

The media has indisputably changed the role and scope of the presidency of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Certain presidents have utilized the media expertly to enhance their presidencies, whether to benefit their image or their policy agendas, or both. All have done this in different ways and to different ends. Use of the media to promote personality or policy is not mutually exclusive. In fact, the media has blurred the line between presidential personality and policy over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A few presidents have been particularly successful because they strategically developed their use of the media to establish an emotional connection with the public.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt's assumption of the office in 1932 is widely considered the turning point for the "modern presidency," the emergence of the president as the primary leader in domestic and international affairs, rather than the Congress or political parties.<sup>1</sup> The modern presidency expanded the role and profile of the president. Roosevelt's administration was innovative in the face of national crisis and contributed to the rise in federal power and publicity. He accomplished much of his success through the developing medium of radio. The public profile of the president has escalated steadily since Roosevelt. As the role of the president has increased, so has media coverage of the president.

Presidents have used available media to communicate with the public, to varying degrees of success, throughout the twentieth century. A few presidents' reputations were even cemented through their use of media. Franklin Roosevelt is nearly synonymous with fireside chats, a foundational component of his approach to press outreach that capitalized on the emergent medium of radio. John F. Kennedy's

---

<sup>1</sup> Sidney M. Milkis and Michael Nelson, *The American Presidency: Origins and Development, 1776-2007*, (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2008), 281.

reputation is permanently tied to television because of his landmark televised debate with presidential opponent Richard Nixon. Kennedy had a perceptive understanding of the power televised images would hold. Ronald Reagan's name is conjured up with any mention of the "Great Communicator." His media-savvy advisors effectively stage-managed his presidency through prepackaged televised images, taking the media presidency to a whole new level with radio, television and orchestrated photo opportunities.

Evidence also suggests that Theodore Roosevelt had these three beat. He had a youthful and attractive family, along with a colorful personality that captured America's attention. He shook up Washington, D.C. with his progressive policies and bold new approach to the office at the turn of the twentieth century. He also "rode the crest of the emerging mass media," using all available media forms to connect with Americans.<sup>2</sup> He was the first to recognize the potential power of good public relations. He used photographic images most effectively to connect with the American people and convey his energetic personality.

Out of Theodore Roosevelt's recognition of the potential power held in media came the first White House quarters for the press, the first daily interviews, the first press secretary, and understanding and management of press deadlines.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite his significant contributions and media management style, he is routinely left out of the discussion of great White House communicators.

---

<sup>2</sup> Lewis L. Gould, *The Modern American Presidency*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas 2003), vii.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Schmertz, "Media and the Presidency," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (1986), 12.

The Washington press evolved considerably through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has advanced exponentially in the earliest decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>. At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup>, relations between the president and the press were tentative. Theodore Roosevelt was instrumental in developing a valuable relationship with the press, forming contacts with reporters and allowing them more access to the White House. But decades later, the advent of new media transformed the game for both reporters and leaders. Americans' accessibility to radio, and television later on, affected what they were interested in reading or hearing about the president. In response, politicians had to explore these new media and form communication strategies to develop beneficial relationships with their constituents.

Presidents hold a great deal of influence over the public. They can influence public opinion and the public policy agenda, whether through "political drama," (public speeches, campaigning, etc.) or their own popularity.<sup>4</sup> Popular presidents are able to affect the public's opinion of a specific policy, but even a president that does not hold high popularity can still influence the agenda.<sup>5</sup> A key component to this theory, however, is an assumption that presidents have easy access to the American public through mass media. Presidents (and their often brilliant advisors) had to develop media strategies to reach Americans and reaped the rewards of their innovative communication efforts.

Presidents are the most visible members of the government with the most to gain or lose in their management of the agenda. Some scholars argue that presidents

---

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey E. Cohen, "Presidential Rhetoric and Public Agenda," *American Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 1, (1995): 87.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen, "Presidential Rhetoric and Public Agenda," 88.

are not elected to be great communicators or evaluated based on their media skill.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the normative arguments, it is clear that media savvy is an imperative element required for successful presidents. This paper evaluates the different ways presidents have used media to cultivate a connection with the American people in order to be successful leaders. The presidents examined here aimed their messages directly at the public through images, radio and television.

### ***THEODORE ROOSEVELT***

Theodore Roosevelt understood the powerful impact that images and positive press could make on public opinion. The media propelled Roosevelt to fame even before he was elected Vice President to William McKinley. He was not a bystander or a media creation: he lapped up the attention. It was certainly not a one-sided affair that was all the media's doing, however. Roosevelt enjoyed the spotlight along his trip to fame and "exploited the public dimensions of all his roles and offices with zest and skill."<sup>7</sup> Though his presidency did not coincide with a new medium for communication, Roosevelt mastered the use of images and available media expertly during his presidency, and proved to be a role model for future presidents.

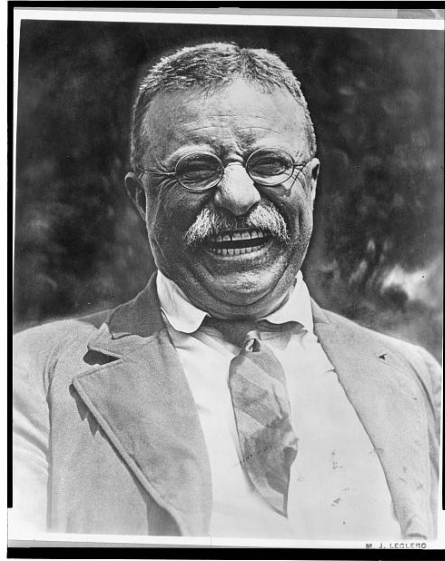
Roosevelt appealed to the public for support with literally all available media at the time of his presidency. He used active photography, wrote several books while

---

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Schmertz, "Media and the Presidency," 19.

<sup>7</sup> John Milton Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985), xi.

presidency, and manipulated the press for favorable coverage. All of these developments served to personalize a previously stilted, formal presidency.<sup>8</sup>



(Photo 1: Roosevelt was able to convey his lively personality through photographs. Photo via Library of Congress: <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3c34760/>.)

Roosevelt developed an acute understanding of body language and appearance. Though he was only 5'9", he was able to project a strong, burly image by *seeming* massive. He appeared immense and muscular, and his actions belied his smaller stature. Biographer Edmund Morris detailed his interpersonal behavior in his biography, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*:

When talking his entire body mimes the rapidity of his thoughts. The right hand shoots out, bunches into a fist, and smacks the left palm; the heels click together, the neck bulls forward, then, in a spasm of amusement, his face contorts, his head tosses back, spectacle-ribbons flying, and he shakes from

---

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Ponder, *Managing the Press*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 29.

head to foot with laughter. A moment later, he is listening with passionate concentration, crouching forward and massaging the speaker's shoulder as if to wring more information out of him. Should he hear something not to his liking, he recoils as if stung, and the blood rushes to his face.<sup>9</sup>

This emotional, dynamic behavior was a great strength for Roosevelt. Everything about his appearance was lively and animated. He had unfortunate luck not to preside in an era with television, a medium that would offer Americans universal access to future presidents. Instead, he had to find ways to portray his spirited, attractive nature. He turned to photographs and news stories, the available media of the day, which depicted the vigorous young president to the public. The photo above is an example of how a frozen image still managed to portray Roosevelt's lively spirit (Photo 1). Pictures like this one created an emotional and psychological tie between average Americans and their bold, young leader. He visually represented a collective spirit for the country at that time.

Roosevelt's rise to fame was well-documented, beginning with his leadership of a ragtag group of cowboys and Ivy Leaguers called the "Rough Riders" in the Spanish-American War. Roosevelt took full advantage of the attention and "did not leave publicity to chance," making special provisions for reporters and photographers to capture the experience.<sup>10</sup> The press followed him throughout the war and focused many stories on the Rough Riders. Americans were eager for tales of the war and the tabloid journals obliged, printing stories of "Colonel Roosevelt" and the Rough Riders nationwide. As a leader of the group, Roosevelt found widespread fame and he took

---

<sup>9</sup> Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 2001), xxv.

<sup>10</sup> Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, 39.

great pride in his moniker “Colonel.” He fondly used the nickname for the remainder of his life.<sup>11</sup>

He understood the power of personal appearance early, having been bullied as a slender-framed young man with asthma. He fought this perceived weakness by he learning outdoor skills and participating in sports to bulk up and fight his asthma. He fought his wealthy East Coast appearance to become a Western cowboy, his personal ideal. By the time he led the Rough Riders, he presented “himself as a solid and muscular, mature, battle-ready horseman. Roosevelt had remade the youthful, slim, decorated and slightly feminized body... into a battle-hardened man of action worthy of national acclaim.”<sup>12</sup> The pictures of Roosevelt around this time reinforced this new image as he appeared manly and prepared for battle in Cuba. Though it is often remembered inaccurately, Roosevelt participated in the charge of San Juan Hill (actually Kettle Hill), the most famous event of the Spanish-American War. His actions created a heroic reputation on a national level.

He quickly capitalized on his experience in the War and newfound fame. No other soldier profited as much as Roosevelt from the short war. He was a prominent figure on the national scene within months after the war’s end, and was elected Governor of New York upon his return to the United States.<sup>13</sup> He held an intensely charismatic power on the campaign trail, drawing huge crowds to his appearances, a testament to his public relation skills.

---

<sup>11</sup> Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, 39.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Lyons Watts, *Rough Rider in the White House: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Desire*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 132.

<sup>13</sup> Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, 38.

Even though he served as a Republican governor, his relationship with New York Republican machine boss Thomas Platt was prickly at best. Because his focus on reform threatened their agenda, it is commonly believed that Platt pushed Roosevelt as a candidate for the vice presidency in 1900 as a way to rid the state of the stubborn leader and put him in a fruitless position. Fate interfered when McKinley was assassinated early in his second term and Roosevelt became the unexpected president, with more power than ever. As a bold young president, Roosevelt continued to use images to connect with the American people. He continued to shun his upper crust, east coast background (a traditional background for presidents) in favor of his western, rugged ideal.

This ideal was not singular to Roosevelt, however. Nationally, the archetypal male image was evolving from the patrician ideals of the early and mid-1800s to a new, rugged modern hero. Mass-circulation magazines wrote stories about the new ideal man: a “cowboy-soldier operating...on sheer strength of will and physicality.”<sup>14</sup> Roosevelt worked to embody this new image of the ideal male. Biographer Sarah Lyons Watts writes that “In one seamless cowboy-soldier-statesman-hero life, Roosevelt crafted the cowboy ethos consciously and lived it zealously, providing men an image and a fantasy.”<sup>15</sup> He knew the superficial effect it had on the public. He once acknowledged that Taft (his successor) was “a far abler man...but he don’t know how to play the popular hero and shoot a bear.”<sup>16</sup> Roosevelt’s image had a national effect,

---

<sup>14</sup> Lyons Watts, *Rough Rider in the White House*, 124.

<sup>15</sup> Lyons Watts, *Rough Rider in the White House*, 123.

<sup>16</sup> Gould, *The Modern American Presidency*, vii.



similar to the national response to Andrew Jackson who became president as a “man of the people.”

He played into the ideal persistently. A profile of Roosevelt, written for McClure’s Magazine in 1898 before he held a national office contains a section titled “The Life of a Cowboy.” Author Ray Baker writes that the “sterling, rugged, old-fashioned sense of duty is the key-note of Mr. Roosevelt’s character—that, and the iron determination to do his duty promptly when he sees it.”<sup>17</sup> The media loved quoting Roosevelt’s strong, stubborn rhetoric and style. He harnessed both visual and print media to portray him as the ultimate male, establishing a connection with average Americans that leaders have tried to emulate ever since.

Roosevelt’s life as projected through the media was desirable for many men. It also contributed to his national success, as many Americans suffered through the Gilded Age while monopolies and robber barons capitalized with record profits at the turn of the century. Many Americans looked favorably on a reformist outsider given the ripe environment. Roosevelt’s cavalier attitude and image were the perfect antidote to the perceived problems in the United States.

Roosevelt cultivated his relationship with newspaper reporters. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Washington press corps was small but growing, and hungry for stories on the president. Enter Theodore Roosevelt: “A reporter’s dream come true. Young, flamboyant, dashing, colorful.”<sup>18</sup> Roosevelt recognized his personality as a vehicle to advance his political and policy goals. He used his secretary

---

<sup>17</sup> Ray Stannard Baker, “Mr. Roosevelt: A Character Sketch,” *McClure’s Magazine*, Volume 12, 1898.

<sup>18</sup> Waterman, et al., *The Image-Is-Everything Presidency: Dilemmas in American Leadership* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 142.

to provide “guidance” through official statements and press releases. It was a win-win: Roosevelt controlled the majority of what was written about him while the newspapers’ subscription rates rose.

He used newspapers to aid him in the maintenance of his “common man” image. He is credited with building the first room for White House reporters after seeing them huddled under the portico in the rain.<sup>19</sup> He played favorites with reporters, trading privileged off-the-record information in private Oval Office interviews in return for favorable coverage. He even exerted his influence over the press on weekends. With a sharp understanding of the news cycle, he would call up reporters with selected information for a story in order to create positive press on notoriously slow news days.<sup>20</sup>



(Photo 2: Roosevelt preferred to be photographed while engaged in sports or in active settings. Photo via Library of Congress:  
[http://loc.gov/pictures/item/95514635/resource/cph.3a08054/.](http://loc.gov/pictures/item/95514635/resource/cph.3a08054/))

---

<sup>19</sup> Charles Press and Kenneth VerBurg, *American Politicians and Journalists* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 132.

<sup>20</sup> Edwin Diamond, “The Sound Bites and the Fury,” *New York Magazine*, March 28, 1988, 38.

Roosevelt was photographed more than any other previous president.

Roosevelt understood the raw, emotional power of an image in the finest detail. The emotional impact of a photograph is not always logical, but it creates a lasting impression. Roosevelt was able to effectively convey his vivacious qualities through photographs. As Edmund Morris put it, the photographs were able to capture “a perpetual flow of torrential energy, a sense of motion even in stillness.”<sup>21</sup>

Naturally, he preferred to appear active in images to reinforce his beloved cowboy reputation. He would intentionally pose for photographs during public events: speaking with his fist gesturing in the air. He was frequently photographed engaging in active endeavors: hiking, riding horses, even operating a crane at the Panama Canal construction site. In the photo above, Roosevelt is shown riding a horse over a fence, engaging in western sport that strengthened his reputation (Photo 2). Perhaps most telling of his attention to image-creation is that he would not allow himself photographed while playing tennis because it portrayed the opposite of his desired manly image.<sup>22</sup>

While presidents of the 19<sup>th</sup> century often sat for portraits in stiff, conventional poses, Roosevelt took full advantage of his persona and used active, dynamic photographs: posing on a horse; revealing his full, charismatic smile; travelling the country; sitting with his young children. These images portrayed a young, active, energetic White House leader most of America could relate to.

---

<sup>21</sup> Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 2001), xxiv.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Waterman, et al., *The Image-is-Everything Presidency*, 33.

Roosevelt exploited his personal popularity through what he termed the “bully pulpit.”<sup>23</sup> This was a fundamental shift in presidential leadership where leaders would use the publicity with the position to accomplish policy goals rather than simply administrate. He used the bully pulpit and photographic images to advance his conservationist agenda. His image, grounded in his soldier-cowboy persona, blended perfectly with the issue of nature conservation.

In a style that rivals his contemporaries in the White House, Roosevelt created public events to push his agenda. He invited national leaders to attract press attention and manipulated the stories written by the papers.<sup>24</sup> In speeches he tapped into the traditional American myth of the frontier, using mental imagery, of brave individuals bonding together by ideals to fight the hostile frontier.<sup>25</sup> He relied further on photographs to display his efforts and affection for nature. Many Americans were without the means to have experienced wildlife at the level Roosevelt had, and were particularly susceptible to this type of photographic advertising. Primitive photo opportunities at wildlife preserves or Yellowstone Park helped to advance his cause by displaying the goal of the effort. Roosevelt was ultimately successful in passing legislation to support the National Parks System.

Images defined Roosevelt’s presidency, even with limited media capability of the times. The images Roosevelt relied on often contradicted reality, making it an impressive use of media in overwriting his legacy. He used rhetorical and symbolic images to represent his foreign policies, such as the proverb “speak softly and carry a

---

<sup>23</sup> Gould, *The Modern Presidency*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Leroy G. Dorsey “The Frontier Myth in Presidential Rhetoric: Theodore Roosevelt’s Campaign for Conservation,” *Western Journal of Communication* 50, no. 1 (1995), 12.

<sup>25</sup> Dorsey, “The Frontier Myth in Presidential Rhetoric,” 4.

big stick,” and his domestic image as a trustbuster. In actuality, Roosevelt was hesitant on foreign crises and actually accomplished less with trusts than his successor William Howard Taft.<sup>26</sup> But the image lasts long after the actual policy or results, so Roosevelt’s image succeeds Taft’s reality.

Teddy Roosevelt is often left out of the discussion of great presidential communicators, but he understood personal communications at an impressive level. Not only given the available media, but also given the historic precedent of static, more managerial presidents before him. He changed the course of the presidency in relation to the media. His ability to expertly manage the media should not be so overlooked by current scholarship.

### ***FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT***

Franklin Delano Roosevelt is a presidential legend. His time in office is routinely considered a game-changer as the “first modern presidency.”<sup>27</sup> Both the American people and the media loved him. It was hard not to, when he was such a capable, effective and charismatic leader who spoke to the public through the informal and readily accessible medium of radio. Radio was a new form of communication, but FDR’s style was suited to trying innovative methods to advance his policies and correct the nation’s problems.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Roosevelt took office amid economic disaster: a peak unemployment rate of 25% with nearly 40% of non-

---

<sup>26</sup> Waterman, et al., *The Image-is-Everything Presidency*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> Milkis and Nelson, *The American Presidency*, 281.

farmers unemployed. Millions of Americans were homeless and living in “Hoovervilles,” titled as a flippant dismissal of President Hoover’s ill-suited policies to address the depression. Roosevelt took action immediately and enacted the New Deal legislative package, which funded vast public works programs and included the Social Security Act. It was an unprecedented expansion of federal power to take control of the economy. But Roosevelt’s presidency is important for more than just his groundbreaking policies. He followed Theodore’s lead in further altering the relationship between the president and the public.

Roosevelt took office with all the benefits of fame and wealth. He was born to wealthy New York parents, attended Ivy League schools Harvard and Columbia and steadily rose to positions of prominence in the Democratic Party. He served as a state senator in New York, then as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, and campaigned for Vice President alongside Democratic presidential candidate James Cox in 1920 before becoming the Governor of New York in 1924.<sup>28</sup> He was comfortable on the national stage.

Roosevelt was aptly suited for the task of inspiring and leading the country during such despairing times. He had a natural ability to connect with people on an informal, comfortable level. Roosevelt took office and delivered his inaugural address in his straightforward style:

I am certain that my fellow Americans expect that on my induction into the Presidency I will address them with a candor and a decision which the present

---

<sup>28</sup> “Our Presidents: Franklin Delano Roosevelt,” The White House.  
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/franklindroosevelt>.

situation of our Nation impels. This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly.<sup>29</sup>

Roosevelt addressed their fears head-on, with candor. In his speech he summarized the problems Americans faced and the potential for improvements. Most importantly, he outlined the role that he envisioned the government would play in improving it. This candor was typical of FDR's communication style. Roosevelt also used photographs to convey an active, healthy lifestyle despite his ailments. His most important contribution to the development of presidential communications was his use of the emergent medium of radio to connect with Americans directly during the economic catastrophe.

FDR's powerful personality and drive were perfectly suited for the advancements of the 1930s. Technological improvements set the stage for enhanced relations between the president and the American people. Roosevelt was ready to explore the potential of radio. Today it is hard to imagine radio as such a powerful communication tool, but in the 1930s it was a powerful and influential form of both entertainment and information. Scholar Robert Brown says the influence of radio was never before and never since rivaled.<sup>30</sup> Radio revolutionized American culture. As a new medium, it captivated the listeners' imagination in a new way. Anything or anyone—from soap opera programs to demagogues—seized the airwaves, breaking down geographic barriers and allowing Americans access to programming nationwide.

---

<sup>29</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt, *First Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1933. Full text at: <http://www.advisorsquare.com/new/kannerfinancialservices/Franklin%20Delano%20Roosevelt.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Robert J. Brown, *Manipulating the Ether: The Power of Broadcast Radio in Thirties America*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), xi.

Roosevelt was not the first president to employ radio as a communication tool—Herbert Hoover tried too and failed—but he was the first take it to the next level. Roosevelt’s “fireside chats,” for which he is very well-known, began on March 12, 1933, just a week after his inauguration. His first chat aimed to explain the banking crisis in the United States. He began by addressing the audience “My friends,” an informal greeting that made listeners feel closer to the president. He proceeded to speak simply and straightforwardly to expand the bank holiday:

I want to tell you what has been done in the last few days, why it was done, and what the next steps are going to be. I recognize that the many proclamations from State capitols and from Washington [...] should be explained for the benefit of the average citizen.<sup>31</sup>

He used radio in this instance similar to the way he used his first inaugural address. Radio was perfectly suited for his direct approach. Roosevelt had a gift for talking to average citizens on their level in a powerful way. He recognized the novelty of radio and the potential for impact. He said to NBC President Merlin Aylesworth that “nothing since the creation of the newspaper has had so profound an effect on our civilization as radio,” and recognizing the potential for “promoting national unity.”<sup>32</sup> Roosevelt demonstrated how powerful radio could be, and led future presidents to embrace radio in order to communicate successfully.

---

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Alter, *The Defining Moment: FDR’s Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope*, (Simon and Schuster, 2007) 344.

<sup>32</sup> Brown, “Manipulating the Ether,” 9.





(Photo 3: FDR used radio to communicate directly with Americans in addresses he called “fireside chats.” Photo courtesy Library of Congress: [www.loc.gov/.../0804/images/expand-newdeal01.jpg](http://www.loc.gov/.../0804/images/expand-newdeal01.jpg))

The advent of radio in the American life allowed politicians to have access to the public in a direct manner. This new “domesticated” form of political messaging felt much more comfortable than the abstract, impersonal print journalism.<sup>33</sup> Radio gave everyone a chance to become informed and participate in political discussions. The development of radio was instrumental in democratizing the relationship between the government and the people.<sup>34</sup>

Radio was effectual because it “reached listeners in their home...and could impress a message distinctively and repeatedly on a listener’s awareness and memory.”<sup>35</sup> This level of impact proved particularly true for advertisers, who successfully seized on the radio boom. Advertising was far more powerful over radio than through newsprint by tapping into listener’s minds and imaginations. Programs like the “War of the Worlds” epic were successful over radio due to their escapist

---

<sup>33</sup> Peter Dahlgrin and Colin Sparks, *Communication and Citizenship: Journalism and the Public Sphere*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 44.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications*, (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 355.

elements, allowing listeners to imagine the sagas unfolding and escape the overwhelming domestic challenges facing their families and friends.

Success over radio wasn't limited to advertisers. Radio personalities (often demagogues) also grabbed hold of the medium to gather more support and bolster their political efforts. Because radio eliminated geographic limitations, speakers like Huey Long and Father Coughlin were able to reach many more listeners and potential followers. Coughlin, a right-wing Catholic priest and anti-Semite, held an estimated 10 million strong audience for his weekly broadcasts attacking New Deal legislation.<sup>36</sup> Louisiana Senator and populist agitator Huey Long also held a huge audience for his broadcasts. Many considered him an even better radio communicator than Roosevelt. He often received an average of 60,000 letters in response to his radio broadcasts.<sup>37</sup> His success over the airwaves and his fierce populist movement was likely leading Long to a presidential run in 1936, but he was assassinated in 1935 before he had the opportunity.

Having seen the success of advertisers and leaders like Long and Coughlin, Roosevelt knew he must use the radio immediately upon taking office. Sensing the melancholy spirit of the American people, Roosevelt used the radio "as a weapon against discontent."<sup>38</sup> It was the first of nearly 30 broadcasts over Roosevelt's four terms. Roosevelt was an extremely effective communicator over broadcast radio. It had the effect of soothing the nation's fears and concerns because it felt as though Roosevelt were sitting in your living room discussing the nation's challenges in a

---

<sup>36</sup> Richard Davis and Diana Marie Owen, *New Media and American Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>37</sup> Davis and Owen, *New Media and American Politics*, 9.

<sup>38</sup> William H. Young and Nancy K. Young, *The 1930s*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 216.

straightforward and effective manner. Some estimates claim that roughly 30 million listeners (over a quarter of the nation) tuned in to Roosevelt's chats. It was an unprecedented series of events: never before had a president held such easy, open access to so many people at a single time.<sup>39</sup>

The administration reserved fireside chats for times when they were most necessary—crises or situations of legislative deadlock—so that he could “assert maximum influence on the popular mind” through the potent broadcasts.<sup>40</sup> He delivered approximately thirty fireside chats from 1933 until his death in 1945. Radio was still a nascent form of media, and as *Fortune* magazine asserted in 1935, “Until Mr. Roosevelt, no one had any idea of the possible range of its virtuosity.”<sup>41</sup>

Roosevelt's success in communication was not limited to his brilliance over radio. Advisors to the president recognized Roosevelt's ability to connect with the American people and began to look for other ways to capitalize on it. Stephen Early was not the first presidential press secretary, but he was the first press secretary in the modern understanding of the position. Herbert Hoover technically had the first aide solely focused on press relations, but he was largely ineffective.<sup>42</sup> Early ran the press office from 1933 until 1945, establishing twice-weekly press conferences and taking impromptu questions from reporters.<sup>43</sup> The history of press relations and the presidents is basically a history of the press conference. No one exemplified this

---

<sup>39</sup> Young and Young, *The 1930s*, 217.

<sup>40</sup> Gould, *The Modern American Presidency*, 86.

<sup>41</sup> Unknown, “The Case Against Roosevelt,” *Fortune Magazine*, December 1935.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Hess, *Presidents and the Presidency*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1996), 119.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen Ponder, *Managing the Press*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 162.

theory more than FDR: Roosevelt held 998 press conferences over his twelve years in office.<sup>44</sup>

Roosevelt liked to call his informal meetings with the press “delightful family conferences.” There were specific rules about the type of information he would give in the meetings: he would offer direct quotations only on occasion; his press conference comments; background information on topics; and off the record comments that reporters were strictly instructed not to repeat to absent reporters.<sup>45</sup> Roosevelt’s press offices wrote about 1,000 press releases per month by the end of his first year. Over a seven-week period, *The New York Times* wrote 1,281 articles with their origins in the White House press office.<sup>46</sup>

While Roosevelt shifted the presidency into a new age of power and dominance, by way of a dramatic expansion of authority, he also revised the role of the president within the media. He followed Theodore Roosevelt’s lead in creating a more accessible and influential presidency. He saw the potential for the president’s role to expand through new media innovation.

---

<sup>44</sup> Hess, *Presidents and the Presidency*, 115.

<sup>45</sup> Arthur Meier Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency*, (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004) 224.

<sup>46</sup> Richard M. Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press and Public in America*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 41.



*(Photo 4: FDR used photographs to project a healthy, vigorous image despite losing the use of his legs to polio. Only two known images exist of FDR in his wheelchair.*

*Photo via Encyclopedia Britannica Online:*

*<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/509263/Franklin-D-Roosevelt>)*

Like his cousin TR, he understood the power of imagery. Though FDR suffered from polio and lacked the ability to use his legs properly, only one photograph exists of him in his wheelchair. The press never published pictures of his aides carrying him or assisting him in any way. The images distributed among the papers were of him standing at his speeches, or of him with his cigarette-holder, looking strong and capable. The visual images of FDR—combined with the mental image listeners obtained while listening to the radio and his revolutionary policy accomplishments—resulted in the perception of a very strong, capable leader despite his physical limitations.

Roosevelt has a secure place in history as one of the greatest presidents in American history, no matter how scholars compare them. His expansion of the executive branch, his powerful legislative programs, and his forceful personality led him to be a great and powerful president. His ability to develop the new medium of radio allowed him to further cement his legacy as a great president. He took

advantage of the radio (and also capitalized on newsreels and photojournalism to bolster his image) and showed the country just how powerful the medium could be. Though radio would subside as the dominant form of media, subsequent leaders would take lessons from his mastery of direct communication.

### ***JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY***

A young Senator Kennedy wrote, “TV has altered drastically the nature of our political campaigns, conventions, constituents, candidates and costs. Some politicians regard it with suspicion, others with pleasure. Some candidates have benefited by using it-others have been advised to avoid it. To the voter and vote-getter alike, TV offers new opportunities, new challenges and new problems.”<sup>47</sup>

These words seem obvious today in the world of the 24-hour news cycle, sound bites and horse race presidential campaigns. Television is an integral part of modern day culture. Early on, John F. Kennedy perceived what television would mean for politics. Nearly a year before he appeared in the much-celebrated televised Kennedy-Nixon debate, he wrote an essay for *TV Guide* about how big a role television would come to play in politics. Then-Senator Kennedy wrote that the viewer’s impressions were likely to be “uncannily correct.” Kennedy cited two Republicans who bucked the Democratic trends of 1958 and were elected to governorships through their effective usage of television. He noted that these men, as well as other successful televised candidates, were relatively young. While youth appeared to be a handicap in the eyes

---

<sup>47</sup> John F. Kennedy, *A Force That Has Changed the Political Scene*, TV Guide Magazine, November 14, 1959. Accessed: [http://www.museum.tv/debateweb/html/equalizer/print/tvguide\\_jfkforce.htm](http://www.museum.tv/debateweb/html/equalizer/print/tvguide_jfkforce.htm).

of older politicians, it was clearly a plus in the television-viewing electorate's eyes.<sup>48</sup> Kennedy faced plenty of criticism as a young senator for being all-appearance or "just a suit," but he understood how truly important television would be to the future of political candidates yet to come. He worked this knowledge to his advantage throughout his presidential campaign and through his short time in office.

Television ownership began to thrive, increasing from nine percent in 1950 to almost 80 percent in 1960.<sup>49</sup> Broadcast television quickly became the most popular medium for Americans to obtain information. The pure emotional power of images allowed politicians and activists to convey messages without nearly as much effort as a traveling campaign, while reaping much more benefit. For example, southern civil rights activists were much more successful in advocating for legislation when images of police brutality and racism were broadcast into America's living rooms. While the majority of the public was able to avoid personal involvement in the violent struggle, television instantly placed the issue right in their homes. "Cameras seared the images of Birmingham and Selma into the national consciousness."<sup>50</sup> And ultimately, images of the Vietnam War on the nightly news drove students and activists to the streets, protesting the unpopular war in unparalleled numbers. Television had a powerful grip on the nation's political psyche that Kennedy wanted to take advantage of. These images also worked the opposite way, eventually forcing Kennedy to become involved in tricky political issues.

---

<sup>48</sup> John F. Kennedy, *A Force That Has Changed the Political Scene*, TV Guide Magazine, November 14, 1959. Accessed: [http://www.museum.tv/debateweb/html/equalizer/print/tvguide\\_jfkforce.htm](http://www.museum.tv/debateweb/html/equalizer/print/tvguide_jfkforce.htm).

<sup>49</sup> David McKay, *American Politics and Society*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005) 146.

<sup>50</sup> G. Calvin McKenzie and Robert Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour: Washington and the Politics of Change in the 1960s*, (Penguin Group, 2008), 50.

In 1952, Kennedy had enrolled in a Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) course detailing how to be an effective speaker on television, where his instructor felt Kennedy's natural style would be particularly successful for the medium. His instructor was accurate about the young senator. Kennedy went on to revolutionize presidential communication by demonstrating the importance of television similarly to Roosevelt's use of radio. He did so not only with his "first-class stagecraft, a natural wit and telegenic good looks, but...he had important things to say."<sup>51</sup> He maximized television to promote his personal image, but also to advance his policy goals.

Television is a unique medium in the way that "it can show you off to best advantage or destroy you in an instant." Television combines sound with visual images so there are multiple stimuli going to the viewer's brain at once. The confluence of images and sounds created a powerful emotional effect for viewers. Think of how television would have enhanced Franklin Roosevelt's famous radio addresses. Kennedy attempted to build on FDR's model of communication so that viewers could listen and see the speaker at the same time, creating a visual version of fireside chats.

---

<sup>51</sup> John A Barnes, *John F. Kennedy on Leadership: The Lessons and Legacy of a President*, (AMACOM, 2007), 76.





*(Photo 5: Due to his youth and attractive appearance, television enhanced Kennedy's chances in the presidential debate with Richard Nixon. Photo courtesy of Encyclopedia Britannica Online, © Bettmann/Corbis: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/314791/John-F-Kennedy>.)*

The renowned Kennedy-Nixon debates, routinely taught in contemporary American history and political science courses as the game-changer in presidential elections, were the first live presidential debate on national broadcast television. In the words of Marshall McLuhan, “the medium is the message.” In this instance, the message was the contrast between a young, handsome Kennedy and a pale, shift-eyed Nixon. Visual images had a strong and definite effect on viewers. By most accounts after the debate, most radio listeners thought Nixon had won, while most television viewers thought Kennedy won.<sup>52</sup> Though Nixon’s resume boasted much more experience in national and international politics, the glamorous Kennedy won the election by the closest margin since 1916.

While prominence has always been a necessary component to a successful presidential campaign, the advent of television meant that obtaining prominence

---

<sup>52</sup> Michael X. Delli Carpini, “Radio’s Political Past,” *Media Studies Journal* 7, (1993): 33.

would be a little easier for the unknowns.<sup>53</sup> It meant that candidates could reach an audience of millions. And unlike radio, the candidate could leave them with a lasting mental picture of the candidate's appearance, whether good or bad. Kennedy benefited from a prominent political family name, but his natural skill, talent for communication and physical attractiveness aided him significantly in winning the 1960 election.

The rise of television in the later 1950s and early 1960s had the democratizing side effect of lessening the strength of political parties. Because candidates could appeal directly to voters, they could veer around political elites and gain support directly from the people. Like radio before it, television was a way to further the nation's investment and involvement in the political process.

In his *TV Guide* piece, Kennedy had challenged America: "It is in your power to perceive deception, to shut off gimmickry, to reward honesty, to demand legislation where needed. Without your approval, no TV show is worthwhile and no politician can exist."<sup>54</sup> He was recognizing the total influence television would have over the public's emotions and support, and vice versa. Politicians would inevitably need to mold their messages to garner the public's affection.

Kennedy captured the American public's attention with his youthful appearance and glamorous family. His administration wanted to capitalize on his appearance and natural rhetorical skill and decided to make his press conferences televised live to the public. The change required surprisingly little innovation, as

---

<sup>53</sup> McKenzie and Weisbrot, *The Liberal Hour: Washington and the Politics of Change in the 1960s*. (Penguin Group, 2008), 51.

<sup>54</sup> Kennedy, *TV Guide*, 1959.

network news already filmed the conferences; the networks only had to broadcast live. Samuel Kernell wrote that the “innovative use of live television in this important instance was as much a political adaptation as a technological one.”<sup>55</sup>

Kennedy’s move was initially dismissed as an “administration disaster second only to the Bay of Pigs,” the press eventually rejoiced at the press conferences.<sup>56</sup> His first televised press conference was held in January 1961 and drew 65 million viewers. Presidential scholar Fred Greenstein describes Kennedy’s preparation for these conferences as similar to that of an athlete. Kennedy took an afternoon nap, took test questions from his own aides, and wore a back brace before going out before reporters and taking their questions “with a crispness and wit that transformed a commonplace routine into a primetime media event, winning support for him and, by extension, his policies.”<sup>57</sup> The conferences gave the public a personal view of their president in action for the first time. Kennedy was in his element, using his innate skill to convert his minimal electoral margin of victory into the highest average public opinion support for any president in the last 100 years.<sup>58</sup>

Without Kennedy’s press and television savvy, his presidency may have taken a very different course. There were many disappointing and negative events in his term, including the erection of the Berlin Wall, the Bay of Pigs disaster, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the coalition of conservative southern Democrats and Republicans that opposed Kennedy’s New Frontier legislation. Without an adept skill for

---

<sup>55</sup> Samuel Kernell, *Going Public*, (Washington, DC: CQ Press 1997), 86.

<sup>56</sup> Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992), 25.

<sup>57</sup> Fred Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership style from FDR to Barack Obama*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2009), 69.

<sup>58</sup> Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*, 69.

communicating his message, a lesser Kennedy would have struggled to maintain a respectable level of public support.



*(Photo 6: JFK delivers his speech on the Cuban Missile Crisis to a national audience via television. Photo courtesy of Britannica Encyclopedia Online, © Archive Photos: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/314791/John-F-Kennedy>.)*

Television was integral to the communication strategy of several major events, including the Cuban Missile Crisis. On October 22, 1962, at 7:00 p.m., Kennedy delivered a televised address to the American people. In his speech, he made the following points clear: the Soviet Union had been lying about their intentions in Cuba; the Soviets had deployed medium and intermediate range missiles to Cuba, an island only 90 miles from the United States border; the United States was prepared to blockade the island and repel the missiles by whatever means necessary; and that any Soviet attack on the United States or a Latin American country would lead to a “full retaliatory response.”<sup>59</sup> Kennedy appeared strong and decisive, capable of leading the country through the international crisis. His speech had a strong effect on the

---

<sup>59</sup> James G. Blight, *Shattered Crystal Ball: Fear and Learning in the Cuban Missile Crisis*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992), 14.

national psyche as Americans stocked their bomb shelters and relied on their televisions to obtain any news or developments in the crisis. They lived in a constant state of fear of imminent nuclear war, while the Navy's strategy was to "squeeze the Soviets in Cuba until they relinquished."<sup>60</sup>

The Kennedy administration's approach to the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated an interesting public-private dichotomy of the art of communications. President Kennedy made public statements prior to the Cuban Missile Crisis that the United States would not tolerate Soviet missiles in Cuba, which had a clear effect on the administration's public response. Indeed, their public stance was always hard-lined opposition to Soviet advances. But their actions indicated his administration "planned compromise in secret while using combative rhetoric in public."<sup>61</sup> His public appearances during the crisis fed the culture of fear and heightened the tensions of the Cold War, displaying the power of the presidential role when he communicates effectively. These actions also demonstrate the power that their media strategy held, regardless of the accuracy of the message.

Though Kennedy desired to control media throughout his presidency, during the crisis period his actions were extreme. The administration "repeatedly lied" about the situation and Kennedy personally interfered to prevent *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* from writing the story. After Kennedy's speech, where he was able to control the message, the media found itself dependent on the government as

---

<sup>60</sup> Blight, *Shattered Crystal Ball*, 14.

<sup>61</sup> Guttieri, Karen, et al, "Integrative Complexity of American Decision Makers in the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 39, no. 4, (1995): 606.

its source of information.<sup>62</sup> Kennedy's success following the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrates the importance of media management during national crises.

The Cuban Missile Crisis was ultimately a political success for Kennedy. He handled it ideally, using the rally-round-the-flag mentality to unite the country in the face of extreme danger. Then he did what any good president would do: he spun the resulting political capital into policy. Kennedy delivered a speech at American University in the summer of 1963 indicating his desire for a nuclear arms treaty, which he eventually announced live on television on July 26, 1963.<sup>63</sup>

Kennedy allowed the press to capture many aspects of his presidency. Cameras filmed everything from his trips abroad to his efforts to integrate the University of Alabama; his glamorous wife Jacqueline guided a tour of the White House that was broadcast on television. He used images of his young children or his family while playing football. These photographs humanized the presidency because he seemed normal and accessible to the public. Kennedy was not only accessible to the media; he actually promoted the televised journalism community in return.<sup>64</sup>

On some level, it must be considered that the enormous public reaction and mourning to Kennedy's assassination was related to his unprecedentedly high presidential profile. He was part-celebrity, part-politician. He was placed in the center of many American lives through television. And just when his policies and strategy were beginning to take hold, he was shot and killed in Texas. The mental image of an emotional Walter Cronkite announcing Kennedy's death, televised on the

---

<sup>62</sup> Denise M. Bostdorff, *The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Foreign Crisis*, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press 1994), 34-35.

<sup>63</sup> John F. Kennedy, "1963 Spring Commencement," American University Media, June 10, 1963. <http://www1.media.american.edu/speeches/Kennedy.htm>.

<sup>64</sup> Zelizer, *Covering the Body*, 26.

news, “burned deeply into the memories of millions.”<sup>65</sup> Like the images of the civil rights struggles in the south or the Vietnam War, images of the First Family saturated the country after his assassination. In many ways the press and Kennedy shared a mutually beneficial relationship, each one legitimizing the other.

Kennedy’s status in history is secure. His mastery of televised communication ensured his message and his policies were received by Americans. He excelled in forming a strong emotional connection with the public. A poll conducted 28 years after his death asked Americans to name their 3 greatest presidents; Kennedy tied with Civil War president Abraham Lincoln.<sup>66</sup>

### ***RONALD REAGAN***

Many presidents have had the advantage of a sympathetic press corps. Both Roosevelt and Kennedy benefited from their personal relationships with the press. Roosevelt, who suffered from polio, was never photographed when in a wheelchair or being carried by aides. He once fell down face-first into the mud before his 1936 nomination speech in Philadelphia, but the media never published the photos out of deference to the president.<sup>67</sup> They had a personal, though not entirely objective relationship with him based on favors. He played favorites with reporters—bestowing one-on-one interviews or exclusive quotes—in exchange for positive coverage.

---

<sup>65</sup> Zelizer, *Covering the Body* 165.

<sup>66</sup> Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*, 64.

<sup>67</sup> Mark J. Rozell, “The Press and the Presidency.” In *Understanding the Presidency*, edited by Roger Davidson and James Pfiffner (New York: Longman, 2006), 183.

The press corps paid a similar courtesy to Kennedy, who suffered from chronic back pain but nevertheless staged football games and photo opportunities that made him appear more youthful and allowed him to display his attractive family. The press was also aware of his numerous extramarital affairs, yet they didn't consider it a relevant or necessary news item.<sup>68</sup> Up through the Kennedy administration, the media had a different, less antagonistic relationship with the president than we see today. The press corps abided by a different code.

Both the extensive Watergate scandal during Nixon's second term and the horrific Vietnam War under Lyndon Johnson damaged the relationship between the president and the media. The press lost their trust in the president's role and as a result, coverage grew more skeptical and aggressive. Immediately following Nixon and Ford, the strained relationship with the press affected Jimmy Carter's national image. The press investigated even his minor errors with a "Watergate-like inquisitiveness" that hurt his presidency.<sup>69</sup>

Ronald Reagan took office in 1981 following his electoral victory over one-term Democrat Jimmy Carter. Reagan's election was likely due in large part to Carter's image created by the media. Reagan's communication style was a departure from his immediate predecessors but built on Kennedy's style. He and his advisors understood the power of imagery. But rather than using a specific medium to directly reach Americans, like Kennedy and television or Roosevelt and radio, Reagan became the "ultimate media president," by harnessing the media and using it as a tool.<sup>70</sup> Reagan

---

<sup>68</sup> Rozell, "The Press and the Presidency," 182.

<sup>69</sup> Rozell, "The Press and the Presidency," 184.

<sup>70</sup> Waterman, *The Image-is-Everything Presidency*, 53.



earned his title as “the Great Communicator” because his administration focused almost exclusively on image management to build his reputation.

Though Reagan’s presidency didn’t coincide with the rise or proliferation of a new medium like Kennedy or Roosevelt, he harnessed the power of both radio and television in the 1980s to effectively convey his message to the American people. He used powerful, all-American imagery to evade his policy and administrative errors by creating high public support. In many ways, the White House press office successfully manipulated the media for the entirety of his eight-year term in office. Reagan’s communications staff acted as stage managers, crafting a public image that differed greatly with Reagan’s actual policies and lifestyle. They also masterfully created an imagined representation of America, full of archetypal Norman Rockwell-style images in their “Morning in America” or the “City on a Hill” campaigns.

His public relations team influenced the public perception of the president to increase his popularity by placing Reagan in the spotlight frequently, even while his policies succeeded or failed.<sup>71</sup> Michael Deaver, the chief “image-maker” for the White House, used television and radio to influence American perception of their president with their approach of predetermined messaging. They used “sound-bites and sloganeering [to upstage] issues,” and “images [to upstage] analysis and criticism.”<sup>72</sup> Reagan’s appearance could alter the direction of the media’s message on many stories.

---

<sup>71</sup> Waterman, *The Image-is-Everything Presidency*, 53.

<sup>72</sup> Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 162.

A particularly illustrative example of their strategy comes from Lesley Stahl, a CBS reporter who covered the Reagan presidency. She recounts the story in her memoir *Reporting Live*, when the CBS *Evening News* asked her to create a story on Reagan's 1984 reelection campaign. Her piece tried to portray the dissonance between the images shown by the campaign and the actual governing style of the administration. For example, Reagan was "trying to create amnesia about his policies," by showing him cutting the ribbon on a new nursing home, despite cutting funding for nursing home construction; giving medals to handicapped athletes despite cutting funding for the disabled.<sup>73</sup>

This example accurately demonstrates the discordant images and policies of the administration. But Stahl also found curious results from the supposedly hard-hitting piece she intended to produce. She worried about the reaction from the White House, where she was CBS's chief correspondent. However, senior staff, including Deaver, called to congratulate Stahl and thank her for the piece, declaring it a "great story" that they "loved."<sup>74</sup> When she inquired if they were joking with her, they responded that the piece was "five minutes of free media" for Reagan. They explained shrewdly that "when pictures are powerful and emotional, they override if not completely drown out the sound...Nobody heard you."<sup>75</sup> Stahl was shocked.

This had been the general approach of the Reagan administration. They shaped compelling images, which created a narrative of a picture-perfect "America," despite the reality of unemployment, inflation and international tensions. The

---

<sup>73</sup> Leslie Stahl, *Reporting Live*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 210.

<sup>74</sup> Stahl, *Reporting Live*, 211.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

approach was immensely successful. Stahl was intrigued with the comments from Reagan's advisors. She tested the theory by showing the *Evening News* piece without any audio to a test audience. When asked what the clip was about, they responded that it was a campaign ad for Reagan. The images were certainly similar to an ad, with many American flags, happy people and inspiring images. When she ran the piece again with her narration, the vast majority still responded that it was a campaign ad or a positive news story about Reagan.<sup>76</sup> Stahl's story and subsequent research demonstrated what Reagan's advisors already knew: television creates an entirely different experience that depends on visual images. Television evokes an emotional response, which Reagan capitalized on this power methodically and repeatedly.



*(Photo 7: Ronald Reagan's advisors orchestrated his appearances with all-American style. His presidency was a non-stop campaign.*

*Photo courtesy Britannica Encyclopedia,  
<http://www.britannica.com/bps/image/492882/13684/Ronald-Reagan>)*

---

<sup>76</sup> Stahl, *Reporting Live*, 211.

Deaver, Reagan's deputy chief of staff, knew that around 70% of Americans watched the evening news on network television. He also knew that the news gave "forty to eighty seconds" per story, and "unless you can find a visual that explains your message you can't make it stick."<sup>77</sup> The administration's "message of the day" strategy—boiling each day down to an easily digestible sound bite or image—meant that Reagan's teams manipulated the nightly news into showcasing the irresistible images and messages that they wanted. Deaver and his associates exploited the fact that Americans were (and are) much more likely to enjoy and understand a lighthearted, entertaining story than a hard-hitting, analytical piece.<sup>78</sup> Television is the perfect medium for this type of strategy. It is visual and active: the perfect vehicle for such a strong and attractive personality.

President Reagan's success was rooted in the fact that he had a public persona outside of politics. His former career as a Hollywood actor meant he was already a recognizable figure. He had been recognized as a rising star after his televised speech in support of presidential candidate Barry Goldwater in 1964. His speech, titled "A Time for Choosing," fundraised over \$8 million for Goldwater.<sup>79</sup> The speech was a rousing kickoff to Reagan's political career, which culminated in his development of the "actor-President."<sup>80</sup> He was the perfect vessel to communicate the new images of the conservative movement. His advisors crafted Reagan into the perfect candidate. Ronald Reagan's advisors skillfully developed his image as a family man with solid family values, despite his reality as a divorced father of fairly rebellious children. He

---

<sup>77</sup> Michael Deaver, *Behind the Scenes*, (William Morrow & Co., 1988), 141.

<sup>78</sup> Schmertz, "Media and the Presidency," 16.

<sup>79</sup> Robert V. Friedenberg, *Notable Speeches in Contemporary Presidential Campaigns*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 143.

<sup>80</sup> Waterman, *The Image is Everything Presidency*, 248.

was not particularly religious, yet he led the country during its conservative revival and the Christian Coalition movement.

Reagan counted on his fundamental experience in the entertainment industry in the creation of his presidential image. He understood deeply that image would be more valuable than substance, which is true in both politics and the entertainment industry. He used the press as a tool to create his image, rather than take the approach of Roosevelt or Kennedy in appealing directly to the public through radio or television. Reagan's top communication aides accurately assessed the erosion of press relations that occurred during Johnson, Nixon and Carter's terms and sought to repair a positive relationship.<sup>81</sup> Reagan was the ideal candidate, using his personal charm and charisma to rope the press into an ally.

Contrasting Reagan with Carter is illustrative of his new approach to press relations. Reagan held only six news conferences in his first year of office, while Carter held only 22.<sup>82</sup> Reagan was able to control his message and demand by not saturating the country with appearances. The president also addressed members of the press corps in an informal and casual style, often using reporters' first names once he learned them. He used humor to disarm aggressive reporters and appeared "peaceful and well-intentioned."<sup>83</sup> In contrast with his predecessor Jimmy Carter, Reagan did not try to display his mastery of technical or advanced information. He

---

<sup>81</sup> Karla K. Gower, *Public Relations and the Press: The Troubled Embrace*, (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2007) 133.

<sup>82</sup> Walter Weintraub, "Personality Profiles of American Presidents as Revealed in Their Public Statements: The Presidential News Conferences of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan," *Political Psychology* 7, No. 2 (1986): 291.

<sup>83</sup> Weintraub, "Personality Profiles," 292.

used his personal warmth and wit to charm reporters. While Carter recited facts, Reagan was more fun to be around.

But much of Reagan's reputation for personal interaction with the press and the American people is misleading. A rhetorical analysis shows that Reagan scored low on items like "expression of feeling," and high on "non-personal references," indicating that he did not take a particularly personal approach to the presidency. He made statements in the plural, using "we" instead of "I" to explain decisions, or using the passive voice.<sup>84</sup> It is clear that Reagan rarely took individual responsibility for the failures of his administration. Weintraub writes that "leaders of revolutionary movements tend to use 'we' frequently." Reagan certainly saw himself as the leader of the American conservative movement.<sup>85</sup> Walter Fisher, a communication scholar, wrote in 1982 that Reagan's use of the romantic style of rhetoric, emphasizing individualism and inspiration, helped him to appear as a potential American hero.<sup>86</sup> Fisher even compared Reagan to Kennedy, a legendary public speaker, in terms of heroic and passionate rhetoric.

The overarching strategy was to establish the "line of the day," which was distributed through the White House to ensure the entire administration would be communicating the same centralized message.<sup>87</sup> Deaver and his cohort used their extraordinary knowledge of the media to create images that would be irresistible to the press. They were able to communicate their message by manipulating the press. Stahl's unflattering story on the administration is a great example: the story had a net

---

<sup>84</sup> Weintraub, "Personality Profiles," 294.

<sup>85</sup> Weintraub, "Personality Profiles," 294.

<sup>86</sup> Walter Fisher, "Romantic Democracy, Ronald Reagan, and Presidential Heroes," *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 46 (1982), 299-310.

<sup>87</sup> Gower, *Public Relations and the Press*, 134.

positive effect for the administration because it used the prepackaged images. The administration also weaved their communications strategy with their legislative strategy, so that Reagan was able to count on sustained public support for his agenda.<sup>88</sup>

In one televised address to increase votes for his tax cut bill in 1981, Reagan asked his supporters to contact their representatives and senators. Americans responded with phone calls, letters and telegrams. Speaker Timp O'Neill acknowledged Reagan's influence and said the House was "experiencing a telephone blitz like this nation has never seen."<sup>89</sup> But the administration had also taken preliminary steps to ensure that their strategy would work, employing opinion polls, leaking and briefing items with the press, and grassroots lobbying efforts, all while the president worked to "soften up" members of Congress by traveling to members' districts.<sup>90</sup> His integrated approach to promoting his tax policy proposal demonstrates the type of media president Reagan was. He was the ultimate media president.

The Iran-Contra scandal broke in 1986, towards the end of Reagan's second term. The scandal exemplifies how an administrative and political failure was successfully outlasted by Reagan's public image. The affair involved the covert sale of weapons to Iran in exchange for hostages, while secretly funneling the profits from the sale to the Contras, who were anti-communist rebels in Nicaragua. Reagan had signed the Boland Amendment, which forbade any government funding for the

---

<sup>88</sup> Rozell, "The Press and the Presidency," 185.

<sup>89</sup> George C. Edwards, III, "The Presidential Pulpit: Bully or Bologna?" *Understanding the Presidency*, 205.

<sup>90</sup> Edwards III, "The Presidential Pulpit," 205.

contras, in an appropriations bill in 1982. When the media discovered the level of involvement that upper level aides took in the affair, they focused on Reagan's apparent lack of control within the administration. The scandal furthered speculation that Reagan was just a "dimwitted puppet" controlled by his media strategists.<sup>91</sup>

Reagan's advisors worked to try to redefine the terms of the investigation saying the hearings were a "political dispute" and not an inquiry into "administrative wrongdoings."<sup>92</sup> His image-managers were looking for ways to shift the public debate into a more favorable fight. The investigation became a more emotional battle, with Oliver North playing the hero. The image of North taking the oath before his testimony became iconic of the investigation, again defining the scandal with an emotional image. North emerged as a hero.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, poll results following the hearings indicated the public thought that interrogators had been unfair and had attacked North.<sup>94</sup> Though he had destroyed relevant documents and lied, the public polls indicated Americans somehow viewed him as an honest man working within his duty. The success of his testimony was a "coup" and a "bit of a media miracle," according to the editors of *US News and World Report*.<sup>95</sup> Political commentator Daniel Schorr summed it up acutely: "Verdict by television can be a fickle thing."<sup>96</sup> North achieved his folk-hero status much like Reagan did—through images and perception, not reality.

---

<sup>91</sup> Jim Cullen, *Imperfect Presidents: Tales of Misadventure and Triumph*, MacMillan (2008) 228.

<sup>92</sup> Michael Lynch and David Bogen, *Spectacle of History: Speech, Text, and Memory at the Iran-Contra Hearings*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 149-150.

<sup>93</sup> Lynch and Bogen, "Spectacle of History," 102.

<sup>94</sup> Lynch and Bogen, "Spectacle of History," 315.

<sup>95</sup> Lynch and Bogen, "Spectacle of History," 30.

<sup>96</sup> Lynch and Bogen, "Spectacle of History," 103.



Political coverage of the hearings was more about performance than substance. Questions about Oliver North's testimony shifted from what he would say to how we would say it.<sup>97</sup> The focus on presentation has become a central element in coverage of presidential speeches and appearances. Reagan redefined the way presidents have been evaluated since. The media now analyzes all aspects of campaign appearance. Stage-management is now a necessary component to appearing presidential.

The Tower Commission, the special review board which investigated Iran-Contra, ultimately determined that Reagan was not primarily responsible for the events. But his management style placing "especially heavy responsibility on his key advisors," led to oversight of the details.<sup>98</sup> These discoveries hit particularly hard because it broke with the idealistic narrative Deaver and company had created about Reagan. The president was not the strong, rugged leader he was presented as. He had less power or control, and passively shifted blame with the infamous "mistakes were made" statement.

Reagan's approval ratings inevitably dropped during this period as the administration was under an investigative microscope. What makes Reagan remarkable is that his legacy survived this letdown and his public opinion rating was revived by the end of his term. His public opinion polls took the largest drop of any president in history, falling 67% to 46% in November 1986. But by the end of his

---

<sup>97</sup> Lynch and Bogen, "Spectacle of History," 248.

<sup>98</sup> Excerpts from the Tower Commission Report,  
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/PS157/assignment%20files%20public/TOWER%20EXCERPTS.htm>

presidency, his approval ratings rebounded to 61% in 1989, and finally to 68% under retrospective evaluations.<sup>99</sup>

John Kennedy pioneered the use of television, but Reagan took visual communications to the next level. Reagan earned his reputation as “Great Communicator” through his advisors’ ability to craft his public image successfully. He also earned the nickname “Teflon President,” because of his ability to manage his image through policy failures and the great Iran-Contra scandal. Deaver and other advisors played a huge role in masterfully manipulating the media. Deaver knew the media would be unable to resist showing certain images and photo opportunities on the news and engineered the president’s appearances accordingly. Many speculate over how much Reagan actually knew about the presidency, yet he undeniably accomplished. Their handling of the media was crucial to Reagan’s popularity and success.

## ***CONCLUSION***

The four presidents studied here are popular leaders. They are among the four most celebrated presidents to serve in the twentieth century for different reasons. But they have much in common: all four were attractive, successful, and thrived on attention. Communication style was a consistent variable through all four of these presidencies. Each leader was unafraid to explore new emergent media or to capitalize on the media management lessons of their predecessors.

---

<sup>99</sup> Bootie Cosgrove-Mather, “A Look Back at the Polls,” CBS News, June 7, 2004. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/06/07/opinion/polls/main621632.shtml>.

Theodore Roosevelt exploited photographic images like no president had before him. Studying pictures of TR gives an accurate and comprehensive impression of the energetic, bullish young president. He used photographs to advance policies in addition to his persona. Pictures of TR at play or in his outdoor element promoted his conservationist agenda, creating an early form of public relations in the White House. He also wrote extensively, making sure he could take advantage of all available media. Theodore Roosevelt understood the functions of the media better than any of his predecessors or successors until his cousin took office in 1932.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt had the misfortune to preside over an economic crisis. He seized the emergent medium of radio to connect with Americans and assure them of the government's extensive new programs that would help them recover. Radio was an intimate and accessible means to communicate with the public. Like Teddy, FDR also understood the power of still images. He took great measures to appear strong and healthy despite his physical limitations. Radio cemented FDR's status as a legendary American leader because it created such an intimate bond between the public and their leader.

John F. Kennedy's early understanding of television proved to be prescient. He wrote about the potential for television in politics years before he would participate in the legendary televised presidential debate with Richard Nixon. All students of politics and media study this landmark debate as a watershed moment for presidential communication. Kennedy continued to use television throughout his short time in office to project his administration directly into American homes on a regular basis. Television created an emotional bond (similar to radio) between the

public and Kennedy. Many important events in his short term were observed through television. Americans watched Walter Cronkite's iconic and emotional announcement of Kennedy's assassination on television.

Though all of these individuals integrally demonstrated the power of specific new media to advance presidential communication, Ronald Reagan mastered the entire media as a political tool. His advisors understood the media on a minute level and prepackaged campaign-style photo ops for the nightly news. Reagan's advisors were able to project and promote their agenda with these archetypal images throughout his administration. Deaver and other media strategists understood the power of the senses and catered the administration's messages to create strong connections. Whereas TR, FDR and JFK had each explored and developed specific media (photographs, newspaper, radio, or television) to directly connect with America, Reagan harnessed the entirety of the media as a tool for his administration.

Reagan's total domination of the media is most telling in contrast with the current media world. The rise in 24-hour cable news cycles, smart phones, Facebook, Twitter, personal blogging, and other social media would be more than enough to overwhelm even Reagan's advisors. The public is playing a key role in the dialogue for the first time. Current President Barack Obama faces a huge media presence, but he has already taken important steps in his administration's media usage.

President Obama can learn from all of these leaders who navigated difficult domestic and foreign issues. These leaders strategically developed personal, emotional connections with their constituents as media grew more personal. They didn't just use media because everyone else did. TR used photographs to convey a

strong, willful and enthusiastic president. FDR used radio to reassure and connect with disheartened Americans. Kennedy employed television as a tool to address Americans directly and left lasting impressions of their intelligent, witty, handsome president. Reagan's mastery of the media left a lasting impression on Americans, even to this day.

Obama's presidential election campaign relied heavily on the internet, the new medium of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His online grassroots movement raised record amounts of money from small donors.<sup>100</sup> Their use of online media in the 2008 race revolutionized the scope of political campaigns. Some question whether Obama would have won the primary or the general election without the internet.<sup>101</sup> The campaign used the internet to foster a sense of community with their supporters. This strategy would seem to emulate the presidents discussed in this paper: communicating directly with supporters to send them Obama's statements, position papers and videos.<sup>102</sup>

The administration already uses more technology than ever before. The White House has a Twitter page and a Flickr account to access a generally disinterested and uninformed American public. The campaign alone employed 90 people on the internet team, raising half a billion dollars, emailing a list-serv of 13 million, texting a million cell phones.<sup>103</sup> Obama seems to understand the importance of mastering their

---

<sup>100</sup> Jose Antonio Vargas, "Politics is No Longer Local. It's Viral," *Washington Post*, December 28, 2008.

<sup>101</sup> Dupuis, Martin and Keith Boeckelman, *Barack Obama: The New Face of American Politics*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008), 135.

<sup>102</sup> Dupuis and Boeckelman, *Barack Obama*, 136.

<sup>103</sup> Vargas, "Politics is No Longer Local. It's Viral."

use of the internet. He now employs a staff within the administration devoted solely to new media outreach.<sup>104</sup>

Obama must use these new forms of social media—Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogs—to connect emotionally with notoriously disengaged Americans. He has shown that he understands the value of connecting with constituents. He controls most of his public exposure on television, in photographs, and through emails. His e-mails are a powerful way to connect with supporters but do not help form a general connection with the entire American public. Obama also uses YouTube to broadcast “Your Weekly Address” videos, a nod to the fireside chats of Franklin Roosevelt or the televised press conferences of Kennedy. The speeches are “carefully choreographed” for Obama to appear in his best light, acknowledging the success of Reagan’s stage-managed presidency.<sup>105</sup>

Early on in his presidency, Obama has demonstrated a keen understanding of the past. Time will tell the true emotional impact Obama will have and how his presidency will stand up against the legendary TR, FDR, JFK and RR.

---

<sup>104</sup> Virginia Heffernan, “The YouTube Presidency,” *The New York Times*, April 12, 2009.

<sup>105</sup> Heffernan, “The YouTube Presidency.”

## Works Cited

- Alter, Jonathan. *The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope*. Simon and Schuster: 2007.
- Baker, Ray Stannard. "Mr. Roosevelt: A Character Sketch." *McClure's Magazine*, November 1898, 23-32.
- Barnes, John A. *John F. Kennedy on Leadership: The Lessons and Legacy of a President*. AMACOM, 2007.
- Blight, James G. *Shattered Crystal Ball: Fear and Learning in the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992.
- Bostdorff, Denise M. *The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Foreign Crisis*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994.
- Brown, Robert J. *Manipulating the Ether: The Power of Broadcast Radio in Thirties America*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004.
- Carpini, Michael X. Delli. "Radio's Political Past." *Media Studies Journal* 7, (1993): 23-35.
- Cohen, Jeffrey E. "Presidential Rhetoric and Public Agenda." *American Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 1 (1995): 87-107.
- Cooper, John Milton. *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985.
- Cosgrove-Mather, Bootie. "A Look Back at the Polls," *CBS News*, June 7, 2004.  
<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/06/07/opinion/polls/main621632>
- Cullen, Jim. *Imperfect Presidents: Tales of Misadventure and Triumph*. MacMillan, 2008.
- Dahlgrin, Peter and Colin Sparks, *Communication and Citizenship: Journalism and the Public Sphere in the New Media Age*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Davis, Richard and Diana Marie Owen. *New Media and American Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Deaver, Michael. *Behind the Scenes*. William Morrow & Co., 1988.
- Diamond, Edwin. "The Sound Bites and the Fury." *New York Magazine*, March 28, 1988, 36-39.

- Dorsey, Leroy G. "The Frontier Myth in Presidential Rhetoric: Theodore Roosevelt's Campaign for Conservation." *Western Journal of Communication* 50, no. 1 (1995): 1-19.
- Dupuis, Martin and Keith Boeckelman. *Barack Obama: The New Face of American Politics*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008.
- Edwards, George C. III, "The Presidential Pulpit: Bully or Bologna?" In *Understanding the Presidency*, edited by Roger Davidson and James Pfiffner. New York: Longman, 2006.
- Excerpts from the Tower Commission Report.*  
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/PS157/assignment%20files%20public/TOWER%20EXCERPTS.htm>
- Fisher, Walter. "Romantic Democracy, Ronald Reagan, and Presidential Heroes." *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 46 (1982), 299-310.
- Friedenberg, Robert V.. *Notable Speeches in Contemporary Presidential Campaigns*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002.
- Gould, Lewis L. *The Modern American Presidency*. Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2003.
- Gower, Karla K. *Public Relations and the Press: The Troubled Embrace*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2007.
- Greenstein, Fred. *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Barack Obama*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Guttieri, Karen, et al, "Integrative Complexity of American Decision Makers in the Cuban Missile Crisis." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 39 no. 4, (1995): 595-621.
- Heffernan, Virginia. "The YouTube Presidency." *The New York Times*, April 12, 2009.
- Hess, Stephen. *Presidents and the Presidency*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1996.
- Kennedy, John F. "A Force That Has Changed the Political Scene." *TV Guide Magazine*, November 14, 1959.
- Kennedy, John F. "1963 Spring Commencement." American University Media. June 10, 1963. <http://www1.media.american.edu/speeches/Kennedy.htm>.



- Kernell, Samuel. *Going Public*. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1997.
- Lynch, Michael and David Bogen, *Spectacle of History: Speech, Text, and Memory at the Iran-Contra Hearings*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996.
- McKay, David. *American Politics and Society*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005.
- McKenzie, G. Calvin and Robert Weisbrot. *The Liberal Hour: Washington and the Politics of Change in the 1960s*. Penguin Group, 2008.
- Milkis, Sidney M. and Michael Nelson. *The American Presidency: Origins and Development, 1776-2007*. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2008.
- Morris, Edmund. *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*. New York: Random House, Inc., 2001.
- “Our Presidents: Franklin Delano Roosevelt,” The White House.  
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/franklindroosevelt>.
- Perloff, Richard M. *Political Communication: Politics, Press and Public in America*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Ponder, Stephen. *Managing the Press: Origins of the Media Presidency, 1897-1933*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.
- Press, Charles and Kenneth VerBurg. *American Politicians and Journalists*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1988.
- Roosevelt, Franklin Delano. *First Inaugural Address*. March 4, 1933. Full text at:  
<http://www.advisorsquare.com/new/kannerfinancialservices/Franklin%20Delano%20Roosevelt.pdf>.
- Rozell, Mark J. “The Press and the Presidency.” In *Understanding the Presidency*, edited by Roger Davidson and James Pfiffner, 161-172. New York: Longman, 2006.
- Schlesinger, Arthur Meier. *The Imperial Presidency*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004.
- Schmertz, Herbert. “Media and the Presidency.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (1986): 11-21.
- Stahl, Lesley. *Reporting Live*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.
- Starr, Paul. *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications*. New York: Basic Books, 2005.

Troy, Gil. *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Unknown, "The Case Against Roosevelt," *Fortune Magazine*, December 1935.

Vargas, Jose Antonio. "Politics is No Longer Local. It's Viral." *Washington Post*, December 28, 2008.

Waterman, Richard, et al. *The Image-Is-Everything Presidency: Dilemmas in American Leadership*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999.

Watts, Sarah Lyons. *Rough Rider in the White House: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Desire*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Weintraub, Walter. "Personality Profiles of American Presidents as Revealed in Their Public Statements: The Presidential News Conferences of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan." *Political Psychology* 7, no. 2 (1986): 285-295.

Young, William H. and Nancy K. Young. *The 1930s*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002.

Zelizer, Barbie. *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.