

In the Public Domain

Presidents and the
Challenges of Public Leadership



Edited by Lori Cox Han and Diane J. Heith

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To our husbands,
Tom Han
and
Steve Kline

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Preface

The publication of *The President and the Public* in 1982, a volume edited by Doris A. Graber, sought to examine the linkages between the president and the American public. This book represented an important change that was occurring in the study of the American presidency, as the volume marked one of the earliest attempts among both presidency and political communication scholars to better understand the impact of the mass media and public opinion polling on presidential governance and leadership. According to Graber's preface, the idea behind the book began in the fall of 1980 as the nation prepared for the presidential election when American voters would choose between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. With an "election hinging on factors of confidence rather than specific issues or party allegiance . . . many professional president-watchers put a spotlight on various aspects of that relationship." The major issues covered within the chapters of the book included the presidential image, media portrayals of the president, the electoral connection, and appraisals of presidential performance. As Graber stated, the topics were interrelated, since "relations between the president and the public are much like a seamless web. One area merges into the other, and there is substantial overlap."¹

Prior to the early 1980s, few scholars seemed interested in either a systematic or theoretical understanding of the public aspects of the American presidency. With the exception of Elmer Cornwell's *Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion* (1965), few studies existed that looked explicitly at the relationship between the president and the public—this during a time of expanding and changing technological capabilities that seemed to greatly impact both the governing and electoral processes. Whether the election of Ronald "The Great Communicator" Reagan in 1980 was a catalyst for creating scholarly interest in the public aspects of presidential leadership or simply a coincidence may never

be known. Nevertheless, the Reagan years witnessed the publication of several groundbreaking and seminal works on presidents and the press, presidents and public opinion, the rhetorical aspects of the presidency, and how those areas were impacting presidential leadership and performance. Most notably, those works included Michael Grossman's and Martha Joynt Kumar's *Portraying the President: The White House and the News Media* (1981), David L. Paletz's and Robert Entman's *Media Power Politics* (1981), George C. Edwards's *The Public Presidency* (1983), Theodore Lowi's *The Personal President* (1985), Sam Kernell's *Going Public* (1986), and Jeffrey Tulis's *The Rhetorical Presidency* (1987).

Graber's *The President and the Public* also belongs on the aforementioned list, as it represented the coming together of various presidential scholars interested in asking timely questions about the changing relationship between presidents and the public due to the growing influence of television and the increased reliance on public opinion (both inside and outside the White House). In reviews of the book, other scholars agreed that the subject matter dealing with the linkage between presidents and the public was necessary to further advance the understanding of presidential leadership in the latter years of the twentieth century and recognized the value of not only the substantive findings that the essays provided but the many important questions that were raised on the topic for further study. According to Thomas Cronin, "Teachers and researchers will learn from these research essays. They will especially learn how much remains to be studied if we are more rigorously to comprehend the interaction of presidential leadership and American citizens."² Similarly, Alana Northrop commended the book for addressing the issues of public perceptions of presidents as portrayed in public opinion polls, as well as the issue of media influence in elections and presidential governance. She concluded by recommending the book for anyone interested in understanding important issues "raised by recent research on the president and the public."³

For several years, we have considered putting together an edited volume that would serve as an update to the Graber book. The idea was born soon after we first met as graduate students at a conference honoring Richard Neustadt at Columbia University in 1996. The purpose of such an endeavor would be to once again bring together several essays by scholars who have focused their research on these same linkages between the president and the public to examine how much progress has been made in our understanding of these key issues in the past two decades. This edited volume does just that, and it includes timely research by some colleagues who share our intellectual curiosity about the many aspects of the public presidency. We also are honored to include the introductory essay by Doris Graber that links the issues within her edited volume, published more than two decades ago, to the current state of scholarship on the relationship between the president and the public.

Following Graber's introduction, the book is broken into four distinct categories that consider the presidential challenges of public leadership. Part I,

The Challenge of Perception, considers external factors that challenge public leadership in the areas of presidential image, party politics, and news media coverage. Because of fictional portrayals in the mass media, American presidents are now viewed as cultural icons—an image with which real-life presidents must compete in the media-saturated political environment (Genovese). Presidents must also respond to partisan pressures once elected—a candidate-centered approach during the presidential primaries must be replaced by a party-centered approach for the nominee and eventual victor of the presidential campaign, as these roles dictate representing the party as a whole (Jarvis and Jones). Presidents also must be mindful of news media coverage, as the tone of coverage of a particular policy can shift public opinion on a White House initiative, particularly during wartime (Baum and Groeling). Part II, *The Challenge of Policy Management*, addresses how presidents use public leadership to pursue their policy goals and objectives. They rely on public opinion polling but do not want to appear overreliant, regarding policy decisions (Heith). Presidents also must rely on informal powers of the public presidency as leverage in achieving their policy goals (Ponder), and second-term, lame duck presidents face unique challenges in pushing their legislative agendas, despite recent electoral success (Cunion).

Part III, *The Challenge of Presentation*, considers the importance of public opinion, rhetorical strategies, and public activities. Presidents do not want to stray too far from established public opinion on certain policy issues (Cohen and Hamman). And due to the television age, presidents are now expected to keep up a regular schedule of public activities (Han) and must rely on the news media, particularly television, to aid in their public leadership efforts (Mayer and Rozell). Presidents also face many challenges in recognizing and acknowledging the diversity of the American public, whether on a national level or within specific groups, through their rhetorical efforts, and many recent presidents have failed at this task (Stuckey). Mastering these areas of public leadership, however, has proved difficult for many recent occupants of the White House. Part IV, *The Challenge after the White House*, looks at the public concerns of former presidents—how news media coverage impacts the development of presidential legacies (Han and Krov) and recent developments involving the Presidential Records Act and access to documents in presidential libraries (Kassop).

We would like to thank all of the contributors to this volume for their willingness to share their time and expertise in the creation of this book. We also would like to thank John Kenneth White and Michael Rinella for their interest and enthusiasm for this project when it was merely a list of potential contributors and chapters. A special thank you as well goes to Mark Rozell and Robert Spitzer for their suggestions and advice along the way. And finally, we offer our deepest gratitude to our families for their never-ending support and encouragement.

NOTES

1. Doris A. Graber, Preface to *The President and the Public* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1982), v–vii.
2. Thomas E. Cronin, Review of “The President and the Public,” ed. Doris A. Graber, *The Journal of Politics* 46:2 (May 1984): 605–607.
3. Alana Northrop, Review of “The President and the Public,” ed. Doris A. Graber, *The American Political Science Review* 78:1 (March 1984): 224–25.

Introduction

The President and the Public Revisited

Doris A. Graber

The outcome of presidential election campaigns often depends on the rapport that candidates can establish between themselves and their publics. Electoral success may hinge on the winner's ability to convince prospective voters that he or she is the best choice to solve the country's major problems. Accordingly, scholars of presidential elections and practicing politicians often focus their attention on the strategies that candidates use to persuade the public that they are politically astute, trustworthy, empathetic, and "presidential," and that they espouse solid political programs that they will and can execute. Analysts scrutinize what candidates told their audiences and how they framed their appeals. They want to know what channels they used to communicate their messages to the public and how the public responded. Such matters have always intrigued students of American government, although they have not been the main focus of scholarly attention.

The desire to provide richer insights into the interactions between Americans and their presidents during elections but also during other phases of the president's term led to the 1982 publication of a volume of essays titled *The President and the Public*.¹ The rationale for the book was the inadequacy of readily available scholarly information about a broad array of issues relating to communication between the chief executive and average Americans, despite general acknowledgment that the issues deserved attention. Accordingly, the volume thrust the limelight on the public's expectations about the presidency, people's perceptions about the president's style and performance in office, and media portrayals of the presidency, along with neglected aspects of the electoral connection.

Why is linkage between the president and the public sufficiently important to devote an entire book to it? There are many reasons. Foremost is the fact that this linkage is a crucial element of democratic governance. Democracy, by definition, means government by the people. In large societies, where

the duties of governing have to be delegated to representatives of the electorate, communication is necessary between the principals and their agents. Within the modern American system, that means the president at the national level.

Most Americans consider the president the public's chief national representative. He or she is the only public official elected to serve the entire nation rather than territorially limited constituencies. The framers of the Constitution had planned otherwise. They thought that legislators would be viewed as the chief representatives of the public. They did not expect that the president would become the single most powerful actor in the government, taking a leading role in generating and executing domestic and foreign policies. The president's prominence in these governmental activities now makes him the key official to whom publics turn when they are concerned about political developments and public policies.

Indications that the leader of the country keeps in touch with the nation are important to make people feel that the government belongs to them, even when linkage amounts to little more than sporadic, often purely symbolic, contacts. Signs that the president enjoys public approval for his actions lend them the aura of procedural correctness that makes them acceptable. They are the tokens that signify legitimacy.

This is why presidents often "go public" to pass their legislative agenda. They appeal for demonstrations of public support to show that large constituencies throughout the nation support their plans. Congress often yields to such demonstrations of popular support, partly because defiance of the people's will creates unfavorable images that Congress members prefer to avoid, and partly out of fear that constituents will deny their votes to legislators who oppose and obstruct a president backed by the public.² Like members of Congress, journalists are loath to anger their audiences. Going public may therefore have the additional benefit of short-circuiting adverse media criticism of the president's proposals.

Even if presidents are disinclined to continuously stay in touch with the public, political necessities tend to force them to communicate with their national constituencies. The news media cover the presidency far more amply than other branches of government. That focuses public attention on the president, forcing him to communicate with the public to create and maintain an image that reassures people that the government is in capable hands.

Presidential scholar Richard Neustadt calls the president's ability to use the White House as a bully pulpit to address and persuade nationwide audiences his main political weapon.³ Presidents need popular support to govern. They must be able to rally the public when major policies, such as conserving energy or going to war, require willing cooperation from large numbers of people. The symbolic significance of public support makes it important even when policies do not require direct public action. If presidential programs face

major congressional opposition, then public speeches allow the chief executive to focus public attention on the issues in question and gather public support for his stands. Presidential appeals for support are likely to be effective, especially if the president is popular. It also helps that the public pays more attention to news by and about the president than to news about other politicians.

Of course, the most pressing reason for linkage is the fact that presidents depend on the vote of the national electorate for their initial election to office and for reelection to a second term. Campaigning for office necessitates communicating effectively with the publics whose votes the president seeks. Winning election to a first term requires presidential candidates to persuade voters that they are a good choice; for reelection, they must convince their constituents that they have performed well.

Is it useful to revisit issues pertaining to the interactions of presidents and their publics and to put together a sequel to the earlier volume? I believe it is. These linkages remain extraordinarily important and are an ever-present challenge for the president as well as the public. I am therefore delighted that two keen analysts of the presidency—Lori Cox Han and Diane J. Heith—have assembled a collection of essays that sheds fresh light on linkage issues and problems as they present themselves at the start of the twenty-first century.

Specifically, it is important to cover changes in the linkage relationship brought about by the passage of time. The political climate has changed substantially in the intervening decades, and major new information technologies have transformed political communication. Fireside radio chats by Franklin D. Roosevelt differ in impact from John F. Kennedy's more casually scripted televised news conferences that bear no resemblance to George W. Bush's blogs. It also is important to broaden and deepen the study of the interface between presidents and their publics. Topics absent from the first volume need to be added, issues analyzed need to be explored in greater depth and with more sophisticated methods, and entirely new developments need to be acknowledged.

Furthermore, to systematically study the political behavior of American presidents and their publics requires time to allow for comparisons of an array of presidents. Presidential studies have always been plagued by the fact that there were only a few presidents available for comparison in a particular era. If one takes 1960 as the start of the television era of political communication, then only five presidents were available for comparison in 1980, including John F. Kennedy and Gerald Ford, whose terms were abbreviated. By 2004, that meager number had nearly doubled.

The current volume makes major contributions to filling gaps in the story about the president's image and the public's reactions. Like the earlier volume's authors, the current contributors devote considerable time to discussing why and in what ways linkage is important. But they devote more attention to developing and testing specific hypotheses, and they use a broader array of

quantitative and qualitative methods. These more intensive approaches produce more precise findings than before, though much room remains for further refinement.

Michael Genovese's chapter on the president as a pop culture icon is one of many excellent examples of the focus on recent developments. The mere fact of honing in on entertainment offerings as an important form of political communication is innovative and still unduly rare. Depicting the president as a pop culture icon is even rarer because it documents a sea change in the treatment of presidents in films. Fawning hero worship, as in films about former presidents Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy, has given way to often sneering cynicism, as in films about Richard Nixon. Former presidents who appear in films and videos are no longer the revered leaders of the nation, blessed with super-human virtues and devoid of most major human failings. They have been transformed into ordinary human beings, warts and all, and some of the warts, such as corruption, dishonesty, and shamelessly self-seeking behaviors, are large, inviting scathing condemnation or merciless ridicule.

Changing the character of presidential images may have profound consequences. In this case, the new images may have contributed to the precipitous decline in trust in government that surfaced during the Nixon administration's Watergate scandal. The decline has persisted since then, although trust has increased periodically, as during the Reagan administration and the country's involvement in hostilities with Iraq.

Genovese's study also is novel in employing an exceptionally broad comparative approach that ranges across the entire history of presidential portrayals in films. In the process, Genovese raises important questions about the likely impact of films and video presentations on images of the person occupying the presidential office. There seems to be close correspondence between the character qualities and the skills attributed to nonfictional and fictional presidents. The favorability of their images rises and falls together as art imitates life, and vice versa.

PERSISTENT PAST PROBLEMS

Political life is a seamless web in which patterns of the past persist side by side with patterns of the present and harbingers of the future. Clean breaks are rare. So it is with relations between presidents and their publics. They are a blend of perennial and new issues that embeds the seeds of the future. Many of the situations that defied accurate measurement in 1980 still do so. For example, contributors to the earlier volume used public opinion polls and surveys to discern how Americans view their president and what they like or dislike about him. Although polling methods have improved

since the 1980s, poll results remain problematic as accurate measures of the views of various publics.

Most detrimentally, in polls and surveys researchers still decide which questions to ask and how to frame them. Their choices determine the subject matter around which respondents' answers revolve and the criteria by which the issues in question will be appraised. For instance, when pollsters assess the public's confidence in the president by asking how certain they are that the president can lower health care costs or ensure air travel safety, it matters that these two problems were raised. Reported confidence levels might be higher or lower if the poll questions revolved around unemployment or global warming. It also matters which word choices the poll offers. Respondents may be willing to call the president's achievements "very good" if that is the highest rating used in the poll but may balk at choosing the top spot if it is labeled "outstanding" or "excellent."

It remains difficult to judge the dimensions of the opinions reported by polls. Pollsters rarely ask how strongly people feel about the matters at hand, or why they feel the way they do. They hardly ever inquire about changes in contingencies that might alter opinions. When pollsters ask for evaluations of a president's job performance, it is generally unclear which criteria the respondents used to make their judgments. In fact, there are indications that responses may be largely tied to overall political conditions. When times are good, or when presidents are involved in major, seemingly successful foreign ventures, they often receive favorable evaluations, irrespective of the contributions they have made to these conditions. When situations turn sour, presidents frequently suffer the blame, even when the turn of events was completely beyond their control. A disastrous, worldwide economic downturn became "Hoover's depression," while a spectacular economic boom was credited to lucky incumbent Bill Clinton. If ratings of presidential performance are largely context dependent, then comparisons among presidents continue to be problematic.

The concluding section of the earlier book raises as yet unresolved perennial questions about the capacity of average Americans to judge presidential performance accurately, given the complexity of modern American politics. It remains unclear and debatable whether they get enough sound political information from the news media to meld it into meaningful images about what the president is doing or might be doing under the prevailing circumstances. If the information base for judgments is seriously flawed or underused, then are the heuristics that people use to facilitate judgments sufficient to reach sound conclusions? For example, is there enough information so that citizens can judge the quality of the president's performance by monitoring the views of trusted leaders or brief reports about unemployment fluctuations?

Good communication channels between presidents and their publics remain a prerequisite for satisfactory linkage. In the twenty-first century, as in

the waning years of the twentieth century, adequacy of communication channels remains a major problem, particularly for upward message flows from various publics to the president. Presidents attempt to gauge public opinions through watching general public opinion polls and special polls run by the executive branch. But the information extracted from polls is marred by the weaknesses outlined earlier. Direct messages from various publics via petitions and letters and now e-mail and other Web-based messages are tools used almost exclusively by elites. Even then, most messages intended for the president miss their target because the human capacity to listen and absorb is out of synch with the overabundance of information seeking a hearing. When millions of e-mails arrive at the White House each year, it is not surprising that only a tiny proportion will ever come to the president's attention.

While downward messages fare better than upward ones, data remain sparse about the quality and truthfulness of presidential messages and their effects on average people and various elites. The problem is confounded by the fact that journalists paraphrase most presidential pronouncements rather than allowing people to hear what the president said and extract their own meanings. Frames used in news reports often distort or destroy what the president meant to convey. Withdrawal from a humanitarian intervention that the president depicts as a courageous decision to serve American interests, for instance, may be transformed by hostile news media accounts into an act of cowardice and national shame. Depending on the framing, the action redounds to the president's credit or discredit.

Media framing tends to prime media consumers' memories so that they judge presidential messages against the backdrop of the primed situation. For example, when news consumers were primed with visions of the disastrous Vietnam War by stories that compared it to Operation Iraqi Freedom, they were likely to associate the operation with failures in Vietnam, counteracting the president's optimistic predictions. In fact, peoples' images of the president depend less on what he says or actually does and more on how media elites judge him in news stories transmitted to members of the public. Matthew Baum and Tim Groeling provide excellent illustrations of the impact of framing in this volume by demonstrating that the tenor of media coverage shaped the rally phenomenon in the two recent wars that pitted the United States against Iraq.

THE NEW BALL GAME

Reading the earlier work and its current sequel makes it clear that many fresh winds are blowing when it comes to communications between presidents and their publics. Again, as with problems carried over from the past, I shall sample only a few. One major change since the Nixon years concerns the mood of

the country. Political elites, including journalists as well as the public, have become far more negative in their evaluations of government, including the presidency. Interactive talk shows, cable television, and the Internet provide many new outlets for voicing opposition to the president. Of course, these venues also provide presidents with many more opportunities to win supporters. But supportive messages have always carried less weight than attacks.

The public's increased skepticism about political life has had important consequences. On the good side, public servants now are viewed in a more realistic light as human beings with flaws as well as virtues. That realization clears the air for fruitful communication, because it whittles down expectations to levels that are achievable. Increased skepticism is bad if the pendulum swings too far and all public officials become suspect. That seems to be happening as more and more people take Lord Acton's dictum that power corrupts as an infallible prediction rather than as a statement of possibilities. Skepticism turned into cynicism becomes an insurmountable barrier to good communication between presidents and their publics. Disillusionment with public officials, especially presidents, also is harmful because it may keep the president from serving as a symbol of reassurance in times of crisis. As Murray Edelman has pointed out, a frightened public takes comfort in times of crisis in the thought that the person at the helm of state is fully capable of coping with looming calamities.⁴ That reassurance keeps political life on a more even keel.

Interestingly, while there has been an increase in partisanship and a decrease in civility in the current climate of combative politics, there has actually been a decline in emphasizing partisan alignments during elections. Presidents now try to appeal to publics across party lines, as Sharon Jarvis and Emily Balanoff Jones document in this volume by examining party labels used in presidential acceptance speeches from 1948 to 2000. Acceptance speeches may not be the best barometer of reduction of partisan mentions because presidents want to be seen as unifiers at the start of their term. However, numerous other developments suggest that the phenomenon may indeed be pervasive because it reflects changing political conditions. The growing numbers of television stations along with Web sites allow candidates to reach out to the public and to raise money for their campaigns without help from their party. Minimal assistance from the party leaves presidents less beholden to it and free to ignore their party in their public discourse.

Technological developments have produced some of the greatest changes in the interrelation between presidents and their publics. The swiftness and ease of air travel allows presidents to personally visit widely scattered locations at home and abroad without major disruptions of their normal schedule. Cable television and the Internet have markedly changed election and reelection strategies. Continuous campaigns have become a permanent feature of the political scene. The president appears on television screens in the nation's living rooms on a daily basis, often morning, noon, and night. In fact, presidents

almost seem to govern more by appearance than by accomplishment. In the image game, adept use of photo opportunities may count more than words, and censoring disturbing pictures may avoid a crisis.

Web sites give presidents opportunities for exposure on their own terms rather than being at the mercy of journalists beyond their control. On the negative side, Web sites carrying messages hostile to the president have multiplied as well. Presidential messages have benefited from employing well-trained communication and public relations experts. Since the 1980s, the art of spinning the news has progressed greatly, largely due to advanced social science research. There is more emphasis on political symbolism and on a quick rebuttal of negative publicity.

New technologies, especially the Internet and cable television, like CNN's round-the-clock news programs, also have shrunk the time available for presidents to analyze situations, assess public opinions, and develop responses accordingly. When hasty decision making abounds, often based on incomplete information, public deliberations about the wisdom of policies are reduced to Monday morning quarterbacking laments.

Overall, relationships with the press have become more routine. However, the professionalization of message construction and dissemination has not abated critics' complaints that too much of the news is primarily infotainment and that too many presidential messages are intentionally vague or even deceptive to protect the president's image. Nonetheless, most people claim to feel moderately well informed and able to perform essential civic functions such as voting intelligently and participating in political discussions.⁵ Continuous campaigns have raised the problem of overexposure of the president, which may breed inattention, boredom, and even contempt. The fears of scholars such as Neil Postman, that overexposure and humanization of the president will trivialize the presidency, may be well grounded.⁶

SOME UNFINISHED BUSINESS

The linkage problem that concerns me most is the inequality of access to linkage. It is often mentioned only in passing, and little has been done to assess its full impact. Communicating with top officials and gaining a hearing is primarily a right enjoyed by socioeconomically privileged members of society. The least privileged are largely left out. This inequality defies eradication, because it springs from a system where most opportunities are open to everyone, but the ability and motivation to seize them is greatly enhanced by upper-class status. The lack of socioeconomic advantages during childhood and adolescence becomes a major handicap to success in life.

Election systems, including primaries and the Electoral College procedure, further increase inequalities. Single-district election arrangements that

are almost universal in the United States drown out the voices of millions of members of losing parties. Low voter turnouts, especially by socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, explain why most presidents usually are the choice of only one-fourth to one-third of the electorate. To make matters worse, the Electoral College procedure allows a candidate to become president despite losing the popular vote. That raises serious questions about whether citizens' voices are receiving equal consideration so that majority rule prevails in the end. The Electoral College procedure gives populations in smaller states more political influence than their fellow citizens in larger states, increasing the advantaged positions they already enjoy because the Senate represents states equally, irrespective of population size.

Another form of distortion of communication between presidents and their publics comes from presidential secrecy. As perennial leaks and periodic investigations make clear, presidents conceal much information or spin it to the point of distortion for political reasons unrelated to national security concerns. The executive branch strives mightily to control information by limiting the release of political data. That leaves the public in the dark about many important matters that it needs to know to reach sound political judgments.

Assessments of the president's success in leading public opinion are plagued by unrealistic expectations and faulty assumptions. Pundits and even scholars routinely characterize presidents as weak, unpopular persuaders if they fail to gain approval from large majorities of Americans. That ignores the fact that people have well-formed opinions on many issues that run counter to those of the president. Once people have made up their minds, it is difficult to change them. Success in persuasion should therefore be assessed in terms of the numbers of people who were still receptive to the president's arguments. Except for totally new issues about which the public knows little and partisan divides that have not yet emerged, the numbers of people open to persuasion usually are quite small.

The ability of political leaders to persuade their constituents is limited, at best. Presidents live within the nexus of their historical periods, which may or may not provide opportunities for opinion leadership. Moreover, leaders cannot be too far ahead of the public. It may require a substantial period of time to overcome culturally ingrained attitudes, such as race and gender prejudices or the reluctance to become embroiled in military activities in distant parts of the world. Even a superb orator such as President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew that he could not easily overcome the American public's reluctance to enter the Second World War. Therefore, he proceeded gradually from small breaches of American neutrality to increasingly massive interventions in the conflict.

Finally, it remains an unresolved philosophical question whether linkage encourages pandering. According to the dictionary, pandering involves seeking benefits for oneself by catering to the weaknesses and vanities of others.

Phrased in political terms, should leaders take their cues from the public and try to accommodate public wishes? Should they shun policies that are likely to be unpopular, even when they are convinced that the policies are sound, though unlikely to win public approval? Such questions deserve more attention, because pandering is common and new communication technologies make pandering increasingly easy and effective.

In sum, establishing sound relationships between presidents and average Americans remains as challenging as ever. *In the Public Domain: Presidents and the Challenges of Public Leadership* presents important analyses of the dynamics of linkage interactions. It updates many of the findings in the earlier volume and adds much that is new and important. But it definitely is not the last word. It still leaves many important areas, such as linkage inequalities, untouched, and many of its final findings will become merely interim statements as time marches on. The ultimate satisfaction for its talented contributors will be to see their work spark yet another volume a few decades hence. If that volume lives up to the quality of the current one, then it will be an important contribution to understanding crucial facets of the American presidency.

NOTES

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I

The Challenge of Perception

For all modern presidents during the television age of politics, image matters. Presidents must not only be aware of their image as a leader but must also pay attention to public opinion and partisan concerns as the head of their party. The three chapters in Part I address some of the specific challenges that presidents face in connecting with the American public and the presidential image as portrayed through the mass media.

As presidents face the challenge of appearing in public, the importance of their image as a leader among the American public cannot be ignored. Moreover, due to the mass media's influence over the political environment, both the news and entertainment spheres influence the president's image. While in office, the president must transmit his image and message via the mass media, which are outside of his range of influence through news coverage, books, movies, and television programs. As Michael A. Genovese shows in "Celebrity in Chief: The President As a Pop Culture Icon," the portrayal of the president can range from one extreme (an adored father figure) to the other (an evil and unscrupulous politician). The combination of attention in both the news media and popular culture results in a loss of control over the presidential image. The president's rise to the status of an icon in popular culture adds another dimension to the office and to presidential leadership. Genovese argues that the challenge for the actual, rather than virtual, president is how to use the current image rather than be used by it. The current iconic presi-

dency emerges out of the realities of Vietnam and Watergate, as well as the dramatic portrayals of those cataclysmic political events. The result is a significant challenge to any effort at public leadership, as the president must always confront both realities.

Even before they are elected to the White House, presidential candidates learn quickly the importance of connecting with the public. Prior to achieving their party's nomination, candidates are attentive and respond to public opinion polls and trips to the voting booth during the frenzied primary season. Candidates who do not personally appeal or stake out individually identifiable issue positions do not survive long in the race for the nomination. Thus by the time of the nomination, candidates are well schooled in using the rhetoric of personal public appeals—in other words, in producing candidate-centered behavior. However, with the nomination comes the attachment of the party label, and party identification remains the strongest influence on voting behavior, regardless of its decline in recent years. The challenge for the presidential nominee is one that continues for the victor: how to incorporate the party rhetoric with candidate (or presidency-) -centered behavior. In "Party Labels in Presidential Acceptance Addresses: 1948–2000," Sharon E. Jarvis and Emily Balanoff Jones find that candidates tend to use party labels positively, with negative party critiques reserved for adversaries. The party label, however, appears more empowering for elites than for the public at large, due likely to the reluctance of candidates to pepper their rhetoric with references to the party and party ideology.

Finally, any presidential effort to garner public support for a person, program, or policy requires that the public receive knowledge of the preferred presidential option or outcome. Since the media serve as the means for transmission, the mode of presidential coverage matters for presidential outcomes. The usual challenge then is for the president to deal with the quality of the news coverage and how it influences attitudes and opinions. During wartime, public opinion generally supports the president in what scholars call a "rally 'round the flag." The phenomenon, a rise in support for the president and military efforts abroad, is significant, because it often mitigates criticism of presidential military efforts. Matthew A. Baum and Tim Groeling find in "What Gets Covered? How Media Coverage of Elite Debate Drives the Rally-'Round-the Flag Phenomenon: 1979–1998" that the magnitude of a presidential rally is contingent upon media presentation of elite criticism, in particular, a wave of negative media coverage is increasingly shortening rallies. Baum and Groeling find a potentially devastating challenge to presidential leadership, as congressional criticism combines with media preference for conflict to eliminate or limit the power of public support for the president.

Celebrity in Chief

The President As a Pop Culture Icon

Michael A. Genovese

Take One: The president's plane has been hijacked with the president aboard, but our heroic president (played by Harrison Ford), super-macho hero that he is, uses brains and brawn to single-handedly foil the bad guys and save the day in *Air Force One*.

Take Two: Aliens have invaded, but our president (Bill Pullman) as star fighter takes to the skies and pilots a plane that takes on these evil invaders and saves the day in *Independence Day*.

Take Three: Just prior to the election, the president has been caught in a sex scandal with an underage girl. What to do? Create a phony war, of course, a war pageant to distract the public—and so it goes in *Wag the Dog*.

Take Four: The president is utterly mad! He walks around the White House talking to the portraits of former presidents. Even the secretary of defense, wary of the mental state of the president (played by Anthony Hopkins), orders the military not to obey orders from the commander in chief in *Nixon*.

The president as hero and villain—ah, but it was not always so. Initially, presidents were portrayed in commercial films with reverence. Until the fall-out from Vietnam, Watergate, the Iran-Contra scandal, and the Clinton sex scandal, Hollywood tended toward fawning hero worship in its cinematic treatment of presidents—real or fictional. But in the past quarter century, the presidential film image has gone through a roller coaster ride of high worship and object scorn. What a ride!¹

PORTRAYING THE PRESIDENT ON FILM

Among the changes in film coverage in the past two decades is the increased use of the American president as a symbol, character, and key component in a wide variety of films. The presidency is a potent symbol of American politics

and nationhood and has become an attractive focal point in countless movies. The president, once treated in popular art with reverence, has been transformed from a national icon to a pop idol, with all of the negatives of familiarity that come with pop star status.²

In a nation with no official religion or sacred text and few unifying national symbols, the president has been converted into a high priest and symbolic representative. Our monuments to presidents tower over the Washington, D.C., landscape. We have Mount Rushmore to honor our presidents, and we erect grand palaces in their names in the form of presidential libraries, the modern cathedrals of presidential worship. If one goes to Disney World in Orlando, Florida, one can visit the Hall of Presidents. We have constructed the paraphernalia of quasireligious worship to the men who serve as presidents. The presidency has become more than a political or constitutional institution. It is the focus of emotions, hopes, and aspirations.³ Since the Vietnam conflict, the presidency has been the focal point for complex and contradictory attachments and emotions. As such, the good, the bad, and the ugly of the American presidency have become the focus of numerous films.

In some ways, technology has rewritten the U.S. Constitution. Television has refocused public attention away from the separation of powers and has given the presidency center stage. This also is true with commercial films. As the focal point of our attention, the impression created is one in which the presidency appears more powerful and important than the Constitution intended. The president gets so much more television coverage than Congress that the electorate begins to believe that the president is the center of the political universe. Yet constitutionally, the president must share power with a Congress that visually is more obscured but politically more powerful than is at first obvious.

The creation of this electronic throne raises public expectations of the president's powers; the resulting demands placed upon the president become unrealistic. When the president fails to meet these high expectations, disappointment sets in: the president often finds himself in a no-win situation, often resorting to "impression management" rather than an exercise of power.

Presidents devise sophisticated strategies to use the media, lest they get *used* by the media. Television has enlarged the presidency by focusing so much attention on that institution, but it also has shrunk the presidency by overexposing and therefore trivializing the office. How have movies and television dealt with this complex and sometimes contradictory office?

THE EVOLUTION OF PRESIDENTIAL IMAGE

In the early days of moving pictures, the presidency drew little attention. Rarely was the president portrayed as a fictional character in films, and while

some historical portrayals made it to the screen (especially of Abraham Lincoln), the presidency was infrequently a part of films.

Prior to the disillusionment of Vietnam, Watergate, the Iran-Contra scandal, and the Clinton sex scandal, presidents—when portrayed in films—were presented primarily as political giants, saints who oozed goodness. No president received a greater cinematic boost than Abraham Lincoln. With such films as *Abraham Lincoln's Clemency* (1910), *Lincoln's Gettysburg Address* (1912), *Lincoln the Lover* (1913), *Lincoln's Thanksgiving Story* (1914), *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1915), *The Lincoln Cycle* (1917), *The Highest Law* (1921), *The Heart of Lincoln* (1922), *The Dramatic Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1924), *Abraham Lincoln* (1930), *Of Human Hearts* (1938), *Lincoln in the White House* (1939), *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), and *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1940), a type of blind hero worship was created around Lincoln.

This began to change during the Great Depression, when the search for hope led some filmmakers to turn their attention to politics and the creation of a presidential hero, amid all of the squalor and misery. During periods of crisis (the depression) and war (World War II), it is not unusual to see the president portrayed as a hero or savior. In times of stress, the public looks to the president for reassurance, comfort, and rescue. Films such as *Gabriel over the White House* (1933) presented an activist, quasiauthoritarian president who (after the spirit of the angel Gabriel enters his body) accomplishes miraculous deeds of reform and political regeneration, albeit in violation of constitutional restraints. This wishful thinking and hero worship presented the president as a popular hero and savior.⁴

In *The President Vanishes* (1934), an honest president, beset by a corrupt Congress, fakes his own kidnapping. In *The Phantom President* (1932), George M. Cohan plays the dual role of T. K. Blair, a cold, colorless presidential candidate, and a Blair look-alike, song-and-dance man Doc Varney. The political bosses have Varney run for president as Blair. Varney wins and stays on as president, “to run the country for the people’s benefit.”

Presidential cinematic hero worship continued into World War II as a patriotic fervor swept the nation and the film industry. Movies featuring pro-American and pro-presidential themes proliferated as Hollywood was enlisted to boost morale and support the war effort. It did so enthusiastically.

After the hot war, a cold war developed between the United States and the Soviet Union. This ideological and geopolitical war led to the Red Scare in the United States (1947–1955), and the result was the McCarthy era. This period had a chilling effect on Hollywood, and most filmmakers shied away from overt political messages. The occasional cinematic representation of a fictional president can be found, such as in Frank Capra’s *State of the Union* (1948), but the McCarthy era is best known in Hollywood as the time of the blacklist and the retreat from social problems.

State of the Union, starring the popular duo Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn, has Tracy playing successful industrialist Grant Matthews, who

goes after the Republican presidential nomination. But the well-meaning Matthews is manipulated. Finally, seduced by the political bosses, he goes from a man of integrity to a political pawn. He becomes "one of them," but at his wife's urging, Matthews has a change of heart, and in true Capra fashion, he once again becomes a man of integrity, speaking truth to power.

For roughly the next dozen years, political or social problem films declined, falling victim to the oppressive forces of McCarthyism and the Hollywood blacklist. By the 1960s, presidential films such as *Sunrise at Campobello* (1960), dealing with FDR's response to paralysis in his pre-presidential years, and *PT 109* (1963), about John F. Kennedy's bravery during World War II, presented a reverential, hero-worshipping portrayal of individual courage. It was politics at a distance: the personal was the political, and the president was the hero.

Complex presidential images also were evident in films such as *Advice and Consent* (1962), *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *The Best Man* (1964), and *Fail-Safe* (1964), but in general, the reverential depiction was the order of the day. For the most part, presidents were portrayed as "forceful, wise, and selfless; they were stolid embodiments of republican virtue."⁵

This changed rather dramatically in the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate era.⁶ The age of the heroic presidency gave way to the demonization of the presidency and the decline of public trust in government. An age of cynicism enveloped the political landscape, and the cinematic portrayal of presidents reflected this shift.⁷

Before Vietnam and Watergate, it was all but unthinkable to cinematically portray a real life president in anything but the most flattering light. All presidential rogues were fictional characters. But the fallout from Vietnam and Watergate changed everything.

All the President's Men (1976), starring Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman as *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, dealt with the lies and corruption of Richard Nixon. There followed a spate of Nixon-bashing films, from *Secret Honor* (1984) to Oliver Stone's biopic *Nixon* (1995) to *Dick* (1999).

Even when the president was not a central character, it was not unusual to present a president in a less-than-flattering light. In *The Right Stuff* (1983), for example, Lyndon Johnson comes off as a buffoon and George and Barbara Bush as comic characters in *Naked Gun 2 1/2: The Smell of Fear* (1991). It is the era of the post-heroic presidency, brought painfully to scale.

In the 1960s, as a result of the cultural rebellion of the period, we saw the rise of the "anti-hero." This trend filtered its way into the presidential image as well. Commercial films are designed, first and foremost, to make a profit. Therefore, filmmakers are less likely to shape views than they are to reflect the ideas, biases, tastes, needs, and desires of their audience. Filmmakers give the audience "what it wants," and with the counter-culture movement of the

1960s, Vietnam, and then Watergate, the public grew cynical, and films played to, fed, and exploited the dissatisfaction and disaffection of the American movie-going audience, and thus the American voter. Slowly, portraits of presidents as venal, corrupt, and self-serving began to appear. *Being There* (1979), a film about an amiable dunce becoming presidential timber, began to deflate the presidential image. Instead of simplistic adulation, a paradigm shift took place: it was now simplistic condemnation. Instead of Hailing the Chief, we were Railing the Chief. In *Wild in the Streets* (1968), when fourteen-year-olds get the right to vote and age minimums for holding office are eliminated, one of the new president's first acts is to forcibly place everyone over thirty-five in "retirement" camp. In *Putney Swope* (1969), we see President Mimeo, a marijuana-smoking midget, more interested in fooling around with the First Lady than in governing. In *The Virgin President* (1968), fictionalized President Fillard Millmore, a thirty-five-year-old idiot, cannot even figure out that his cabinet is going to bomb China. And in *Hail to the Chief* (1972), a megalomaniac president orders his private police force to massacre hippies.

During the 1980s, life began to imitate art when an actor, Ronald Reagan, actually became president. And as memories of the turbulent 1960s, Vietnam, and Watergate began to fade, we saw a revival of a more hopeful, even heroic (some would say imperial) presidency. Reagan, the star of such movies as *The Knute Rockne Story* (where he played George Gipp, "the Gipper") and *Bedtime for Bonzo* (where Reagan costarred with a chimp), began to mix up life and art.

Reagan told the Israeli prime minister that he would never let Israel down because he was there when the Americans liberated the Jews from Nazi concentration camps, and that he would never, could never, forget. Of course, this never occurred. Reagan was not there when the allies liberated the Jews, but he had *seen it* in a movie! Reagan even drew ideas and inspiration from popular films, as when he announced that he would build a protective bubble (the strategic defense initiative) over the United States and name it after the movie *Star Wars*. Reagan even challenged Congress in cinematic language, telling it, "Go ahead, make my day!," another popular movie line.

By the 1990s and the end of the cold war, the public's confusion regarding what it wanted and expected of the presidency worked its way into the movies. Conspiratorial or critical depictions of presidents such as *JFK* (1991) and *Nixon* (1995) mixed with lighthearted, hopeful portrayals such as *Dave* (1993) and *The American President* (1995). If the images were mixed and mixed up, then one thing was perfectly clear: the American president had become a star of Hollywood movies.

Even a partial list of presidency-oriented films reveals just how popular and marketable the presidential image and office have become. From Oliver Stone's conspiracy homage in *JFK* (1991), to the president as a liberal icon in *The American President*, to the president as a *star wars* hero in *Independence*

Day (1996), to the president as comic relief in *Mars Attack* (1998), to the president as super-macho man in *Air Force One* (1997), to the president as—well, as Clinton—in *Wag the Dog* (1997), and to Clinton as Clinton in *Primary Colors* (1998), presidential images cluttered the silver screen, and many of these films drew large audiences. Even *Beavis and Butthead Do America* (1997) had a not-so-lifelike president.

I LIKE JED!

Art imitates life in the hugely popular NBC series *The West Wing*. Created in 1999 by Aaron Sorkin, *West Wing* won nine Emmy awards in its first season.⁸ A fictionalized insider's account of life in the White House where the brilliant, liberal Democrat, Josiah Bartlet (Martin Sheen), wages a battle within himself between high-minded idealism and the demands of practical politics, *West Wing* has filled a void in our politics and in entertainment. Smart, witty, and topical, it has, in effect, replaced the Democratic Party as the "loyal opposition."

The Democrats, weak, confused, and leaderless after Clinton, have been both unwilling and unable to put up credible opposition to President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the September 11 tragedy. Thus the fictional Bartlet is the president (nearly) everyone wishes existed. He is the intelligent alternate to the failures of the Bush administration. In post-September 11 America, the role of the "loyal opposition" party is filled by a fictional TV character, Jed Bartlet, the president on *The West Wing*.

Centering on the lives (and sometimes loves) of several key White House staffers, *West Wing* feeds the public hunger for matters of substance in an otherwise superficial television wasteland. Not without its flaws, the show nonetheless presents the president as a smart and good man who must compromise, cut corners, and sometimes accept defeat. And it leaves viewers with the gnawing question, why can't we get a real-life Jed Bartlet in the real White House?⁹

FIRST FAMILY FOLLIES

Not only is the president subject to cinematic examination (if not exploitation), but the president's spouse and children also have become fodder for filmmakers. Prior to the 1980s, you could count on one hand the number of substantive portrayals of presidential family members. Today, it is commonplace.

In *First Lady* (1937), a light-hearted fictional saga of political catfighting between Washington wives, a former president's granddaughter, played by Kay Francis, campaigns to have her husband (Preston Foster) elected presi-