness, and symbol mongering. Governing rhetoric, in

contrast, the speech associated with presidents while in office, has been characterized by the absence of these elements and a concentration on the deliberative mode. The combination of increased polling and the strategies associated with television, which have led to the permanent campaign, have also led to a blurring of the distinctions between campaign rhetoric and governing rhetoric. With the decline of party structure, discipline, and workers, television commercials and media appearances not only serve to mobilize voters but also to govern the nation once the election is over.

In other words, presidents can no longer rely on traditional means of garnering and maintaining public support. The political parties are weak, and the formal institutional links between the leaders and the governed have largely broken down. As Congress increasingly ceded power and responsibility to the president, the office came to dominate the federal government. Congress can act less responsibly now than in the past because Congress is, in fact, less responsible for policy than in the past. The president is now responsible for developing national policy.¹⁸

The president is also responsible for communicating the content and implications of policy. In an increasingly media-dominated society, the communication process affects both the institutions that develop policy and the policies developed by those institutions.¹⁹

With radio, the door opened for a more personalized brand of political leadership. The president could be present in the homes of the electorate, his voice part of the family circle. He became an intimate. Television heightens this intimacy, bringing the president's face as well as his voice into the living room, and reducing the formal distance between speaker and audience. Because presidential communication increasingly means televised communication, presidents have had to adapt their message and style to fit the medium.

This means that political language forms, which "perform a crucial function by creating shared meanings, perceptions, and reassurances among mass publics,"²⁰ are now being consciously and consistently manufactured for audience effect rather than for policy content or out of personal character.

The bulk of most political discourse is centered on the engineering of consensus; a process that involves rationality and fact-finding, but frequently defines a superior point of view. It is primarily a process that works by using existing beliefs and attitudes to build agreements.²¹

The existence of television as the major conduit of political communication means that this process of consensus building will involve less and less "rationality and fact-finding," and more and more manipulation of "existing beliefs and attitudes." Which leads to the possibility that the kind of consensus under construction is less viable, less stable, and less meaningful than would otherwise be the case. This is particularly significant in the case of presidential speech. As an increasingly rhetorical office, the presidency can profitably be studied from a rhetorical perspective.

Rhetorical criticism analyzes public discourse in an endeavor to understand the public meaning of shared symbols, for a society develops an understanding of itself by negotiating the meaning of such symbols.²² In this negotiating process, some voices speak more loudly, more clearly, than others. In the United States, one of these voices belongs to the president.

When a disaster occurs, a war is declared, or a major event of any kind happens, we rely on television to present and interpret that event for us. Television, which tends to both simplify and personify complex issues, privileges the presidential voice and exacerbates presidential interpretive dominance. In so doing, television has influenced the altered place of the president within the American political system and has affected both the form and the content of presidential speech. By beginning this analysis with the inception of the modern presidency and the development of personalized, mass politics that occurred simultaneously with the institutional growth of the office, this book provides an exegesis of those changes from a rhetorical perspective. By examining the form and content of presidential speech and argumentation patterns, we can arrive at a more thorough understanding of the changes in the persuasive opportunities available to the president and the consequences of those changes for our political life.

Conclusion

The strategies involved with "going public" affect our politics. These strategies are of relatively recent vintage, and they are, as yet, imperfectly understood. Clearly, presidents are talking more. It is not clear, however, that they are thinking more lucidly about what they are saying. Kathleen Hall Jamieson believes that "the disposition toward eloquence" is no longer cultivated²³ and that our political rhetoric and political understanding have suffered as a result. Language, like democratic politics, involves negotiation of meaning. Presidents, by virtue of their institutional position, have a privileged position in the negotiating process. Television,

which highlights the presidential voice, further privileges this position. Televised presidential communication has fallen into *habitus* and adopted strategies that undermine the negotiatory process and thus undermine our national self-understanding. By systematically studying the rhetoric of modern presidents and the relationships between that rhetoric and the media through which they were communicated, we can further the process of understanding the state of our present political language and political life.

The study explores carefully all the public speeches of Presidents Franklin Roosevelt through Ronald Reagan and approximately the first two years of George Bush's administration. All their public speeches, remarks, press conferences, and news briefings are included. Historical and contemporary accounts are also used. All the material is public. Private conversations and interactions are relevant only to the extent that they affect the public stance, image, and communication of the president.

Chapter 1, "Political Rhetoric in the Premodern United States," discusses the early history of American public speech and how it formed a base for the speech of the modern presidents. The chapter divides American history into five eras and focuses on the style of speech, political culture, and technology associated with that speech in each era. The eras include the colonial period, when political communication was oral and confined to small groups; the revolutionary period, when political communication was both oral and written as a response to the growth and diversity of the community; Jacksonian America, when the expansion of the franchise led to an increase in the quantity of political communication as well as a heightening of emotional appeals; the Civil War era, when the great issues under discussion allowed for powerful and sweeping rhetoric; the postwar period, which saw the commercialization of political speech as oratory became public speaking; and the early twentieth century, when the president became the focus of our national politics, and the rhetorical presidency was born.

Chapter 2, "The Development of Mass-Mediated Politics: Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman," describes the beginning of mass-mediated and personalistic politics, and the successes and failures associated with that beginning. Special attention is paid to Truman as Roosevelt's rhetorical successor.

Chapter 3, "The Birth of Televised Politics: Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy," details the rise of television politics and the pre-dominance of personality as opposed to character in our national politics. These presidents reveal how the old style of politics fared given a new

medium of political communication. During this period, specific policies became subordinated to the image that a candidate or officeholder projected; television provided a unique and as yet incompletely understood way of communicating politics.

Chapter 4, "Television and Personality: Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon," describes how politicians began to understand the power of the new media and began to exploit it, and both Johnson and Nixon ended by feeling exploited by the television medium, as the presidency lost the distinction between the public and the private spheres. This era reflects a new emphasis on image management and information control, and details the benefits and problems presidents encounter through the new medium.

Chapter 5, "The Issue of Control: Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter," analyzes the weaknesses of their approach to media politics. The importance of thematic control of the national agenda is paramount. Neither Ford nor Carter was able to use television successfully, although there is evidence that both were very conscious of its power and the importance of images. The reasons for this failure are discussed.

Chapter 6, "Mastering Televised Politics: Ronald Wilson Reagan and George Herbert Walker Bush," describes how the old style of politics was replaced by a style befitting the television medium. The politics of support describe the dominant form of campaigning and governing in the present period.

Chapter 7, "(Almost) 'Everything Old Is New' Again: The Consequences of Television Politics," offers a summary of the arguments and prescriptions for the future of American presidential speech and American political language.