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A Presidency Upstaged: The Public Leadership of George Bush, Joseph V. Hughes Jr. and Holly O. Hughes

Lori Cox Han
Chapman University, lhan@chapman.edu

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

George H. W. Bush and the Public Presidency

When Pres. George H. W. Bush left office in January 1993, much was left to be determined about his legacy. Presidential legacies are often built not only on issues of substance, such as domestic, economic, and foreign policy achievements, but also on issues of style, such as a president's approval ratings and ability to connect with the American public. As Ronald Reagan's successor, Bush is remembered as a president who sought to "stay the course" in terms of policy while distancing himself from the stagecraft and public relations strategies of the Reagan years. But, as Bush discovered during his one-term presidency, continuity coupled with mediocre communication skills does not make for a strong public image as an effective and active leader in the White House. As it continues to evolve, the Bush legacy in terms of his style and public leadership skills has already and will continue to be heavily influenced by the fact that Bush, a one-term president, held office following Reagan and preceding Bill Clinton, both two-term presidents who were dynamic and skilled communicators. On issues of substance, the Bush legacy has benefitted from time and distance from his years in office as he has crafted a strong image as an elder statesman in his post–White House years. His prudence and caution as president, particularly in regard to foreign policy issues, is also remembered more longingly when contrasted with the worldview of son George W. Bush's two-term administration. This suggests that the long-term view of even a president who loses his reelection effort and is not immediately considered a success can be rehabilitated through both hindsight and the missteps of his successors in office.

While many facets of the Bush years provide much for presidency scholars to assess and analyze, it is the role of the public presidency that is considered here. Much can be learned from studying the public presidency of Bush, including his relationship with the press, the communication strategies employed by his advisors, the role of public opinion polling

within the Bush White House, and how these issues shaped and defined his image as a leader. Understanding Bush's public leadership is essential in order to fully comprehend the significance of the Bush years during an age when the mass media played, and has since continued to play, such a crucial role in governance. Many presidency scholars have already weighed in with their opinions about Bush's successes and failures (mostly the latter) in the area of presidential leadership. However, a better understanding of Bush's public leadership is necessary to place his years in the White House within their proper political perspective. Two important volumes have been written on specific aspects of the Bush public presidency—*The Press and the Bush Presidency* by Mark J. Rozell and *The Rhetorical Presidency of George H. W. Bush* edited by Martin J. Medhurst. Further study in these areas, as well as others related to White House communication strategies, can provide a wealth of data and knowledge regarding Bush's presidency.

A consensus among scholars and political commentators alike seems to exist that Bush was, at best, a mediocre communicator. While he brought a strong resume to the Oval Office, which included his experience as vice president, CIA director, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, ambassador to China, head of the Republican National Committee, and two terms in the House of Representatives, he lacked the public connection that Reagan had so skillfully used to his governing advantage. Given the general agreement on this topic—that Bush was not a strong communicator—why bother to take a closer look at the public aspects of his administration? It is important to understand the public aspects of the presidency, particularly within the context of our media-driven political environment, whether or not the president is seen as a successful communicator. Presidents and their advisors have been implementing public strategies as part of the day-to-day governing process now for decades, and understanding the role that this plays in presidential decision-making, governance, and leadership helps to explain one of the crucial ways in which presidents are, rightly or wrongly, judged. In the broader sense, this book discusses the importance of the public presidency and its impact on presidential leadership. The specific purpose is to place the Bush years in the proper context of how presidential leadership has been defined through the public lens and how this can shape a president's ability to govern effectively. As the title, *A Presidency Upstaged,* implies, the timing of the Bush presidency in terms of his historical placement as well as the role of the news media in the overall political environment often left Bush at a strategic disadvantage.

No one disputes that Ronald Reagan, for example, knew how to give a great speech and could easily connect with the U.S. public; understanding his success in that regard tells us much about Reagan the man and the inner workings of his administration. The same type of analysis for Bush, then, can provide similar insights into his administration; the rapid and dramatic changes that occurred in the news industry during the late 1980s and early 1990s while Bush was in office make the issue even more compelling as to the evolving relationship between the president and the press.

This introductory chapter provides a review of the emerging literature on the Bush presidency and a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Bush's public leadership. The structure of the book includes an in-depth analysis of various public aspects of the day-to-day operation of the Bush White House in an attempt to answer several questions. First and perhaps most importantly: Can a president and his administration learn the skill and strategy necessary to implement a successful communication strategy, or was Bush's failure in the area of public leadership part of a larger, systemic problem? Bush provides an excellent case study for several reasons. A general assumption exists that Reagan succeeded as president while Bush failed. If that is the case, then was it simply a matter of style versus substance—was Reagan a great communicator with a hollow message while Bush provided a depth and breadth of political knowledge but lacked public skills? While that certainly may be oversimplifying the comparison between the two administrations, understanding the distinction between style and substance—and the importance of being an effective communicator—is now crucial in defining presidential leadership and what that means for determining presidential success or failure. Bush certainly enjoyed successes during his four years in office. For example, during the Gulf War, his governing style of behind-the-scenes negotiating and consensus building, coupled with his substantive knowledge of international affairs, proved successful in building an international coalition with strong support at home for military action. Unfortunately for Bush, while those types of skills are often essential for successful presidential leadership, they are often not the skills on full public display and thus cannot sustain an image of successful *public* leadership. An irony of the Bush years comes from the fact that his strengths as president—experience and knowledge at the national and international level—did not automatically meet the public expectations left in the wake of the Reagan years and the increasing demands of the 24-hour news cycle.

Other questions must follow to better understand the Bush presidency within the public realm. Beginning with Jimmy Carter's election in 1976, four out of the last six presidents selected by U.S. voters have been former state governors and, more importantly, Washington outsiders. Bush stands out among the six most recent presidents as the only one with an impressive national and international political resume prior to assuming the presidency. Given that Bush was a Washington insider with nearly twenty-five years of political experience, culminating in his eight years as Reagan's vice president, did Bush not see the road map? That is, why did he not learn from Reagan's success and instead distance himself from a proven public strategy? There was no shortage of White House advisors working on the overall communications strategy, and the number of public events increased while Bush was in office. A strategy more focused on substance than style might have been a good fit for Bush and his view of the presidency, but it turned out to not be a good fit for Bush given the political environment in which he attempted to govern. As a result, despite all of his political experience, Bush struggled to implement an effective day-to-day communication strategy amid the public expectations that had been created by his successor in the White House.

Presidential Leadership and the Public Presidency

Leadership, particularly in the political context, has a variety of definitions and is often viewed as a malleable term, but in general it is considered a process that involves influence, occurs in groups, and includes attention to goals.[1] The definition of leadership can also include "individual traits, leader behavior, patterns of interacting, role relationships, relations with followers, and follower perceptions." The job of the president, then, obviously encompasses both governance and leadership—occurring through "formal aspects of government and in a multitude of ways surrounding formal governing."[2] Based mostly on the scholarship of political scientists, the definition of presidential leadership that emerged in 1960 was Richard Neustadt's view that modern presidential power equates the ability to bargain and persuade.[3] Since then, other important works have redefined, modified, or expanded the notion of presidential leadership to encompass various views of presidents and the presidency, including the president as a transformational leader as well as the state of the postmodern presidency.[4] Other important topics shaping the definition of presidential leadership have included changes in the political environment, the institutionalization of and leadership within the executive branch, policy making and the president's relationship with Congress, and the public presidency and changes in White House communication strategies.[5] As Bert Rockman states, the study of presidential leadership is both fascinating and complex in that presidents may vary in temperaments, but all are confronted with similar pressures while in office—"it is the manipulable factor in a sea of largely nonmanipulable forces."[6]

Public leadership—that is, the art and skill of communication on the public stage—has gained increasing significance in terms of understanding the more general notion of presidential leadership. Specifically, and in its political context, public leadership can be defined simply as the ability of a public official to use the public component of a political office to accomplish a specific task, goal, or agenda item. As such, the end result of public leadership can be something as specific and tangible as the passage of a new law or the start of a government initiative, or something as broad-based and intangible as rhetoric that motivates, inspires, or comforts the masses. However, at either extreme, public leadership skills matter and play a large role in allowing a public official to accomplish his or her political goals.[7] The importance of public leadership to effective governance is perhaps most pronounced when viewing that of a president.

The president's proficiency as a public communicator, what Fred Greenstein refers to as the "outer face of leadership," is an important determinant in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of individual presidents.[8] As defined by George C. Edwards III in the early 1980s, during the time when Ronald Reagan was raising the bar in terms of presidential communications in the television age, the "public presidency" encompasses a president's understanding and leadership of public opinion; a president's influence of the press; press portrayals of the president; and the public's expectations and evaluation of the president.[9] Utilizing the public aspects of leadership has led modern presidents to seek public support by what Samuel Kernell refers to as "going public," a style of presidential leadership that includes "a class of activities that presidents engage in as they promote themselves and their policies before the American public." Addresses to the nation, press conferences, and other public appearances are examples of how a president attempts to sell his agenda or other presidential actions to not only the public but other political actors as well. This activity has been made easier in recent years with the technological developments of the mass media.[10] Developing an effective White House communication strategy, which considers the president's leadership style

and policy agenda within the context of press relations, speechwriting, and public activities, is now more important than ever in an attempt to control the political environment in which presidents operate: "communication strategies emerge for every president, and can shape, to varying degrees, the relationship that the president has with both the press and the public, which in turn can help determine the overall success of the administration and its policies."[11]

As presidential scholar Clinton Rossiter observed in 1963, the president "is not one kind of leader one part of the day, another kind in another part—leader of the bureaucracy in the morning, of the armed forces at lunch, of Congress in the afternoon, of the people in the evening. He exerts every kind of leadership every moment of the day, and every kind feeds upon and into all the others."[12] The importance of Rossiter's observation has gained more credibility over the years, as the media age has continued to infiltrate the parameters of presidential leadership. Public expectations have been raised during the past four decades for what is now defined as strong presidential leadership—a concept that has changed greatly since the days of the administrations of Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, or even both Roosevelts (Theodore and Franklin). Beginning with John F. Kennedy's skill at using television and other means of communication to effectively present an image of strong leadership emanating from the White House, the public responsibilities of a president are now on a strategic par with other policy-related day-to-day functions within an administration.

However, as more recent studies have shown, even politicians who are skilled communicators do not have an easy time of influencing the public through their rhetoric or the symbolism of their offices. Several impediments still exist that make the task of leading the public difficult. The growing number of media technologies, outlets, and channels make it difficult for even the president to have his voice heard among the cacophony of news anchors, political pundits, and other entertainment options. In addition, the current divide among the electorate in which the voters are firmly grounded in their beliefs and cannot be persuaded otherwise can make attempts at presidential rhetoric futile; even those presidents who are charismatic face many obstacles and are frustrated in their attempts to lead the public, even though the "American political system provides presidents with strong incentives to increase their persuasive resources by seeking public support."[13]

Other recent studies have also begun to question the "going public" model in terms of its effectiveness and usefulness for governance, as it is often Congress and the bureaucracy, and not the public, to which presidents direct their public speeches in an attempt to influence legislation and implement public policy. In addition to "going public," presidents also "signal" members of Congress and the bureaucracy to gain support for their policy initiatives.[14] Presidents have also received much criticism of late for their willingness to "pander" to public opinion in terms of choosing which public policies to support and for adopting a model of governing that resembles a "permanent campaign."[15] While presidents do appear sometimes to pander to public opinion, they do so to maximize their influence over Congress and the public (who can be motivated to influence Congress to support the president) to push through legislation that is already generally supported by the public.[16] Presidential rhetoric can also have an important moral message and "send signals to Congress, contribute vital public support to a burgeoning social movement, make important connections between policy decisions and ethical concerns, enhance their constitutional role, oppose political adversaries, or engage in party leadership."[17]

These studies, of course, shift the debate of the "going public" model. The technological developments of the mass media in recent years have allowed presidents to go public more often and with much greater ease. Yet going public does not necessarily translate into greater success with efforts at public leadership. Strategy matters in this regard, and only in some cases does a president have success at gaining the support of both the public and other relevant actors in the policymaking process to enact some sort of tangible change. Those who hold public office do not have the luxury of acting unilaterally in accomplishing their goals and, depending on the circumstances and the mood of the public, must appeal to other politicians, the public, the news media, or any combination of those three to succeed in their public leadership efforts.

Between the years of 1961 and 2001, three presidents are usually categorized as "successful" communicators—Kennedy, Reagan, and Clinton—while the remaining five—Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and Bush—are categorized as generally "unsuccessful." An assessment of George W. Bush as a communicator is somewhat complex; the younger Bush was certainly not known for his "polished and inspiring public performances," but he did nonetheless win reelection (as did Nixon) and seemed to connect well with certain voters.[18] And while it is certainly not methodologically sound to so easily place presidencies into generalized

categories of "successful" or "unsuccessful" based on communication skills, this is now among the standard measurements many scholars use when assessing presidential skill and effectiveness while in office, as well as determining presidential legacies. Just as good communication skills can negate other presidential shortcomings, bad communication skills can cloud public perceptions of positive aspects (whether policy related or ceremonial) of the presidency. The ability to effectively communicate can highlight positive elements of an administration to the public, which can have obvious benefits (public approval ratings and relations with Congress, for example), while a poor communicator cannot adequately "sell" substantive and important policy matters to the public. Right or wrong, the public cannot appreciate what it does not clearly see or is not being told in an effective (and sometimes entertaining) manner.

How Americans view the president as an individual leader and the presidency as an institution helps to define presidential leadership. Americans have high expectations of their presidents, even though achieving the status of presidential "greatness" remains elusive for most occupants of the Oval Office. The symbolic powers of the office, however, can go a long way toward providing a president with firmer ground on which to maneuver, at least within the public realm of the office. The U.S. presidency is "the focus of intense emotions. . . . Presidents are the nation's number one celebrity; most everything they do is news. . . . by their actions presidents can arouse a sense of hope or despair, honor or dishonor."[19] So while these informal and symbolic powers of the office can enhance presidential leadership if used effectively, they can also detract from the president's ability to govern in other areas. Popular presidents also have much greater success at influencing public opinion than do unpopular presidents. Public opinion about the president, and whether or not the public approves of the president's actions, does matter in the day-to-day operation of the White House—"mass evaluations of the president weigh in the balance of power between governmental units and make political life easier or more difficult for the president than it would otherwise be."[20] Public opinion can also play an important role in a president's effectiveness as a leader or success as a policymaker. The White House is now obsessed with popularity and how the president rates in public opinion polls, since high approval ratings can translate into more successful dealings with Congress.[21]

Ronald Reagan set a new standard for his use of the symbolic powers of the presidency during the 1980s. No president had ever fit into the role

of national leader quite so easily, especially via the medium of television. The Reagan administration enjoyed unqualified success in its management of news generated by the White House as well as the image portrayed of the man in charge. As a communicator, Reagan was "devastatingly simple and viscerally seductive," which translated into one of the greatest achievements of his presidency.[22] As Reagan's legacy continues to evolve, it has already been well documented that his brand of *public* leadership changed an important aspect of *presidential* leadership, not only in how the White House now manages the public aspect of the office but how the public views the presidency as well. During the Reagan years, the president was "literally 'produced' as never before; he had never been orchestrated before in the same way. There is no great mystery about this, it could easily be studied, and any new president could decide whether or not he wished to adopt the same techniques."[23]

The emphasis on style, image, and symbolism so prevalent during the Reagan administration is not necessarily a positive change to presidential leadership. Style over substance can also pose dangers for the notion of a "deliberative democracy," inherent in the U.S. system of republican government. In many aspects, the Constitution provides for a "government by discussion" and requires broad-based public discussion of matters of public concern. Not only must adequate information be provided to the public at large, but there needs to be "an absence of strategic manipulation of information, perspective, processes, or outcomes in general."[24] While this is not an attempt to indict the Reagan administration for harms done to the U.S. public through successful image manipulation of the presidency, it does raise the point, as other scholars have done, that the powers available through the rhetorical aspects of the presidency have not only greatly deviated from the original constitutional intentions of the Founders but have harmed the constitutional balance of power among the branches as well.[25]

Leadership and the Bush Presidency—Substance over Style?

Several presidential scholars have provided definitions, explanations, and assessments of George Bush's style of presidential leadership. Most are in agreement that Bush was a cautious and prudent president who saw his role as the manager and caretaker of the federal government, as opposed to a visionary leader. And while his presidency is not considered one of great innovation, from either a policy or leadership perspective, Bush is

viewed as a capable and intelligent man who, through his vast party and government experience, was qualified for the job. Bush had a strong commitment to public service, instilled in him from an early age. According to Fred Greenstein, "It is necessary to go back to Franklin Roosevelt to find a chief executive with the rich governmental experience of George Bush."[26] Based on contemporary standards of "successful" presidential leadership, however, Bush came up short in many categories. Bush was viewed as "a president for some seasons, not all. He [was] Mr. Inside."[27] Bush has been called the "semi-sovereign president" with a strategy based on a "lesser scale of policymaking so long as he could work his will through internal and unaccountable channels"; a not-so-public president with a style different from the very public approach to governing through the use of mandates, public opinion, and legislative activism.[28] The Bush years have also been called the "status-quo presidency" and the "guardianship presidency."[29] Bush was an insider with a limited agenda, and since academics tend to have a scholarly bias for "activist" presidents, which Bush was not, assessments of the Bush years have been mostly negative.[30] According to Michael Genovese, Bush's presidency focused on procedure, not ideas. Bush was "more cautious, more moderate, more pragmatic than Reagan. Bush was a manager at a time when the nation needed a leader, a status quo president in a time of change, a minimalist in a momentous time. . . . [he] often seemed a passive observer in a dramatically changing world."[31] Stephen Skowronek also provides an instructive observation, in that "the historic significance of [Bush's] leadership effort lies in its dismal confirmation of what all presidents should know by now: that the political premise of affiliated leadership is utterly exhausted."[32]

Understanding Bush's style of leadership also demands the inevitable comparisons to Reagan, his immediate predecessor and former boss. In this regard, Bush was challenged from the start to define his own presidency separate from that of Reagan. The negativity that had permeated the 1988 presidential campaign, in which he defeated Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis, did not allow Bush to get off to a quick start in building a strong image of presidential leadership. As Timothy Naftali states, "the election campaign of 1988, so long on patriotic symbols and so short on substance, had left only a vague impression of the incoming president, certainly nothing as powerful as the public image of Ronald Reagan, who despite Iran-Contra appeared to be departing directly from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue for Mount Rushmore."[33] Bush talked of creating a "new world order" but also had to contend with the long shadow being cast on

his presidency by the conservative policy agenda and skilled rhetoric of the Reagan presidency. The Bush presidency, however, was not merely a "redux" or "interregnum" of the Reagan years; his attempts at governing were just as complex but for different reasons: "The heart of the Bush presidency lay in its attempts to deal with the economic instability and cultural anxiety" created by the Reagan years.[34]

Bush admittedly had difficulty in developing his own "vision" for the country and based his policy prioritizations on reviving commitments to federal programs that Reagan had "sought to bury" like environmental regulations, Medicaid, and Head Start. According to Skowronek, the policy "reconstruction" of the Reagan years had turned out to be "largely rhetorical," which made articulating a vision difficult for Bush: "During his four years in the presidency, [Bush] was continually tripping over the question of who he really was."[35] Many of Reagan's policies may have had substance, but many, like his economic policies and the uncontrollable national debt, "unleashed a host of demons that plagued his successor."[36] Bush constantly struggled with his political identity as he tried to stake out a more mainstream political position within the Republican Party, as well as keeping his distance from the symbolic imagery and public relations tactics used by Reagan to govern. According to Neustadt, one of Reagan's greatest legacies was that of imagery and his skillful use of public leadership, which was unfortunate for Bush: "Mr. Reagan leaves, in terms of imagery, a pretty big screen for Mr. Bush to fill. The image includes Reagan, the chief of state, almost always striking the right note. The image includes Reagan as tough tactician in congressional relations during 1981. . . . The media report presidential-congressional relations as a spectator sport, and the White House understood that fact in the Reagan administration. They may not have understood substance, but they surely understood *that*."[37]

Plan of the Book

Understanding the public presidency of George H. W. Bush, and assessing its impact on his years in the White House, requires a better understanding of several distinct yet interrelated topics. Key among those topics include a consideration of Bush's overall communication strategy, especially his use of the presidential bully pulpit and his attempts to step back from the imagery of the Reagan years to focus more on substance. Also, his open access to the White House press corps, and his attempts to provide more

information and less image manipulation, backfired in that his administration still received negative news coverage (as had previous presidents in the television age). For Bush, two ironies stand out regarding the public aspects of his presidency. First, despite efforts to minimize the public aspects of the office, Bush increased his public appearances and relied on an extensive public strategy in doing so. Second, at least until the economic recession in 1992, Bush enjoyed relatively high approval ratings yet was unable to translate his public support into a second term in office.

From the start of the Bush administration in 1989, the heir apparent to the Reagan legacy of public leadership worked hard to distance himself from the stagecraft of the previous eight years. In doing so, he seemed to be, as pointed out by the *Los Angeles Times* in early 1989, "posing a basic question: Can the President of the United States really lead simply by trying to develop popular policies—without slick television packaging and elaborate schemes to manipulate the news media? As a political consultant might put it, is substance enough?"[38] During his first three years in office, Bush's approval ratings seemed to vindicate his anti-Reagan communication strategy. But according to Mark Rozell, by late 1991, with the nation dealing with an economic recession, Bush's failure to cultivate "a positive image of his own impressive background and accomplishments—and to have developed a coherent message of what his administration stood for—doomed his presidency when the public begged for a sense of direction to lead the country out of its problems. Lacking a coherent message, Bush was popular during good times, and then people blamed him for the perceived bad times."[39]

Bush came to office with high expectations in some areas and low expectations in others. He was the first Washington insider since Gerald Ford; having been vice president for eight years meant that compared to "outsiders" like Carter or Reagan, he did not need extensive on-the-job training. Bush had "considerable experiences in government, and had served a long apprenticeship for the presidency."[40] Many of the difficulties that Bush experienced in office had little to do with him personally but more to do with the changes to the political environment during the Reagan years, specifically the "gap between expectations and capability that may reflect a more fundamental crisis of identity and purpose" for the presidency.[41] But the low expectations in the area of public leadership, after Reagan had raised the bar so effectively, were unfortunately accurate. This became an insurmountable aspect to governing for Bush; "While the perception of a president as effective reinforces his power, a perception of him as ineffective is difficult to dispel and undermines his ability to provide leadership."[42]

Bush may have not always succeeded in his style as a communicator, but his years in the White House, and the content of his messages while president, did have many substantive aspects. A more in-depth analysis of those messages, and the strategy behind them, is necessary to see past the lack of imagery to better appreciate the effort. As such, the chapters that follow are organized around various aspects of the Bush public presidency. Chapter 2 considers the internal factors within the White House that contributed to the Bush public presidency, including his governing style, the communication strategies developed and employed, and the internal operations of the speech and press offices. These elements combine to make the "output" of the public presidency; that is, the message and image presented to the American public (along with the news media and other political actors). Chapter 3 will then consider the external factors that helped to shape the Bush public presidency, including the state of the news industry and the political environment in which Bush attempted to govern. The post-Reagan years were not always easy to navigate for the Bush White House, and it was through the "feedback" from news media coverage, public opinion, and policy and electoral outcomes that provided the impetus for how the administration governed and strategized on a day-to-day basis.

Chapters 4 and 5, through a case-study approach, provide the analysis that brings together the internal and external factors of the Bush public presidency to provide an in-depth look at the public strategies employed and the subsequent end result. In doing so, the "output" is assessed through the lens of the "feedback;" or, to put it more simply, how did Bush rate as a public leader? Traditional public venues for presidents—state of the union addresses and major policy addresses—are analyzed in terms of White House strategy for key events, followed by an analysis of several news sources to assess media coverage and public perception. Documents from the Bush Presidential Library, including internal White House memos, also help to illuminate and explain the Bush public strategy. The concluding chapter reconsiders the importance of the public presidency and further analyzes the Bush legacy in that regard and whether or not the prevalent assumptions of Bush as a communicator are accurate and fair.