

The Lure of the Bully Pulpit: How Presidents have used public rhetoric to generate political support, only to discover its limited capacity

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Abstract:

Are popular presidents always the most successful ones? Modern presidents have pursued public support as a political leverage over other branches of the government. Yet, even popular presidents have faced difficulty in establishing dominance over the political establishment, raising questions on the capacity extent of the president's bully pulpit.

This capstone examines the leadership of two case study presidents who have utilized public rhetoric as a tool for governance, FDR and Bill Clinton. Critiquing the success and setbacks of the two presidents, the capstone will analyze the complementary factors that affect president's effective assertion of his bully pulpit. Drawing lessons from their presidencies, this capstone will make its case on the proper use/framework of president's public rhetoric and highlight the intricate relationship between the president's inside and outside political support.

Special Thanks goes to my advisor Professor Richard Benedetto, for his time, advice, and encouragement in research and preparation of this work.

**“Public Sentiment is everything;
With it, nothing can fail. Against it, nothing can succeed”**

Abraham Lincoln

Introduction: The Emergence of Rhetorical Presidency

Are popular presidents always the successful presidents? Certainly political popularity is one of the key criteria for evaluating presidential performance. It is also an important political tool for the president in governing the country. The modern US presidents view public support as a source for their political success and regularly communicate with the voters their visions and policies. Through persuading the public, the presidents hope to attain legitimacy for their agendas and pressure other branches of the government to submit to their “mandate.”

The emergence of this “rhetorical presidency” is fairly a recent phenomenon in the US politics. Historically, the US political tradition frowned upon public activism as “demagoguery” (Pika 107). As a “republic”, the policy decisions of the US government were expected to be made by elected officials (legislature and executive) insulated from populist pressure. While several presidents in the 19th century, such as Andrew Jackson, did emphasize their national mandate as an elected executive, rarely did the US president “went public” to rally popular support for his policies.

The public relations of the presidency went through dramatic transformation in the 20th century. With technological advancement in mass media, it became easier for a modern president to communicate with the national audience. Theodore Roosevelt became the first president to exercise what would be known as the “bully pulpit”, the use of the office of the presidency to inform and persuade the general public (Winfield 4). When confronted by oppositions in the Congress, Roosevelt (and most subsequent presidents) urged the voters to put pressure on their recalcitrant representatives, “popularizing” the political policy process

(Pika 94). Consequently, public expectation in the presidential leadership has increased in the modern era, which in turn has bolstered presidents' ambition to dominate the national policymaking.

However, has presidents' "bully pulpit" significantly enhanced their political leverage over other branches of the government, namely the Congress? Also, has the mass media been truly a reliable political tool for the president? While it is true that the "popularization" of national politics has created a political opportunity for the modern presidents, it has hardly been a panacea that some president may have sought. In fact, if used improperly, exposure to media coverage has actually become a political liability for some presidents. Like a double-edged sword, president's "bully pulpit" has raised public expectation in the presidential leadership but has also increased the likelihood of public dissatisfaction toward the president if the expectation is unfulfilled (Pika 135).

Ultimately, the "bully pulpit" is to a modern US president what a medicine is for a patient. Just as medicine is a necessary but not the sole device in curing the patient, president's public rhetoric is only one of many political tools he requires to promote effective governance. Just as excessive reliance on medicine can lead to more harm for the patient, presidents in the past have suffered political setbacks because of their obsession for (or overconfidence in) political popularity.

This capstone will primarily study two modern presidents who demonstrated political adeptness in utilizing mass communication to their advantage. Franklin D. Roosevelt and Bill Clinton both sought public support as a mean to achieve their political ambition as presidents. Yet, in spite of their mutual personal popularity, FDR by far was more effective in his governance than Clinton. Yet, even FDR too, suffered several embarrassing defeats during his presidency. Through critiquing the success and failures of the two presidents, the capstone

would analyze the strength and limitations of the “bully pulpit” and recommend complementary strategies the president must pursue to wield effective rhetorical presidency.

FDR’s Bully Pulpit (Aggressive, Strategic Presidency):

The press historian John Tebel once described Franklin Delano Roosevelt as a president who “understood the press as no president has before” (Winfield 2). Elected into office in the time of national crisis, FDR exerted his presidential stature through one of the most effective use of “bully pulpit” in modern history. Credited for heralding the modern US presidency, FDR accumulated unprecedented political mandate through utilization of public support, setting an enduring precedence for future presidents.

FDR came into office when the nation was desperately seeking solutions to the Great Depression. In his inaugural address on Mar.4th, 1933, FDR bluntly spoke to the nation, “I will speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly” (Winfield 27). To Americans living in fear of their present hardship, FDR promised answers and reassured them that as their president “he” will find solutions to the economic crisis. To overcome the Great Depression, FDR set out to initiate sweeping transformation of both the US economy and the role of the government, presenting a new political ideology for the nation.

Known as the “New Deal”, FDR’s political solutions called for unprecedented expansion of the Federal government intervention in the national economy (Best 131). To restructure the market economy from the impacts of the Great Depression, FDR offered sound market regulations and comprehensive economic reliefs to support the well beings of the general public. Naturally however, FDR’s policy proposals faced philosophical (and self-interested) objections from those in favor of traditional laissez-faire market economy (Best 89). To govern the nation under the principles of his New Deal, FDR had to first consolidate a

strong political consensus for his new ideology.

Immediately after coming into office, FDR cultivated relationship with press correspondents in Washington, recognizing the vital role the media plays in shaping public perception of the presidency. FDR revived the tradition of holding regular press conferences (first held by Wilson but rarely used by succeeding presidents), promising latest news and information on government policies (Winfield 28). FDR abolished Herbert Hoover's written-question only requirement and enhanced the interactive environment of the press conferences, presenting to the journalists an image of benevolence, collegiality, and informality (Winfield 32). To further attract journalists into covering the White House, FDR even offered twice-weekly informal "off the record" meetings in his oval office (Winfield 28).

The journalists' responses were overwhelmingly positive, at least in the early days of his presidency. The journalists were drawn to FDR's apparent willingness to share government information and White House increasingly became a prime new source for the Washington press correspondents (Winfield 53). Of course, through shrewd dissemination of information, seemingly "transparent" FDR could influence setting of the news agenda and generate favorable news interpretation for his policies (Winfield 38).

For FDR, his rhetorical presidency was a sophisticated twin-pronged strategy to win the minds of both the public and the political establishment (Halford 4). Through mass media FDR crafted his public image as an optimistic, engaging president who champions the interest of the general public (Best 7). Attaining public confidence in his leadership, FDR then used this as political mandate to dominate the public policies, urging other branches of the government to follow his initiatives (Best 12). It was an effective strategy, but one that required far more than simply "friendly media" (and in fact, FDR faced significant media opposition). FDR's public policy success was a result from strategic use of his rhetorical

presidency combined with political leadership in utilizing the gains from his popular support.

FDR appointed Steve Early as his 1st White House Press Secretary (Winfield 85). Loyal and effective, Early took up the task of coordinating not just the White House's public relations, but that of the entire Federal government agencies. The Division of Press Intelligence (later renamed the US Info. Service) was formed within the White House in 1933, to control flow of information from government agencies to the press (Winfield 88). Following the model of White House press conferences, Early also arranged press conferences for each government departments, coordinating their briefings in line with the president's agenda. In addition, many former journalists were recruited as publicity agents (about three hundred in all) for the administration (Best 8). As former journalists, not only did these publicity agents enhance the quality of the administration's public relations, but also utilized their personal connections with the current press correspondents to advantage (Best 2). While ostensibly touting his accessibility to journalists, FDR strongly believed in the necessity of news management to convey to the public an image of a unified government and henceforth, bolster his political capacity in promoting the New Deal (Winfield 93).

In addition to his interaction with the traditional press, FDR also utilized new electronic media as part of his PR efforts. The tapes of his speeches and government announcements were converted into newsreels and shown on national theaters (Winfield 116). The government announcements were regularly broadcasted on Sunday radio programs, often as trial balloons to gauge public support for the administration's policies (Winfield 81). FDR himself, in the year 1933 alone, gave twenty personal broadcast addresses to the nation (Winfield 105). However, the hallmark of FDR's public communication was undoubtedly his "fireside chats."

While serving as a governor of New York, FDR sometimes conversed directly with

the general public through radio, known as FDR's "fireside chats" (Winfield 17). As a president, FDR further refined his oratory skills in employing this medium. The scripts for each "chat" were extensively prepared, sometimes redrafted over twenty times. Keen attention was shown to microphone angle and sound quality, with FDR himself wearing a false tooth to control his own vocal delivery (Winfield 105). To reach broadest number of audience as possible, the "fireside chats" were usually broadcasted at 10 P.M. on Sundays, after most families have finished their dinner (in fact nearly half of the American families listened to the chat). To maintain the significance of each individual "chats", even their numbers were strictly limited; FDR gave total of only sixteen "fireside chats" during the first eight years of his administration (Winfield 105).

Through these mediums of communications, FDR defined his presidency and vision before the American public. More than just advocating the merits of his policies (in fact, his "fireside chats" rarely addressed substantial policy matters), FDR appealed primarily to people's sentiment, in particular optimism and populism (Halford 85). Through memorable phrases such as, "Only thing we must fear is fear itself," FDR urged Americans facing difficult economic times to strive in their daily endeavors and preserve faith in the future of their country (Lammers 48). Criticizing the failings of the irresponsible business elites who caused economic downturns, FDR humorously caricatured opponents to his reforms with poignant metaphors such as "economic royalists", "Tory Press" or "GOP fiction writers" (Halford 162). Against such opposition, FDR consistently advocated his affinity with the lives of the average citizens, with such empathy phrases as "You and I know", or "My Friends", or "Together we can not fail" (Halford 28).

Combined with his dynamic personality and superb oratory skills, FDR's rhetoric made a strong impression in the minds of the average citizens. According to the public

reaction files kept in this time period, many listeners felt as if the president truly had personal concerns for their plight and tirelessly promoted innovative solutions on their behalf (Halford 23). FDR of course, carefully monitored his own rhetorical performances before the public, being the first US president to extensively study public polling data (Winfield 237).

What political success did FDR reap through his effective public communication? Firstly, public came to support, even expect greater exercise of national leadership from the White House (Best 8). Thanks to its vibrant PR efforts, the public received far greater news coverage of the presidency than that of the Congress; in fact, the White House became perceived as the “world’s most important news center” where substantial policies are drafted (Winfield 80). As a result, FDR could claim a “popular mandate” in taking active legislative initiatives. While this did not mean the Congress would always submit to the president’s agendas, it signified a change in the president’s traditional role from merely enforcing the Congressional legislations to taking a lead role in the legislative process.

Secondly, FDR convinced the public the justification of his policy proposals as necessary means to overcome the Great Depression. In front of FDR’s public image as a problem-solver of the current national crisis, the Congress (at least in his 1st term) displayed reluctance in obstructing his agendas (Savage 113). The Democratic majority in the Congress too, also had a political stake in the success of their party president and complied with his leadership (Savage 17).

The 3rd effect of FDR’s rhetorical presidency was that it galvanized political groups and individuals who passionately supported his public policies (while also galvanizing his opposition). For an instance, African Americans who nominally voted Republican in the past rapidly switched their partisan affiliation during this period, casting 68% of their votes for FDR in ‘40 presidential election (Savage 41). The labor unions in the Northern urban areas

also supported FDR's populist rhetoric and mobilized their members in support of the New Deal. Far more than simply delivering votes in the elections however, these pro-FDR interest groups expanded their own participation in the public policy debate, generating popular support for the president's policy.

Public support and the economic environment were certainly two key components to expansion of presidential power under FDR. However, FDR's political successes would not have been sustainable had the "bully pulpit" been his only political leverage. To ensure continued compliance from often volatile political establishment, FDR had to demonstrate steadfast leadership in properly utilizing his political resources/capacities (Lammers 63).

In spite of public support for the New Deal, there were many in the media, business, and political establishments who vehemently opposed FDR's policies. Largely silent during the early days of the administration, his opponents increasingly became vocal in their criticism as they witnessed the effects of New Deal's "radical" policies (Best 35).

While journalists may have had favorable views toward him, most editors, managers, and syndicated columnists of the major newspapers disapproved of FDR's policies, particularly on business regulations (Best 13). Will Hearst and Rob McCormick, who operated chains of major daily publishers in the US, mobilized their newspapers to write editorials against the New Deal, deriding for an instance the National Recovery Administrative Codes set by the administration as a "nonsensical, ridiculous, asinine, interferences" (Winfield 128). Most of the largest newspapers at the time, such as the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribunes*, also opposed FDR's policies. In fact, only 37% of US daily newspapers gave their editorial support to the president in the '36 election (the figure which dropped to 25% in the '40 election), presenting a challenge against FDR's bully pulpit (Winfield 127).

While FDR preferred radio communication as a mean to by-pass hostile press, gradually his opponents too gained access to radio. By 1940, nearly 1/3 of radio airwaves were licensed to news publishers, many of them holding anti-New Deal viewpoints (Winfield 110). Several popular radio commentators, such as Father Coughlin, also used their airwave to rebuke FDR's policies (either for being too liberal or too moderate) (Best 23).

Resistance was also developing within the Congress. While there were liberal Republicans supportive of his policies, the Republican Party as a whole criticized the excesses of the New Deal reforms. Even among Congressional Democrats, many from the South known as the "Dixiecrats" held conservative political views and opposed the more liberal aspects of the New Deal, particularly on social issues (Savage 30).

How did FDR overcome increasing challenges from his political opponents? FDR certainly exercised his "bully pulpit" to counter his opposition. While thanking sympathetic journalists for positive news coverage, FDR was also vocal in his criticism of hostile newspapers for their "immoderate statements" (Best 141). Over the years, FDR's rebuke against the anti-New Deal press steadily increased as he appealed to the public that "85%" of the media was against him (according to one analysis however, only about 60% of the newspapers really reflected anti-New Deal bias) (Halford 35). Against conservative criticisms, FDR stayed on message in emphasizing the justification of the New Deal policies, as well as chiding the selfishness of the "economic royalists" (the elites in business and the media).

While majority of the public tended to sympathize with FDR, his increasing confrontation with opposition meant FDR also required strong support within the political establishment to implement his policy agendas. In complement to his public campaigns, FDR also carried out political strategies to marginalize his opponents and empower his supporters to positions of influence. FDR used three primary mediums to consolidate his political

dominance, party, political machines, and bureaucratic patronages.

The US Democratic Party in the 30's was composed of both significant liberal and conservative elements. Sizeable faction in the party was from the South, where most Democrats held strong conservative views, particularly on civil rights. Even with the Democratic majority in the Congress, FDR had to co-opt the conservative Democrats to implement his liberal reforms (Savage 30). While not completely successful, FDR engaged in both compromises and coercions to unify his party under the New Deal philosophy, transforming the party ideology while tolerating some dissents (Savage 45).

In promoting his New Deal, FDR appealed to diverse elements in the Democratic Party (as well as liberal Republicans). While winning support from urban Democrats through legislations favoring labor unions, FDR offered agricultural reliefs to rural Democrats in the South and West (Savage 113). While nominally supporting civil rights to draw support from social liberals and ethnic minorities, FDR also promised lucrative Federal projects (such as the construction of TVA) to Southern Democrats (Savage 30). In other words, even with its clear ideological leanings, the substance of the New Deal was comprehensive enough to offer incentives to diverse interests within the Democratic Party (Lammers 49).

Of course, FDR's eventual objective was not just to appease the diverse factions within the party, but rather to transform it as a party with clear, consistent political ideology (Savage 129). In fact, due to its popularity, even the Southern Democrats were pressured to at least nominally affirm their support for the New Deal. Through controlling the Democratic National Committee, FDR also cultivated party's interactions with social groups such as African Americans and organized labor, expanding the size of pro-New Deal faction within the party. While conservative Democrats continued to chair many of the Congressional caucuses, with FDR's support the New Deal Democrats were appointed to key positions in

the party apparatus(especially in party conventions), gradually dominating the image and direction of the party (Savage 81).

FDR also enticed support from political establishment through allocation of bureaucratic patronages. FDR appointed his campaign manager James Farley as Postmaster General and also the chair of the Democratic National Committee. Openly supportive of one-party government, James Farley used his position to appoint pro-New Deal Democrats into key Federal government positions (Savage 21). The close Congressional allies of the administration were rewarded with lucrative Federal projects in their districts, and to win the support of the state Democratic Parties, FDR and Farley deferred to their recommendation in appointing local administrators of the Federal programs like the WPA (Savage 19).

Finally, FDR fostered alliances with several prominent political machines to generate political support for his agendas. FDR permitted political bosses to control the New Deal projects operated in their areas, while in return receiving their support in co-opting politicians from their districts (Savage 48). In times of political difficulties, FDR relied on support from political bosses like Frank Hague (in New Jersey) and Ed Kelly (in Chicago) to rein in the wavering Democrats (Savage 53). In fact, as FDR gradually lost support from more conservative rural areas, he increasingly relied on the urban political machines to mobilize popular support and push through his agendas in the Congress (Savage 75).

One of FDR's major legislative victories was the passage of the National Labor Relations Act, also known as the Wagner Act. A hallmark of New Deal labor policies, the act established minimum wages and granted right to collective bargaining for most labor unions. Against strong business and conservative opposition, FDR administration not only used public rhetoric to persuade the voters (proclaiming that labor reforms were compatible to American capitalism and individualistic ethics), but also intensively lobbied individual

Congressman (Best 41). New York Senator Robert Wagner, the ally of FDR, in particular played a indispensable role in passing the legislation in the Congress (Savage 27). A close ally of organized labor and New York political machines, Wagner (and FDR) also utilized persuasion from urban political bosses to extract votes from wavering representatives. Without reliable Congressional allies and party/interest group supports, FDR may not have been able to pass the controversial legislation simply with bully pulpit. In fact, the US Supreme Court later struck down parts of the legislation as unconstitutional, demonstrating the resilience of FDR's opposition (Best 97).

FDR overall displayed combination of caution and boldness in building broad support for his agendas. While for an instance, avoiding direct confrontation with the "Dixiecrats" on the racial segregation in the South, FDR threatened to withdraw Federal projects from Congressmen opposed to his major economic legislations. Yet several times, even FDR overarched in his efforts to exert his presidential authority, overestimating his popularity and/or political capacity (Best 143).

Following his landslide reelection in 1936, FDR set out to reform the Federal judiciary branch. As the US Supreme Court struck down a dozen of New Deal legislations during his first term, FDR was determined to appoint new judges both in the Supreme Court and in the lower courts (Halford 109). Reelected with strong political mandate, FDR apparently felt confidence that the Congress would readily support his plan to expand the number of justices on the Supreme Court.

Had FDR gradually presented the idea to the public, the outcome may have been different. Instead, he surprised the nation with his announcement to reform the judiciary at his first press conference after the reelection. More importantly, FDR was not transparent in explaining his reasons for expanding the Court. Rather than directly criticizing the

obstruction of the Supreme Court, FDR justified his proposal on grounds that current justices were too old to adequately carry out their duties. As a result, FDR was accused by many for his dishonesty and evasiveness (Halford 117). While FDR's congressional allies (who actually agreed with his sentiment against the Supreme Court) displayed displeasure for not being informed of the proposal beforehand, his opposition gained public support by framing his proposal as excessive expansion of presidential power (Savage 31).

FDR waited for a month before openly explaining to the nation the real reasons for judiciary reform (Halford 121). FDR even used his "fireside chats" to clarify his intentions ("I am not court-packing") and criticize the Supreme Court's past rulings against his legislations. Yet, by then the public opinion (49% pro, 51% con) and the Congress was already polarized over the issue. FDR's late reversal of his rationale for the proposal stirred even more suspicions from those opposed to the idea (Halford 124).

When Supreme Court shifted its position and ruled in favor of the New Deal legislation (albeit through one-vote margin), political incentive in the Congress for FDR's judicial proposal further declined. Many Congressional Democrats were willing to support reforms in the lower courts but not on the Supreme Court (Halford 129). With the sudden death of Senate Majority leader Robinson FDR's key legislative ally, FDR was forced to accept compromised version of the judiciary reform that did not include expansion of the Supreme Court (Savage 33). As court vacancies eventually permitted FDR to appoint new justices to the Supreme Court, FDR's judicial agenda may have been both unnecessary and counterproductive. Going beyond merely reprimanding the Court (which would have resonated with the public and his allies), FDR overarched in his effort to dominate the judiciary, prompting natural resistance from other branches of the government (Best 122). Without a resonating crisis or noticeable mutual benefits, Congress was unwilling to follow

FDR's controversial policies, giving him his first major political setback.

Only a year later, FDR suffered another setback because of his continued hubris in his public support. As conservative Democrats increasingly aligned with Republicans to stall his policies, FDR became more publically critical of them in his 2nd term. While in his first term, FDR emphasized party inclusion to expand his political support, confidence from his landslide reelection prompted him to demand more compliance in his 2nd term. FDR accused the conservative Democrats as the "Yes, but...Democrats" who only nominally support the New Deal (Savage 129). In 1938, he actively campaigned against several of them during the Democratic primaries, hoping to persuade the Democratic primary voters to vote against their incumbents.

The challenged conservative Democrats naturally fought back, accusing FDR's interference as "party purge." While pointing out their support for some of New Deal's policies, the incumbents appealed to their constituents that it is necessary for them to show some political independence from the president to best represent their districts' interest (Halford 134). While not directly criticizing the popular president, the conservative incumbents still framed the primary as defense of the state parties' autonomy against the excessive interference of the president.

Even with public support, FDR was put on defensive by his inability to portray his targeted incumbents as threat to the New Deal policies (Halford 132). There were widespread public perceptions that FDR was "purging" (a negative connotation to start with) party dissidents simply for personal vindication. The Democratic Congress also showed reluctance in campaigning against its own colleagues. As a result, most of the incumbents targeted by FDR managed to successfully win in their Democratic Primaries.

The failure of "purge" demonstrated that FDR made a political miscalculation in

overestimating the president's capability in influencing the primary voters' selection of their own Congressional representatives (Halford 10). Furthermore, the Democratic incumbents reelected in spite of FDR's opposition carried natural resentment against his interference, diminishing his respect within the party (Best 147).

Yet, in spite of several political setbacks, FDR maintained steadfast political leadership over the country. In spite of criticism on their mixed results, the New Deal economic policies remained popular among general public. The Democratic Party continued to evolve into a liberal political party, marginalizing the "Dixiecrats" (Savage 183). How was FDR able to accomplish this?

Certainly FDR was a great communicator. He displayed superb rhetorical skills in presenting his policies and/or countering the criticism of his opponents. Richard Wilson the Washington bureau chief of *Des Moines Register* even concluded that "propaganda machines" of FDR's publicity campaign ranked 3rd in the world in its quality, only behind Nazi Germany and Soviet Union (Best 8). While most editorials may have been critical of his policies, even the anti-New Deal press had to publish his events and speeches (covered by more friendly journalists), which had far greater public impact than editorials in the back of the newspaper (Best 11).

However, FDR was also a great political strategist. Against his opposition, FDR coalesced and mobilized his own political coalition. While laying out a distinct political vision/agenda to inspire his followers, he also kept it comprehensive enough to encompass broad political spectrum (Lammers 49). Utilizing different political mediums (party, bureaucracy, and political machines), FDR offered numerous policy incentives to those who cooperated and coerced those who did not (Savage 127). While bold and tenacious in his pursuit for political change, FDR showed methodical calculations in setting his political

priorities, compromising on controversial issues (like racial segregation) to focus on his prime agendas (Savage 186).

Certainly FDR too was several times “lured” to excessive reliance of his own bully pulpit and faced negative political consequence. Yet his political recovery and overall success in public policies lied on his leadership over the New Deal political coalition (which lasted at least until 60’s). Far more than his own popularity, FDR, through amalgamation of ideological consensus and self-motivated political collaboration, created a new political establishment that had stakes in continuing his agenda, building a long enduring public legacy.

Clinton’s Bully Pulpit: (Defensive, Opportunistic Presidency):

Bill Clinton was also a president who utilized public rhetoric to his political advantage. Charming, eloquent, and witty, Clinton relied on his oratorical skills and public image making to influence public policies. Yet unlike FDR, Clinton could not transform his popular support into political dominance. Rather, Clinton was often put on defensive against vehement opposition and failed to consolidate an enduring political coalition. In contrast to FDR, why was Clinton’s bully pulpit insufficient in providing him with necessary political leadership?

Clinton was elected in 1992, under the campaign banner of “hope” and “new beginning” (Waldman 19). Similar to FDR, Clinton promised to overcome national economic recession as well as offer a new political direction for the country, branding his political ideology as the “New Centrism” (Waldman 22). However, while FDR received nearly unanimous political support during his 1st 100 Days in office, Clinton’s presidency faced setbacks right from the beginning.

To being with, Clinton’s transition to White House did not go smoothly. Appointment

of the Cabinet and White House staff was not planned (or at least publically announced) attentively and raised public doubts on the administrative competence of the new president (Waldman 24). Clinton's 1st State of Union Address was also viewed with skepticism by many in the political establishment. In his address Clinton ambitiously proposed broad-sweeping agendas (from budget to health care) and appeared to lack focus in his policy priorities (Waldman 43). While Clinton's initial political strategy was to make a big announcement, mobilize popular support, and then pressure the Congress through public activism, he soon discovered the limits of president's public campaigns in exerting control over the legislative branch (Waldman 45).

What were Clinton's political problems? To begin with, in spite of his frequent interaction with the mass media, Clinton did not initially enjoy favorable relationship with the national press. While FDR enjoyed his "honeymoon period" with the press for at least a year, Clinton's relationship with the press became adversarial almost immediately into his office (Lammers 312).

For one thing, Clinton (perhaps as a Washington outsider) initially viewed the White House Press Corp negatively and attempted to bypass them through participating in talk shows and holding televised town hall meetings (Liebovich 184). While Clinton may have thought he could better "stay in touch" with the public through televised meetings, the results were far less positive than it was hoped. Many of the questions asked from the audience were surprisingly confrontational, questioning his public missteps (such as proposing to allow gays to serve openly in the military), and unfulfilled promises (Denton 67). While coming out from these televised meetings with image as a compassionate president, Clinton was also viewed as equivocal and on the defensive, hardly the public image he needed to forcefully exercise his "bully pulpit" (Denton 82). More importantly, the national media resented

Clinton's attempt to bypass them and became more inclined to cover his presidency in critical perspective (Denton 54).

How about in the Congress? Even though he had Democrat-controlled Congress the first two years of his term, Clinton failed to exercise same party leadership as displayed by FDR. While achieving few notable policy accomplishments, Clinton could not unify different factions in the Democratic Party under his "New Democrat" consensus.

One of Clinton's major policy successes in his 1st term was the passage of NAFTA. In summer 1993, when faced with political choice of pursuing health care reform or NAFTA (both tough political battles), Clinton chose to spend his political capital on passage of the latter (Waldman 56). In spite of the public controversy and division within the Democratic Party, Clinton did exercise strong presidential leadership in generating enough support and incentives to pass the free trade agreement.

To convince the ambivalent public, Clinton launched a full-fledge campaign to build support for NAFTA. Clinton hosted eighteen public rallies, published government studies advocating the economic benefits of the agreement, and sent Al Gore to have public debate with Russ Perot (outspoken opponent of NAFTA) on the issue (Waldman 63). To reassure the unions, Clinton personally spoke at the AFI-CLO headquarter and chided their threats to campaign against pro-NAFTA Congressmen. As a result of Clinton's vigorous public campaign, the public support for NAFTA rose to 57% by the end of '93 (Waldman 65).

Clinton also collaborated closely with both Democratic and Republican leadership in the Congress. As many Democrats wavered, Clinton relied on the Democratic leadership to provide the necessary votes while also receiving assurance of GOP support from Newt Gingrich the House Minority leader (Waldman 56). Ultimately NAFTA got passed with narrow, but bipartisan support.

Unfortunately, Clinton could not sustain his “centrist” coalition that passed NAFTA. The ideological division within the Democratic Party remained while the GOP by and large continued to oppose Clinton’s presidency. While FDR relied on patronages and political machines to hold his party members in line, Clinton’s political leverages were far weaker as NAFTA did not bring immediate economic benefits to most Congressional districts (and may have even harmed some). Neither did it mobilize new (pro-free trade) political movement/interests to enter into the Democratic Party, bringing shift in the political dynamics.

Limitations of Clinton’s presidential leadership were soon demonstrated when he failed to pass campaign finance and health care reforms before his 1st midterm election. In spite of nominal public support for these reforms, Clinton could not overcome entrenched resistance from Congress.

Clinton first discussed his campaign finance proposals to the Congressional leadership in Feb. 1993. The Congress’s response however, was predictably lukewarm as the proposed reforms would affect their own reelection campaigns (Waldman 47). While the proposed reform was being negotiated in the Congress, distracted by other issues Clinton did not exert much political authority over the legislation. Without the sustained attention from the president, there was little incentive on the part of the Congressional leadership to pursue this sensitive topic and the legislation died in the committee (Waldman 55).

On health care, Clinton did attempt his best effort to establish universal health care system. In his ’94 State of the Union Address, Clinton dramatically challenged the Congress that he will veto any healthcare-related legislation that does not include universal health care (Waldman 70). Unfortunately, due to unexpectedly long time consumed in passing the crime bill (which was also controversial) early in the year, health care legislation was taken up by

the Congress only by summer '94 (Waldman 75).

In spite of Clinton's vigorous public campaign, the legislation faced stiff opposition in the Congress. To begin with, there was a general Congressional dissatisfaction that the health care package was micromanaged by the Presidential taskforce headed by the First Lady, Hillary Clinton (Liebovich 189). The Republicans and conservative lobby groups (like insurance companies) also vocally opposed universal health care for ideological and self-interested reasons. After a bruising fight with the Democrats over the crime bill (on assault weapons ban), Republicans were disinclined to cooperate again with the president, particularly in the election year. Ironically, as the economy improved, public incentive for universal healthcare also subsided, further heightening the visibility of marginal, but well-organized conservative lobby (Campbell 35). As a result, the Congress never even took up the vote on the health care bill before the end of its fall session. Shortly afterwards, the '94 midterm election was held, which ended in Republicans taking over both houses of the Congress.

Was it simply strong conservative resistance that led to Clinton's humiliating setbacks in '94? While there are clear constraints to president's power (even FDR had to appease diverse political interests), Clinton was largely inept in his first term to mobilize steadfast base of support within the political establishment. For one thing, Clinton's over ambition to pass numerous legislations in the first two years hampered his efforts to prioritize his agendas (Denton 8). Had Clinton for an instance waited on his healthcare reform after the midterm election, he would not have faced such limited time constraint and may have even focused the election rather on his other achievements like NAFTA and Crime Bill. In addition, Clinton lacked the intimate political interaction FDR had with journalists, Congress, and party leadership (Campbell 75). While FDR gradually expanded the political strength of his

core allies (unions, African Americans, populists), Clinton's "centrist coalition" never emerged as sustainable political force or came to dominate the Democratic Party (Campbell 168).

Yet perhaps one of Clinton's biggest political liabilities that ironically resulted from his frequent media interaction was his personal scandals. Even as a presidential candidate, Clinton faced criticism for his past extramarital affairs and (alleged) draft-dodging. In his first term, Clinton's presidency was harassed by Whitewater scandal (Waldman 69). Clinton's scandals not only posed distraction to the operations of his administration, but also damaged public trust (if not the support) in his presidency and provided moral justification for the Republicans to take vocal stance against "Slick Willie" (Liebovich 187).

Clinton has been praised by many for his political rebound after the '94 GOP victory. Against the challenge from the new Republican-led Congress, Clinton preserved his presidential authority and achieved several political victories. Yet, while Clinton after the midterm election did skillfully utilize opportunities to exercise/demonstrate his personal leadership, he still failed short in creating an enduring political legacy. Clinton's bully pulpit, while effective, was often more defensive than aggressive (Denton 14). Far from dominating the political establishment, Clinton was forced to maintain uneasy cohabitation with his GOP opposition.

In his first press conference after the midterm election, Clinton made it clear that he will remain a relevant political actor. While extending offer of cooperation to the GOP-led Congress, Clinton reiterated his message for pragmatic centrism, promising to safeguard (a "defensive" term) the public interest (Waldman 78). Quite expectedly, Clinton and the GOP-led Congress came to ideological conflicts, resulting in several political showdowns.

The 1st major clash between Clinton and GOP-led Congress was on drafting the '95

Federal budget. While mutually supporting balanced budget, the two disagreed on spending priorities (Waldman 87). Clinton condemned Republicans' proposed budget cut on education and Medicare, vetoing the legislation. The Congress responded by not passing any budget for that year, leading to shutdown of the Federal government operations.

In this time of major test against his leadership, Clinton exercised bully pulpit to sway popular support in his favor. In a "Churchillian flourish," Clinton addressed the public daily during the government shutdown, reframing the issues of the debate (Waldman 92). While reiterating his support for balanced budget, Clinton appealed to audience that he supports budget with "values" and criticized the GOP Congress for their ideological partisanship. As the effects of shutdown became noticeable (such as the shut down of post offices), the public opinion came in favor of "pragmatic" Clinton, forcing the Congress to draft a modified budget (Campbell 84).

Clinton's political strategy with the GOP Congress was commonly called "triangulation." Influenced by his newly appointed political advisor, Dick Morris (a former Republican consultant), Clinton sought middle ground between the GOP and the Democratic positions, commonly using conservative rhetoric to justify more liberal policies (Campbell 87). For an instance while stunningly announcing in his '96 State of the Union address that the "era of big government is over", Clinton proposed continued government intervention to fight racism, crime, and enhance the quality of public education as part of his "value agenda" (Waldman 115). Chiding the ideological dogmatism of the GOP-led Congress, Clinton also portrayed himself as a champion of national unity and pragmatic bipartisanship.

Clinton's political posture was favorably viewed by majority of the public (Denton 9). As economy recovered in the 90's, the public was inclined to support the pragmatic stewardship of the presidency (that does not drastically alter the status quo). With this public

support, Clinton could forestall political challenges from the GOP Congress and was reelected in '96.

However, in spite of his popular support and several tactical victories over the Congress, Clinton's presidential leadership was limited and often put on defensive against resilient GOP opposition. Far from dominating the national policy agenda, Clinton was forced to govern in tense collaboration with the Congress (Campbell 67). While curbing their more excessive demands, often Clinton had to accommodate some of the agendas of the GOP-led Congress and make compromises, as when he signed into law the welfare reform act in return for GOP's acquiesce in raising minimum wage (Waldman 128). Yet, in spite of outward show of bipartisanship, relationship between the GOP and Clinton was always frigid. The Republicans resented Clinton for taking credit for their legislations (like the welfare reform) and using their own rhetoric to chide their partisanship (Campbell 283). In retaliation, the Republicans were rarely cooperative with Clinton's own personal agenda, voting down Clinton's proposal for campaign finance reform and tobacco regulation (Campbell 44).

As a result of "triangulation", Clinton also did not build strong relationship with the Democratic Party. While supportive of the president during his conflict with Republicans, many liberal Democrats resented his willingness to compromise with the GOP agendas. The welfare reform act for an instance was passed against vocal protest from liberal Democrats (Waldman 128). The balanced budget of '97 finally brokered between Clinton and the GOP included cuts in Medicare, further aggravating the Democrats (Waldman 179).

Finally, in retaliation for his support in the past for NAFTA, the pro-labor Democrats coalesced successfully to prevent renewing of Clinton's presidential fast track authority on trade. The Democratic House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt in particular was a harsh critic of Clinton's "triangulation", describing it as "poll-driven maneuvering" (Waldman 183).

While the Democratic Party as a whole abided to Clinton's policies and complimented his high popular support, in reality most Democrats were not in ideological agreement with Clinton (Waldman 142). While as a centrist Clinton could extract compromise, he lacked genuine political support for his ideology from within either political party. This may perhaps be because Clinton's "triangulation" was viewed by many in the political establishment as more of a tactical truce/consensus than a coherent political ideology (Campbell 189).

Finally, Clinton's biggest political handicap was the nature of his own "popular mandate." It is true that the majority of the public expressed satisfaction with the state of the country during most years of Clinton administration (Waldman 225). However, the public supported Clinton more as a custodian of the current status quo, rather than as a transformer he aspired to be (Waldman 271). Clinton's agenda on campaign finance reform for an instance, did not rally the public and the Congress naturally felt little pressure to pass his legislation against their own self-interest. As a result, some Clinton's critics even claimed the Clinton's bully pulpit was more in fact, a lectern, as he had compliant listeners/audience but not committed followers (Campbell 49).

In addition, while public may have supported his presidency, majority did not approve his personal conduct. In fact, most polls showed that Clinton had both high approval and low favorability rate (Denton 4). Clinton's frequent interaction with mass media may have enhanced his accessibility to the public, but also exposed his private scandals (Waldman 267). Compared to FDR, Clinton wasn't as effective in censoring the publicity of his presidency. Just as he utilized media to craft his image/messages, his opponents also used the media to expose Clinton's personal flaws (Campbell 83). As a result, Clinton had dual public images; while being perceived as an energetic, compassionate, pragmatic president, he was also seen by many as slick, devious, and opportunistic politician (Lammers 303). Part of the

reason the Republican Congress could so viciously challenge Clinton was because they knew their conservative constituents held strong moral views against the president (Denton 184).

The ultimate culmination of Clinton's presidency may perhaps be his impeachment trial, as it demonstrated the height and also the nadir of his bully pulpit. During the investigation of his extramarital relationship with the White House intern Monica Lewinsky, Clinton was forced to admit that he obscured the truth during his testimony under oath. Needless to say, Clinton's personal credibility further declined and the GOP-led Congress prepared his impeachment on charge that he has obstructed just process of law.

Rather than be put on defensive by Congress's charge against his personal records, Clinton sought to deflect the issue by going on the offensive, touting his responsibility as a sitting president. As Congress discussed his impeachment, Clinton went on a public campaign against drunk driving and smoking, forcing the media to cover his public events (Waldman 219). In spite of public (and media's) interest in his sensational scandal, Clinton continued to stay on his message for good governance. In fact, much to the surprise of the national viewers, Clinton did not mention his scandal at all in his '99 State of the Union address, even as Republicans prepared to vote for his impeachment (Waldman 243).

Did Clinton's bully pulpit work? In short-term it did. Majority of the public appreciated Clinton's apparent dedication to his presidential duties and did not want to remove him from office because of personal/partisan reason (Denton 191). The Senate Democrats and even some Republicans ultimately voted for his acquittal, while New Gingrich was forced to resign when the House Republicans surprisingly lost seats in the '98 midterm election (Waldman 240). Rather than Clinton's "misconduct", public chose instead to reprimand the aggressive partisan tactic of the Republicans, in part because of Clinton's success in framing the voters' perception in the context of the economy and public policies

(Waldman 225).

However, the long impeachment fight did leave negative impact on Clinton's public reputation as a president. Though defeated, Republicans (who still retained their Congressional majority) continued to express hostility to the president, opposing most his agendas and even some of his judicial nominees (Waldman 261). While the general public and Democrats supported him during the impeachment, Clinton's presidential stature diminished as a whole. Democrats for an instance, viewed impeachment as a proof of failure of "triangulation" and became more skeptical toward Clinton's bipartisan centrism (Campbell 93). Even the general public lost certain respect accompanied with presidency as they witnessed the personal failures of a sitting president, hampering Clinton's moral leadership in implementing his vision (Denton 319). In essence, Clinton preserved his presidency but lost his presidential prestige due to his impeachment (Denton 320). As a result, while leaving the office with sound economy, surplus budget and high approval rating, Clinton's political legacy was grounded to a halt, as proven when even his Vice President (Al Gore) distanced himself from him in the next presidential election.

Political setbacks are not uncommon for presidents. Yet, critics argue that Clinton for all his rhetoric and campaigns, governed as a passive president. While passing several noteworthy bipartisan legislations, Clinton's success lied more with tactical compromises and opportunities rather than achieving his long-term policy strategies (Campbell 87). Due to strong partisan environment in the Congress (as neither parties truly bought into his centrism), Clinton's presidential role was often constrained to that of mediating the difference between the two parties, rather than bringing about political transformation he promised/sought (Campbell 93).

While many of his policies may have been pragmatic, and even popular, Clinton

failed largely to create political realignment comparable to that of FDR's and Reagan's revolution (Waldman 268). Exposure of his personal scandals and absence of pressing national crisis made his presidential stature less imposing than it may otherwise have been. Ultimately however, Clinton's shortcoming as transformative president may perhaps have been that he was a "tactician without a strategy" (Campbell 292). While adept in use of mass communication to enhance his public image and promote his policies, Clinton failed to generate his popular support to establish a sustainable political ideology. Largely this is because Clinton lost too much personal favorability due to his personal scandals and "slickness" to have committed followers (Campbell 142). Yet, it may also be because Clinton, while largely managing to stay above the diverse political interests as an opportunistic (?) "triangler", did not inspire (as perceived by the political establishment) true character as a leader who lay out constructive strategy that permanently effect the dynamics of the country.

Lessons from Presidents' Bully Pulpit

To judge FDR as a successful wielder of rhetorical presidency and Bill Clinton as a failure would be a gross simplification. Thanks to the technological advancement in mass communication by late 20th century, Clinton faced very different media environment from FDR. Nor was their political situation quite similar. FDR had a unified government and faced national crisis (the Great Depression and latter WWII). In contrast, Clinton faced a divided, partisan government and public indifference to change (due to affluent economy).

However, the contrast in the legacy of the two presidents should be examined for its cause. While both faced several embarrassing setbacks, FDR maintained his dominance over the national agenda. His New Deal Coalition remained strong and became the ruling majority in the political establishment all the way to the Reagan Revolution. Clinton's "New

Democrat” coalition in contrast, remained fragile and broke down after the end of his office. Far from political consensus, the nation became further polarized after Clinton’s presidency and perhaps leaned more to the right under Bush, undoing Clinton’s centre-left legacy. As both presidents used bully pulpit to confront their opponents and were by most standards effective in gaining popular support, why was one more successful than the other in controlling the political establishment? What lessons can we draw from the two presidents to determine the effectiveness of bully pulpit as a tool for the president?

Lesson 1: The president’s first conducts/impressions affect the outcome of all the rest

The president’s bully pulpit only works if it’s persuasive and credible. Such credibility is usually established during the first days of the president’s term. Once the credibility is achieved, the president usually can effectively wield his rhetorical capacity throughout his presidency.

FDR inspired the nation with his inaugural address. He promised answers and hope to Americans who desperately sought them in the time of Great Depression. He set out to build relations with press correspondents and effectively rallied the Congress to swiftly pass his legislations during his first 100 days in office, setting a political precedence. Establishing trust, alliance, and leadership early on as a president, FDR maintained political high ground throughout his presidency (Lammers 344).

In contrast, Clinton’s had a rocky start after taking office. Clinton’s leadership was questioned almost immediately when he showed missteps in selecting his cabinet and staff. Clinton’s attempt to marginalize the Washington press correspondents naturally cooled his relationship with the national media. Finally, Clinton’s ambitious socio-economic policies (allowing gays to serve in the military for an instance) were widely criticized as distractions

from national priorities and were either stalled or outright defeated. Such early setbacks led to unfortunate public perception of Clinton as inept or weak, the perception that largely persisted throughout his presidency and reduced the strength/credibility of his presidential leadership (Campbell 36).

Lesson 2: The mass media is a medium for both the president and his opponents

Just as presidents can use media to communicate with the public, his opposition can also use it to rally the public against him. The two great rhetorical presidents, FDR and Clinton faced vicious attacks from their critics in the media. Majority of the newspaper editorialists, editors, and syndicated columnists during FDR's presidency were hostile to his New Deal policies and helped thwart some of his policies, such as his attempt to "pack the court"(Best 115). Clinton too was attacked by rising conservative talk radios and was harassed by the national media that scrutinized his scandals for popular sensation. Clinton's defeat in his health care reform also came about in part because of well-organized publicity campaign by his opponents (Lammers 319).

The president utilizing mass media must use it for both offensive and defensive purpose. While communicating his own message to the public, the president must also defend/protect his own image and records from attacks by his opponents. In a country of free and diverse media like the US, the news management is a difficult job for any administration, but a task that must be carried out if the presidents do not want to be defined by rhetoric/coverage of others.

FDR for an instance confronted his opposition media with both boldness and shrewdness. While on one hand utilizing radio to bypass the hostile press, he also cultivated friendship with journalists (he held total of 998 press conferences during his twelve years in

office), shrewdly judging that newspaper editorials have less impact on the voters than the actual news coverage (Halford 33). FDR also responded to press's criticism with increasingly combative rhetoric of his own, discrediting them before the public as the "Republican fiction writers" and "Tory press" (Halford 36).

Clinton's dealing with hostile media markedly improved during his presidency. He learned to ignore the press's harassment in certain situations, while rapidly responding to false charges in others (Denton 16). While conservative media continued to rally the voters already hostile to Clinton, he won several political victories (budget, impeachment) by attracting positive coverage from the national press, outwitting his opponents in his PR (Lamm 350). However, exposure of Clinton's personal scandals to the media continued to be a liability the oppositions used to defame his image and distract the nation away from his message (Lamm 326).

Lesson 3: Support within the establishment is as important as outside public support

One of the major limitations of public support is that often it does not directly transform into political leverage for the president. Without committed support from his allies, even popular presidents cannot effectively overcome determined resistance within the political establishment (particularly in passing drastic legislations). Clinton's health care reform for an instance was nominally supported among the general public but was ultimately defeated by better-organized interest groups opposed to his plan (Campbell 35).

While broad popular support is important, the president's bully pulpit should be accompanied with building of political coalition dedicated to president's policies. Or, in other words, inside political support is just as crucial to the president as his public support. FDR utilized urban political machines, bureaucratic patronages, and the Democratic Party

apparatus to dominate the Congress and the state governments. Even with unified government and popular support, FDR would have had difficult time controlling the conservative Democrats (who controlled the Congressional committees) had he not empowered his political allies (both in Congress and among interest groups) to push through his New Deal agendas. Distributing the benefits/promises of New Deal to his allies, FDR provided incentives for his followers to continue to promote his policies (under Truman, JFK, and LBJ's presidencies), even after the end of his presidency.

Clinton's inside political support was not quite as strong. Clinton did organize amalgamation of different political interests to pass "bipartisan" NAFTA and welfare reform legislations. Yet, he did not quite form his own "Clintonite" coalition committed to his "triangulation". As a result, Clinton presidential stature was constrained and was forced to cohabitate with existing political establishment, which did accept his compromises (ex: balanced budget) but did not philosophically sustain his ideology.

Lesson 4: President's personal character/conduct does matter

Even with adept political strategy and performance, president who is personally disliked or distrusted by others has difficulty in governing the country. President's personal conduct and character does have an impact on the public perception of his presidency. For an instance, had the media explicitly covered FDR's physical handicap or his collaboration with political bosses, public may not have perceived him as a strong, honest leader (Lammers 351). On the other hand, portrayal of his charisma and finesse (and even warmth during his "fireside chats") gained him favorable public image as a president (Halford 15). At a personal level, FDR was a likeable, persuasive individual (though not quite transparent/sincere as he claimed to be), and cultivated alliances with influential political figures.

Clinton's biggest political liability was his personal scandals. In spite of soaring economy, political popularity, and masterful political rhetoric, his presidential prestige was undermined by his extramarital affairs. Republicans viewed them as his lack of presidential qualification and even the public polls showed low favorability and trust in his personal conduct. While Clinton was liked by many for his charm and eloquence, the lack of public faith in his moral leadership diminished the strength of his bully pulpit. Viewed as "Slick Willie" by many inside and outside the political establishment, Clinton had very difficult time inspiring devout personal followers, hampering his control over the national agenda.

Lesson 5: Crisis can be opportunities for a president

Logically, president who governed during prosperous economy should have greater political mandate than the president who faced economic recession. Yet, FDR (who faced Great Depression) enjoyed far greater mandate to change than Clinton. How was this possible?

Of course, if the public perceive the president as inept in handling the crisis he would lose his legitimacy to govern. However, as the nation looks toward a strong leadership in times of hardship, president who can fill the role accumulates significant political capital. Discontent with the status quo, the public (and the political establishment) becomes more willing to take the risk in supporting the president's reforms (Lammers 39). FDR justified his "radical" New Deal programs as necessary national solutions to address national depression (Halford 9). He criticized the conservative opposition as self-interested elites who were responsible for the economic crisis in the first place (Halford 79). While the New Deal did not wholly overcome the effect of the Great Depression, FDR's apparent dedication to resolving the crisis prompted the nation to unify behind his leadership.

Clinton on the other hand faced a complacent public (demonstrated by record low voter turnout in the '96 election). As economy improved under his administration, voters became content with the status quo and averse to change. As a result, the voters reelected both Clinton and the Republican Congress in '96 and '98 election, effectively preserving the divided government. Without a national crisis to exercise his leadership and justify his bold initiatives, Clinton lacked political mandate to discipline the existing political interests and transform the national politics.

Observation and Insight into Obama's Early Days as a Rhetorical President

Senator Barrack Obama was elected as the new US president in 2008, through superb use of grassroots activism and communication technology. Relatively a novice in the national politics, Obama managed to win both in the primary and in the general election through efficient mobilization of his supporters and persuasive communication to the voters his message of "hope" and "change". In the mold of FDR and Clinton, Obama was also elected as a "populist" president committed to reforming "Washington" through his popular mandate. Naturally, the use of bully pulpit has been one of the crucial characteristics of Obama's presidency. In his first 100 days in office, to what extent has he used his rhetorical capacity and how effectively did he wield it?

To begin with, Obama has taken office in times of national crisis. The US is going through (according to some) the worst economic recession since the Great Depression and the public has clamored for strong leadership to overcome the crisis. Similar to FDR, Obama has been elected with significant political mandate and ambition to propose sweeping government interventions as solutions to the recession (Allen).

Obama has not squandered his initial political opportunity. Coming into office,

Obama made economic recovery the centerpiece of his presidential message, appealing to the Congress (and the nation as a whole) for bipartisanship and decisive action. Obama announced the passage of the stimulus bill in Congress as his political priority and actively lobbied the Congressmen from both parties for support (Johnson). Going further, he personally travelled nationwide to urge public support (calling their representatives) for economic stimulus, declaring that “modest difference” over details should not stall the need for swift government actions (Zeleny). When he faced potentially difficult situation during the withdrawal of several of his cabinet appointees, Obama was quick to apologize and shift the public (and media) attention back to his key message (Loven).

While, the content of the stimulus package has been criticized by many, Obama in the early days of his presidency defined his public image as a leader attentive to the pressing national challenge and who strives very hard to find bold solutions (Allen). To portray positive image of his presidency and persuade the nation to his proposals, Obama and his political allies naturally utilized widespread use of mass communication to “out-voice” their critics (Vogel). While facing passionate criticisms from conservative media (who predictably accused his policies of socialism and wasteful spending), Obama’s administration has overall displayed discipline, adeptness, and luck in managing its public relations.

Obama appointed Robert Gibbs (who has years of experience serving as a press secretary in the Congress) as the White House Press Secretary to interact with the White House press correspondents. To ensure the president remains the center of press coverage, Obama’s White House has organized symbolical, newsworthy events (such as president’s stimulus package signing ceremony in Colorado instead of the traditional location in the oval office) to attract media attention (Meckler). Continuing his campaign techniques, Obama utilized the use of internet to communicate with his former campaign supporters and even

hosted online town hall forum to interact with the public (Edmonds). In fact, in his current efforts to pass his budget in the Congress, Obama has requested his campaign supporters through e-mail to organize grass roots efforts to persuade their representatives (Ciliizza). In facing criticisms from conservative media, Obama's White House has countered by portraying some of them (like Rush Limbaugh) as radically dogmatic opposition, daring the Congressional Republicans to stand in solidarity with such groups (Kurts).

In some ways, Obama has been fortunate that the media coverage of his presidency to date has been overall positive and deferential (a honeymoon period). At the same time, Obama himself has actively pursued close interaction with different media mediums, using both traditional media and internet to portray an image of vibrant, proactive presidency to the general public. He has also countered the criticisms from the opposition through shifting the public scrutiny to the real "culprits" of the recession, the incompetent corporate CEOs who even now spend their firm's fund for personal expenses and bonuses (Shear).

Yet president's public and media support is insufficient unless complemented with support within the political establishment. As president, Obama requires allies and respectable personal leadership/character to manage often factionalized political institutions. As separation of powers is the fundamental principle of the US government, it is not uncommon even for a charismatic president (particularly reform-oriented) to face resistance from other branches of the government. Obama too discovered soon in office that Congressmen pursue their own political interests and often behave in partisan manner.

Obama enjoys for now an advantage of unified government. The Democratic leadership in Congress shares mutual interest with the president in the success of his presidential policies. Most Congressional Democrats also share similar views with Obama on the expansion of Federal government, though differing in its magnitude (Weisman).

At the same time, Obama has reached out to moderate Republicans in appeal for bipartisanship. Obama has touted support from several Republic governors who welcomed Federal stimulus package in their states (Calmes). In spite of partisan opposition, Obama still attained three crucial Senate Republican votes to pass his first major economic agenda (Weisman). While it is too early to tell whether his political support is long-term or simply a honeymoon effect, for now Obama enjoys political consensus in Washington that calls for greater government role in the economy, legitimizing his presidential policies (from health care to infrastructure modernization).

As a political novice, Obama has been criticized during the campaign for his executive inexperience and over ambition. There is still limit to his political dominance, as proven when the Congress ignored his (granted half-hearted) opposition in adding earmarks into the spending bill (Martin). However, other than missteps in his cabinet appointees, Obama has received generally positive review from the political establishment toward his leadership. Obama has portrayed image as an outgoing president who is both populist and also cooperative with Congress (Weismann). While ambitious, Obama has also adapted to traditional presidential image as a stately, family-oriented, religious, compassionate, and tough executive when it comes to national security (on Afghanistan and pirates). For the time being, even his political opponents do not criticize him for not being “presidential” enough.

It will probably not be clear until Obama faces midterm election or major political battle (say over universal health care) to measure how the strength of his political clout as a president. His current popularity and mandate is sufficient and yet hardly absolute; he faces vocal criticism from conservative activists and is still in the process of building relationship with Congress and the bureaucracy (as some of his cabinet positions are still not filled).

However, it can be said that Obama’s presidency has started with a good momentum.

Having utilized grassroots campaign as a presidential candidate, Obama as a president understands public support as a crucial political tool for his governance. To maintain such support, Obama has engaged in extensive public campaign (or some analysts might say “permanent campaign”) to promote his policies to the voters and engage his previous campaign supporters/contributors (Cillizza). Through the use of both traditional and new mediums of communication, Obama has widened his channels of interaction with the public in this multi-media era, reinforcing his image as an outgoing, populist president (Edmonds).

At the same time, it should also be pointed out that Obama’s use of bully pulpit has been complemented by other political factors to sustain his political leadership. Obama has been prudent in spending his political capital on key policy priorities. He has maintained respectful, but also unapologetic stance against his political opposition while cultivating broad cooperation within the political establishment (Weismann). While current economic crisis and personal popularity has provided political opportunities for Obama, had he not invested his effort in building inside support for his presidential leadership, Obama may have faced very confrontational political setting right from the start in his drive for “change.” While this does not mean he will not face major conformation, even setbacks later in his presidency, for now, President Obama appears to show strategic mindset in accumulating necessary resources to achieve long-lasting political legacy.

Conclusion:

The president of the United States is elected with popular mandate to govern throughout his constitutional term. While in the past, the American political tradition preferred the role of president as an independent executive insulated from popular pressure, today there is a different consensus that presidents are held accountable to their voters.

Henceforth, it has become a norm, even a necessity for a modern US president to appeal to public support for his agendas. With public support, the president gains significant leverage in exercising his leadership over other branches of the government. The president who successfully uses bully pulpit to shape public consensus has an upper hand in shaping even political consensus. On the flip side, president who has lost public support also loses respect within the political establishment and are often put on defensive by other ambitious political actors.

However, president's public rhetoric and even personal popularity are merely two of his necessary political tools for governance. In fact, presidents' excessive reliance on bully pulpit could stir widespread backlash from within the political establishment. FDR for an instance needlessly aggravated many of his own party members in attempt to directly "purge" some of the Congressional incumbents. Clinton too failed to display patient, methodical leadership in passing his health care reform, damaging his own political credibility. While public support can help pass some legislation, to consolidate clear dominance and legacy over the national politics, the president has to generate committed support within the government. Leader can not lead with followers, and as the head of the US government, the modern US president must develop priorities, character, discipline, organization, and "environmental justification" in order to transform his popularity into true leadership over the diverse political actors. The president's public rhetoric to be sure is a powerful asset, but he must not forget that he is not longer a campaigner, but an "executives" and can not execute public policies with out the submission of those he work with.

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