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New Strategies for an Old Medium: The Weekly Radio Addresses of Reagan and Clinton

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**New Strategies for an Old Medium:
The Weekly Radio Addresses of Reagan and Clinton**

“Of the untold values of the radio, one is the great intimacy it has brought among our people. Through its mysterious channels we come to wider acquaintance with surroundings and men.”

President Herbert Hoover,
Radio Address to the Nation,
September 18, 1929

While president, Bill Clinton was never one to miss a public speaking opportunity. True to his word that he would “work until the last hour of the last day” in office, Clinton’s last of 416 weekly radio broadcasts aired the morning of January 20, 2001, just hours before George W. Bush took the oath of office. Referring to his weekly radio addresses as his “Saturday conversations” with the American public, Clinton stated: “For eight years, we’ve done everything in our power to reach beyond party and beyond Washington to put the American people first, overcoming obstacles, seizing opportunities. That’s what these radio addresses have been all about. These Saturday talks have often marked action taken to make our schools stronger, our environment cleaner, our food safer, our health care more secure.” Clinton’s assessment of the radio addresses was mostly true; he did speak on a variety of policy issues, mostly domestic ones, throughout his eight years in office. However, his use of weekly radio addresses, like that of Ronald Reagan, provided a unique opportunity to not only “talk” with Americans in a five-minute radio broadcast about important policy matters, but also served as a ready-made news-making opportunity in a controlled format that White House reporters found difficult to distort.

Attempts at control of the White House message and the overall political agenda have long been goals of American presidents. During the twentieth century, the president emerged as a dominant rhetorical figure in American politics with many public opportunities to influence the

national agenda. A president's public activities, as well as media strategies to get his message out, are important in understanding the parameters of presidential leadership and policy outcomes during the television age. However, in a time when image and the use of television have been important for political leaders and candidates alike, two of the best-known communicators to occupy the White House during the television age—Reagan and Clinton—relied on weekly radio addresses as part of their overall communication strategy. Perhaps no president during the twentieth century made better use of radio addresses than did Franklin D. Roosevelt with his “fireside chats,” which he viewed as an opportunity to educate the American public through simple and frank discussions about major concerns of the day (Gelderman 1997, 11). In that same tradition, both Reagan and Clinton relied on weekly radio addresses to supplement their public agenda, target specific policies, most often domestic or economic, and reach citizens who may not be watching television. Perhaps more importantly, this also provided additional coverage in the news media of a controlled event, since the presidents' weekly radio addresses routinely made the weekend television news shows, especially on CNN, as well as the national Sunday newspapers.

While a rich literature exists on presidential communications (including the public/rhetorical presidency and the presidential/press relationship), only recently have presidential scholars begun to analyze weekly radio addresses as an important primary unit of analysis (Rowland and Jones 2002; Sigelman and Whissell 2002a, 2002b). This article analyzes how the use of radio has fit into the overall development of White House communication strategies during the television age, and takes an in-depth look at how Reagan and Clinton used weekly radio addresses to communicate with both the American public and the news media. Specifically, the issues considered here include the strategy development among White House

communication advisors (why did the Reagan and Clinton administrations believe this was an important means of communication?), the policies emphasized in the weekly radio addresses (what did the president talk about?), and the frequency of news coverage concerning the weekly radio addresses (does consistent news coverage occur during the 24-hour news cycle following the address, and if so, in which media sources?).

Presidents and Radio – A Brief History

Presidential attempts to communicate via radio date back to James Buchanan's administration in 1858, when the first attempt by the President to exchange messages with Queen Victoria occurred on August 16 by telegraph wires laid across the Atlantic. The entire exchange (from the Queen to the President and back again) took three days. By January 1903, the quality of the exchange of messages between the United States and England had improved dramatically as King Edward III and Theodore Roosevelt exchanged greetings by wireless telegraph (Archer 1971, 39, 75). Perhaps a more dramatic purpose, Woodrow Wilson relied on the Naval Communications Board to flash wireless messages around the globe during World War I (Archer 1971, 141). One of the first known public radio broadcasts came in 1916 with a post-election report on Wilson's reelection campaign delivered from an experimental station in New York. However, the beginning of commercial radio began with the broadcast of the 1920 presidential election results by KDKA in Pittsburgh. This report of Warren G. Harding's election is the political event "that first brought radio's potential to the attention of politicians" (Minow, Martin, and Mitchell 1973, 26).

Considered by most media scholars as the first "radio president," due mostly to the availability of the new technology during the 1920s, Harding's inauguration was the first to be

broadcast by radio. The medium was still in its early stages, yet Harding's was the first presidential voice heard by most Americans. He delivered a series of messages to the American public by radio during the summer of 1923, including an address in St. Louis on June 21, which was carried by special wire to New York City and broadcast over station WEAJ. Harding had planned to deliver a national radio address from San Francisco on July 31 to be broadcast in San Francisco, Chicago, New York, Omaha, Washington, and Round Hills, Mass. However, he fell ill and died on August 2 (Archer 1971, 317-318).

Later that year, Calvin Coolidge, who succeeded Harding, delivered his first message to the Congress as president on December 4, and this address was broadcast to a national audience. Mostly unknown to the nation during his tenure as Harding's vice president, Coolidge effectively used radio to introduce himself to a national audience, and radio continued to play an important part in Coolidge's political career. His performance on radio broadcasts to the American public was considered successful, and this discouraged any serious challenge for the Republican Party's presidential nomination in 1924 (Archer 1971, 323-324). Twenty-one radio stations broadcast Coolidge's inauguration on March 4, 1925, with an estimated 15 million people listening to the president's voice. At the time, this fact "staggered the imagination of thoughtful observers. Our far-flung democracy had at last found a means by which its duly elected Chief Executive could discuss great problems of the nation directly with all the people" (Archer 1971, 354).

Elected in 1928, Herbert Hoover also had a long-term relationship with radio. He served as Secretary of Commerce during the Harding and Coolidge administrations from 1921 through 1928, and one of his main duties was to develop and regulate the use of radio. Hoover recognized the use of radio by government officials as an interesting dilemma; radio could be both a "powerful educational force" and a tool for political propaganda as well. In his memoirs,

written in 1952, Hoover wrote, “There is little adequate answer to a lying microphone . . . propaganda is seldom the whole truth [and] the officials currently in office have preponderant time at the microphone, and theirs becomes the dominant voice” (Hoover 1952, 146-147). During his four years in the White House, Hoover delivered a total of twenty-three “Radio Addresses to the Nation” on foreign, domestic, and economic policy issues, as well as ceremonial events.¹

As a means to establish “direct contact with the people,” Roosevelt delivered the first of his thirty fireside chats at the end of his first week in the Oval Office in March 1933.² Considered a brilliant success, the speech allowed Roosevelt to reassure the American public that he would guide the Depression economy into recovery. He began the first radio address by saying “I want to talk for a few minutes with the people of the United States about banking,” and continued for twenty minutes explaining in layman’s terms what Americans could do to assist in the recovery. This began an effective trend that the President would rely on throughout his tenure in office—the use of radio to enter the living rooms of Americans to talk, in simple terms that were easily understood, about the problems and challenges facing the country (Burns 1956, 167-168). While Roosevelt was also successful in his mastery of the press, skillfully managing news out of the White House through his frequent press conferences in the Oval Office, radio was his “most important link with the people.” Roosevelt’s warm voice and public speaking skills provided a natural format for the President, and he enjoyed these opportunities to chat with Americans. According to presidential scholar James MacGregor Burns (1956, 204-205), Roosevelt connected with the American public through radio:

Read in cold newspaper print the next day, these talks seemed somewhat stilted and banal. Heard in the parlor, they were fresh, intimate, direct, moving. The radio chats were effective largely because Roosevelt threw himself into the role of a father talking with his great family. He made a conscious effort to visualize the people he was talking

to. He forgot the microphone . . . [a]nd his listeners would nod and smile and laugh with him.

From Roosevelt's tenure to the end of the 1960s, television slowly emerged as the preferred medium for presidents to speak to the American public. With television still in its infancy during the mid-1940s, Harry Truman relied on radio broadcasts to talk to the nation about important domestic policy issues such as price controls and welfare programs, as well as international policies such as the Marshall plan. His address receiving the highest percentage of listeners came when he announced the V-E Day surrender in 1945. But Truman was not the master of the airwaves as his predecessor had been; he was "under no illusion that he was equal of Franklin Roosevelt as a radio speaker," and many acknowledged that "he suffered prestige-wise from the fact that he followed Roosevelt as President" (Chester 1969, 50-51). Dwight Eisenhower had used radio addresses during WWII with a well-known radio broadcast following the invasion of Normandy, and throughout the late 1940s to urge support for the Marshall Plan. In 1953, White House advisors, led by Press Secretary James Hagerty, developed an extensive public relations campaign to promote the achievements of the administration while downplaying McCarthyism. This strategy included televised addresses to be broadcast simultaneously on radio networks, television versions of the "fireside chats" made famous by Roosevelt, and radio broadcasts of news conferences. The latter was an attempt to formalize Eisenhower's relationship with the news media and to guarantee that responses in his news conferences could not be distorted or taken out of context (Allen 1993, 23-27, 54-55).

John F. Kennedy, known for his innovative use of television to build the image of his administration and family, as well as his successor Lyndon Johnson, did not utilize regular radio broadcasts as part of their overall communication strategies. However, Kennedy and Johnson aired simultaneous radio broadcasts of their televised press conferences and major addresses on

the major radio networks. The use of radio by itself—without television—seemed to reemerge during the Nixon administration. Nixon had been a successful debater in his younger days and performed better on a medium that did not rely as heavily on image—“his face [was] missing, his voice [was] as effective as ever.” Nixon also performed better without the intense pressure that came with a television appearance, and radio did not risk overexposure (Martin, Minow and Mitchell 1973, 46).

The use of radio was a frequent topic among Nixon advisors who as early as 1969 urged the President to give a series of radio addresses on specific policy topics. Many within the White House considered the strategy sound, but the actual events continued to be postponed. Eventually Nixon gave four radio addresses during his first term, as well as a series of paid radio addresses on key policies during the fall of 1972 as part of his reelection campaign.³ A series of radio addresses finally materialized during 1973 and 1974, and six such addresses substituted for a State of the Union Address to the nation in 1973. Between January and March 1973, Nixon gave radio addresses on six aspects of the State of the Union message that he submitted to Congress, including the federal budget, the environment, the economy, human resources, community development, and law enforcement and preventing drug abuse. Advisors believed that radio speeches would receive coverage on the substance of the issue and would direct particular messages to specific audiences. Several radio addresses on economic or agricultural issues were broadcast during the day to target housewives, unemployed, or farm workers “not confined to regular office hours” (Martin, Minow and Mitchell 1973, 58-59). By early 1973, with the Watergate investigation consuming more public attention and preoccupying the White House, radio addresses allowed Nixon to communicate with the public on domestic policy issues while avoiding public appearances.

Both Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter gave few radio addresses during their presidential campaigns in 1976 and 1980, respectively, but neither wanted to focus their communication efforts on radio as had occurred during the Nixon administration. However, with the creation of the White House Office of Communication in 1969, an extensive radio actuality service (known as audio press releases) was put into place, and all presidential advisors since Nixon, including those in the Ford and Carter administrations, have used this service extensively to promote the president and his views to radio listeners across the nation. Following Reagan's weekly radio addresses that began in 1982, George H. W. Bush gave only five radio addresses in 1991, and thirteen in 1992 (all but three delivered on a Saturday morning). Twelve of the radio addresses focused on domestic or economic policy, while only one dealt with foreign policy (Address to the Nation on the Persian Gulf Crisis, 1/5/91). The remaining five addressed topics such as national holidays, the Points of Light volunteer program, and the results of the 1992 presidential election.

Research Design

An extensive literature has emerged in recent years on the rhetorical presidency, as well as the public aspects of the office of the presidency, recent changes in White House communication strategies, and patterns of news media coverage of the White House (Kernell 1997; Tulis 1987; Hart 1987; Stuckey 1991; Maltese 1994; Han 2001; Grossman and Kumar 1981). This research will build on that literature in an attempt to not only discover the policy focus present in radio addresses, but also the context of the resulting media coverage of the president's use of radio. This article explores the strategy behind the use of weekly radio addresses by both Reagan and Clinton as part of their overall communication strategy and

determines the policy prioritization in the weekly radio addresses. Also, subsequent news coverage in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* (available on LexisNexis) and on the nightly network newscasts of ABC, CBS, and NBC (available on the Vanderbilt Television Archives) was content analyzed to determine the extent of coverage on the radio addresses. The rationale for the study comes from the ongoing attempts of presidents and their communication advisors to control as much of their message as possible, the belief that the radio address provides an effective, unfiltered format from which the president can speak, and the sense that coverage of the weekly radio address has become a standard feature of weekend news among the elite news outlets that drive the national news agenda. (Rowland and Jones 2002; Martin 1984).

Several research questions are addressed. First, how did communication advisors in each administration prepare and strategize the use of weekly radio addresses from the standpoint of policy emphasis and news coverage? Considered successful television communicators, Reagan and Clinton provide an interesting case study on how radio addresses fit with their administration's communication strategies. For insight on the Reagan administration's strategy, research was conducted at the Reagan Presidential Library, and open White House files of key advisors (including David Gergen, Michael Deaver, Larry Speakes, James Baker, Pat Buchanan, and Marlin Fitzwater) and open White House Speechwriting Research files were examined to locate information on weekly radio addresses. For insight into Clinton, an interview was conducted with Megan Moloney, the Director of Radio and Television Production in the Office of the Press Secretary from 1997 through 2000.

Second, what policies did each president emphasize in weekly radio addresses? Each reference to a particular policy within a speech was counted to measure the frequency with which each president discussed issues on their respective agendas (Han 2001, 16). A total of

twelve policy categories were developed for coding.⁴ When using content analysis, measurement is defined as “counting the occurrences of meaning units such as specific words, phrases, content categories, and themes” (Weber 1990, 70). Following the coding of policy references in all addresses, to determine the policy prioritization for each president policy topics for the speeches were rank ordered by how often each was mentioned.

Third, how consistent is news coverage of weekly radio addresses in the news media? While the message as presented in weekly radio addresses can say a lot about a president’s agenda, few people actually hear those addresses. Determining who actually listens to the weekly radio address has been difficult to track; even White House advisors have been unsure of the exact audience and the number of weekly listeners (Carney 2003). Therefore, how the president’s message is portrayed in the news media is critical in order to understand how the public perceives the message, since it has been well known since 1982 that the more important goal of the radio address from the White House perspective is to help set the president’s policy agenda and receive weekend coverage (Networks Uncertain 1993; Viles 1993; Puig 1993).

Ronald Reagan’s Weekly Radio Addresses

Strategy: Communication advisors to Reagan believed that radio provided an additional medium that allowed him to talk directly to the American people about his policy agenda without any distortion by the national news media. Reagan, who greatly admired FDR, began his entertainment career as a radio broadcaster during the 1930s. During the television age, presidents had only sporadically used radio addresses to present their policy agendas to the American public, but in April 1982, Reagan began his weekly radio addresses to the nation. The five-minute broadcasts each Saturday would generally reiterate policy issues that had been

earlier discussed in other public venues by both the President and his advisors. Like during his television appearances, Reagan would provide a simplified and straightforward version of Washington politics to his listeners, often appealing to his fellow Americans to aid him in his fight against the evils of the political world (like the corruption of big government in Washington or the spread of global communism), and he always presented his position on policies as the reasonable alternative to which the average American could relate (Han 2001, 181).

Along with speeches from the Oval Office, Reagan used his weekly radio addresses as his “principal means to converse with the American people.” His down-to-earth speaking style came through over the radio just as it did through television, and gave him the opportunity to share his vision and goals for America. Reagan’s public speeches always focused more on the broader vision for America’s future, not specific policies, and the five-minute radio format was the perfect opportunity for him to share his views with citizens while not overwhelming them with facts and figures. Reagan was always able to master the medium that he was using, which certainly aided the job of his communication advisors. Radio was also one of the only means of communication for the president during the Iran-Contra scandal—he took a four-month absence from most public appearances, and while not answering questions about the scandal, his weekly radio addresses still provided policy continuity. As communications advisor Tom Griscom states, “It is important for each president to know their communication strengths and how to incorporate them into their administration . . . Reagan understood his strengths and how to make those strengths available for public consumption” (Griscom 1997, 64-66).

In addition, one of the greatest successes of the Reagan administration was its ability to control the political agenda, as well as setting the terms of public debate, and the radio addresses became part of that overall strategy. The administration adopted basic news management

principles, including the use of a consistent theme and delivering the line-of-the-day to the press, which developed each morning and was passed throughout the administration. Reagan's aides had realized that their greatest asset was the President himself, and began using two basic tactics to get his message to the American people: public appearances would be carefully staged and controlled to emphasize Reagan's personality, and he would be promoted as a can-do leader rather than placing any emphasis on a political philosophy (Hertsgaard 1988, 33-37, 105-106.) According to *Washington Post* journalist David Broder (1987, 176-199), the policies and priorities of the communication staff included limiting direct access to the President, making news management a major priority for trusted White House aides and cabinet secretaries, and shutting down the flow of information from lower levels of the administration. As a result, the Reagan administration has been acknowledged for its "stunningly successful news management."

In 1986, Reagan (1986) wrote an article that appeared in *Broadcasting* in which he discussed his love of radio as a medium and his goal in delivering weekly radio addresses:

Some journalists have suggested recently that the radio address should make news every week. More often than not the address does make headlines, but that was never my intent. I initiated the White House radio series on April 3, 1982, because I believed there was so much conflict and confusion coming out of Washington it was hard for people to know what was really happening.

However, his advisors were more intent on making the radio addresses as newsworthy as possible and maximizing positive coverage for the President. For example, in preparing for Reagan's first radio address on the administration's economic recovery plan (delivered on April 3, 1982), communications director David Gergen, who played an integral role in the radio addresses during his three year tenure between January 1981 and January 1984, was concerned that the talk would not "have anything new to say . . . My bet is that the unemployment number tomorrow will be over 9%. If we have a line saying that it won't go much higher, or something

to that effect, that would also make the speech more newsworthy” (Gergen 1982a). The following month, the May 1st radio address was to serve as a follow up to Reagan’s April 29th address to the nation on the federal budget and his urging of Congress to support a constitutional amendment for a balanced budget. After reading the draft of the speech, Gergen wrote in the margins that he “thought this speech was going to have more on const’l amendment—that’s supposed to be the heart of it & headline (sic)” (Gergen 1982b).

In 1983, during the second year of the weekly radio addresses, newsworthiness was still a major concern. In preparing the March 2, 1983 radio talk on unemployment, Gergen (1983a) critiqued the draft as having

some good material here, and while it’s dry, I think the distinction between cyclical and structural unemployment is worth making. My concern about the speech is that it isn’t newsy enough to get much attention. It also needs a little more topicality—after all, the leading indicators today made their biggest single jump in 33 years and unemployment numbers will have come out just the day before he speaks.

However, not all topics deemed newsworthy were incorporated into radio addresses. In October 1985, communications director Patrick Buchanan (1985), who had replaced Gergen in January 1985 after the position had remained vacant for nearly a year during the 1984 campaign, urged other top officials to have Reagan discuss the AIDS epidemic.

With the number of AIDS cases moving toward the 14,000 mark, and the number of dead at or near 7,000, with the story making the press every day, and becoming the medical story of the decade, if not the century—ought we not consider putting the President down on record in a radio speech on the subject. I could guarantee an interested reception from the national press.

Despite Buchanan’s suggestions, Reagan never delivered an address on this topic.

Along with making the news, other strategic issues were considered by advisors when preparing the weekly radio addresses. For Reagan’s May 14, 1983 talk on small businesses, Gergen (1983b) complained about the lack of personalization in the draft:

Speech is ok, but I think we miss a good bet when we don't personalize speeches like this. Just this week, RR presented awards to the top small business leaders across the country—and they represented the best in the U.S. Winners were a Hispanic family, and among the others were many minority leaders and women. Why not play up people like the Ruiz family—would help in all sorts of way. RR has been excellent in his radio speeches in past by personalizing. Can we do that here, or is it beyond us?

Radio addresses also served an important purpose in maintaining control over the news agenda, reiterating other policies discussed by Reagan in other venues, and keeping Reagan one step ahead of Congress in promoting his particular views. William P. Clark (1983), assistant for National Security Affairs, urged communication advisors to have the July 16, 1983 speech target the issue of arms control and reduction (which it did):

You are well aware of the fact that support on the Hill for the M-X is slipping. In order to reverse this dangerous trend, it is vital that the President remain out in front on this issue and continue to exhibit 'flexibility' and enthusiasm for arms control. I, therefore, strongly recommend to you that the President's July 16 radio address deal exclusively with arms control.

Radio addresses were also an excellent opportunity to promote White House initiatives under one common theme, as evidenced by Reagan's address on education and drug abuse on September 6, 1986. This address included discussions on a recent National Governors Association report on education, a new White House report on the nation's elementary schools, and a Department of Education report to the First Lady about schools without drugs. As one memo suggested, "As schools are opening, it would be a good time for the President to speak to students and parents about some of the education themes with which he's come to be identified: standards, discipline, values, parental involvement. Furthermore, there are several new developments which might serve as useful 'pegs' for his discussion" (Kristol 1986). Toward the end of Reagan's second term, his advisors became concerned about the content of his radio addresses as he began to receive criticism from the national press for not presenting new

information in his public remarks. In preparation for the Feb. 7, 1987 radio address on welfare, one memo noted

Pages 2 and 3 are taken almost verbatim from a radio speech on welfare the President did about one year ago. Given some of the criticism of the State of the Union Address as stale and reporters' enterprise in tracking down text in that speech that had been used before, we would suggest that some of the material on these pages be dropped or revised. As drafted, the speech puts the Administration's welfare reform initiatives in a context that could generate criticism about the 'same old stuff from the Administration' in an area where we are trying to undertake thoughtful, new reforms (Tupper 1987).

When the weekly radio addresses first began in 1982, many journalists wanted to know the exact audience for the President's messages. Network officials have never been able to provide a true estimate, although Mutual Broadcasting claimed in 1982 that 245 of their 940 affiliates carried the address, with an estimated audience of 1.5 million. Reagan's deputy press secretary, Larry Speakes, estimated that 1,000 stations were carrying the remarks in 1982, but that figure was never substantiated. ABC, NBC, Associated Press and United Press International also carried the radio addresses each week, with CBS as the only holdout among major networks (Networks Uncertain 1982). While considered successful for Reagan, the radio broadcasts were not without their problems or controversy. When they began, equal time issues arose, which later required radio networks to allow equal time for a Democratic response. In 1983, the AP and UPI announced that they would no longer carry the speech live each week due to Reagan's status as a presidential candidate, covering both the President's remarks and the Democratic response as news events on a delayed basis. A flap also occurred in 1986 between the White House and Ron Nessen, vice president of news for Mutual Broadcasting and former press secretary to President Gerald Ford, when Nessen ignored an embargo on a Reagan radio address that had been taped in advance. Six weeks earlier, Nessen had decided to drop the live broadcast of the weekly speeches due to lack of newsworthiness, calling the speeches a "rehash of his

previously enunciated views on various topics.” According to Nessen, the embargoed speech contained “real news” and necessitated its airing a day before scheduled. Nessen was harshly criticized by White House officials, including Speakes, who threatened “punitive action” against Mutual. Nevertheless, Nessen defended his actions by stating that “he had been troubled by the arrangement of airing the weekly presidential and Democratic statements for some time because it surrendered to the politicians what is the basic responsibility of the media—deciding what is and what is not news” (Mutual Clashes 1986).

In 1985, advisors developed a strategy to take one of the radio addresses global in an attempt to maximize news coverage and better manage the news. Reagan’s radio address on Nov. 9, 1985, in which he discussed the upcoming summit in Geneva with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, was delivered from the Voice of America headquarters in Washington, D.C. instead of the usual Oval Office location. The broadcast was heard throughout the world in seven languages, including Russian, in at least seventy-five countries “as a prelude to the upcoming meetings in Geneva” (Hooley 1985). The address was also televised by satellite transmission via Worldnet to Western and Eastern Europe from the VOA headquarters, with two goals: “guaranteeing maximum foreign utilization of this speech . . . [and] increased audience and network attention in the U.S.” Separate from the usual network feed, the United States Information Agency provided a second radio pool, to feed the address in forty-two languages to an estimated 120 million people. White House public relations advisors worked hard to promote the event to ensure that the American television networks could also prepare for the broadcast (Board 1985). Advisors were pleased with the resulting coverage. Charles Z. Wick, Director of the United States Information Agency, called the event “nothing less than a great public diplomacy success.” According to Wick (1985), the address was audible on two separate

frequencies in both Moscow and Leningrad, and the event “resulted in excellent TV placement all over the world” with an estimated 100 million viewers, including foreign editorials that “cast the President in the mold of the ‘President of Peace.’” Assessed by the White House, American coverage of the event was a great success as well, including CNN’s live broadcast of the entire speech, a “healthy segment” on the NBC Nightly News (ABC and CBS news were preempted by college football), a lead story on ABC’s Nightline with segments of the address, and “lengthy stories” in the *New York Times* (including the entire transcript), *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Times*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Chicago Tribune* and *Philadelphia Enquirer* (Board 1985).

In their analysis of Reagan’s radio addresses, Rowland and Jones (2002) conclude that Reagan was “a sophisticated and involved rhetorician who skillfully chose among the available means of persuasion to appeal to the broadest possible audience.” The study concludes that the radio addresses support the revisionist view of Reagan as a communicator—that his rhetoric was more moderate and inclusive than conservative and exclusive, and that he was an involved participant in the creation of his public remarks and not just a former actor delivering lines. On foreign policy issues, Reagan may have taken a conservative view in his radio addresses, but he avoided discussing social domestic issues that appeal to conservatives (like abortion or school prayer) and took an “inclusive worldview” by directing many of his addresses to minority groups and women. The radio addresses also offered much substantive information based on “rational argument in general and statistical proof in particular,” and that Reagan also defended his approach to reforming, rather than opposing, federal programs (Rowland and Jones 2002). In his early study on the Reagan radio addresses during the first term, Martin concludes that from a strategic standpoint, the administration was pleased with the outcome of the weekly events in

that “the attention his views usually receive in the press and broadcast media, even when countered by opposition spokespersons, does more good than harm to his Administration’s goals” (Martin 1984).

Policy Prioritization: In each year, the policy prioritization in Reagan’s radio addresses focused on either economic or international issues, with much less attention paid to domestic issues. Beginning in 1982, and later throughout 1988-89, the category of Domestic Fiscal/Monetary issues outranked all other policy issues in Reagan’s radio addresses during 1982, 1984, 1986, and 1987. During the remaining three years (1983, 1985, and 1988-89), the Diplomatic/Military category outranked all other policy issues (See Table 1). The policy prioritization in Reagan’s radio addresses is consistent with that of his major public addresses in focusing most prominently on economic and international issues. In 1981 and 1982, Domestic Fiscal/Monetary policies received the top priority in Reagan’s major public addresses, while the Diplomatic/Military category ranked first during Reagan’s remaining six years in office (Han 2001, 196-198).

News coverage: From the beginning in 1982, members of the Reagan administration were open about their strategy for using weekly radio addresses, “designed to bypass the press and go directly to the public, just in time to make the widely circulated Sunday newspapers” (Herbers 1982). Table 2 shows the frequency of stories in the Sunday edition of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, as well as stories during the Saturday evening broadcasts for each of the network news programs that focused solely on, or prominently featured, a discussion of the President’s weekly radio address. Accessed from LexisNexis, news stories in the *New York Times* (filed from either the national or foreign desks and appearing in the front section of the newspaper) and the *Washington Post* (appearing in the front section of the newspaper)

included those published in the following Sunday edition.⁵ Stories from each of the networks were accessed on the Vanderbilt Television News Archives. The number of stories appearing in the *Times* or the *Post* does not reflect a weekly average, since some Sunday editions included more than one story/reference to the radio address, and other Sunday editions included no stories or references. While the data does not include a categorization of stories by policy topic, the numbers do imply that both newspapers considered the weekly radio address a regular topic of interest to Sunday readers. In addition, a number of stories appeared in each paper on other days of the week either previewing upcoming topics or referencing past topics discussed in the president’s weekly radio talks.⁶ The television networks were a bit slower in covering the radio address on a regular basis (particularly ABC), but provided coverage to about one-fourth to one-third of the weekly events.

Table 2 – News Coverage: Stories on Reagan’s Weekly Radio Addresses

	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988-89
NY Times	20	41	23	48	43	45	25
Wash. Post	21	31	16	38	25	27	16
ABC	0	1	1	16	14	21	9
CBS	7	19	6	12	15	20	11
NBC	9	13	2	20	13	21	11

Bill Clinton’s Weekly Radio Addresses

Strategy: Following the Reagan tradition, Bill Clinton delivered his first weekly radio address on Saturday, February 6, 1993. While many stations carried the first broadcast live, just as they had done with Reagan, other stations refused to carry the address at all. Recognizing that Clinton’s radio addresses, just like Reagan’s, would be “used more as an opportunity to set the agenda for weekend news coverage than to reach a live audience via radio,” many radio networks were skeptical about the importance of airing the weekly broadcasts (Viles 1993). For

example, by October 1993, none of the eighty stations in the Los Angeles-Orange County area, one of the nation's largest media markets, were carrying Clinton's weekly address. White House advisors insisted that the address was a great opportunity for the President to "reach out and communicate directly to the American people," while many station managers insisted that any newsworthy highlights would be covered later in the news day (Puig 1993).

According to Megan Moloney (interviewed August 1, 2001), Clinton's Director of Radio and Television Production in the Office of the Press Secretary from February 1997 to December 2000, approximately 100 stations across the nation carried the weekly radio address. By Clinton's second term, thirteen of the top fifteen media markets carried the address (San Francisco and Atlanta did not). The exact number of stations was difficult to track because the radio address did not include commercials; therefore, the stations did not report carrying the address. But those carrying it were a mix of urban and rural, and all of the major radio networks in the country had stations that carried the address (ABC, CBS, Westwood One/NBC/Mutual, Associated Press, UPI Radio, Standard, NPR, USA, American Urban Network, and CNN). Also by the second term, roughly forty percent of the broadcasts were live, while the rest were recorded usually on Friday afternoon (either in the Oval Office or wherever the President was traveling). Live broadcasts were originally distributed through the Washington Area Network Distribution, with production rotated among the various networks, but this was taken over by ABC in June of 1995. Clinton's live broadcasts were often late, and several networks had threatened to stop the production due to scheduling and technical difficulties. The number of stations carrying the broadcast reached its peak in 1995, but began to decline in 1997.

The use of radio played an important role in the development of a communication strategy in the Clinton White House (Moloney, 2001). For example, Clinton held a talk radio

day at the White House in 1994 during his unsuccessful bid to pass major health care legislation, White House studios were made available to radio stations for broadcasting live from the White House, and Clinton regularly participated in radio interviews and conference calls. The radio actuality service was also an important part of the radio strategy, and messages were often state-specific. Beginning in 1997, a voice mail-based system provided information to stations by geographic region or by presidential events with two or three pieces of sound available each day. The Press Office also received several letters, e-mails, and phone calls each month from citizens asking where they could hear the weekly radio address. According to Moloney, "This was a good indication that people were getting the message about the radio address." Responses to these inquiries would include an attempt to match the person with a radio station in their area that carried the address. The audio was also posted on the White House web page, as well as a transcript, and C-SPAN would also air the audio on Saturdays. In 1996, a written Spanish translation was often read on Spanish radio stations.

According to Moloney, the Clinton administration "realized early on the importance of the history of radio addresses, going back to FDR's Fireside Chats. This played a very strong part in the decision to use radio, since it was a way of reaching out to people through a common medium. The use of radio, especially radio addresses, is important. For example, the President wanted to reach out to the agricultural community, and this represents a group that is really tied to their radios. The weekly radio address was a way to reach out directly to these listeners." Issues discussed in the radio address often focused on a second tier issue that was not being covered as heavily that week in the news. The radio address got the information out, Maloney said, although the main audience was the Sunday newspaper readers and to generate news on the weekend talk shows. For example, when federal grants were being distributed, newspapers in a

particular city or state that was the recipient of the grant funding would be contacted in advance with the news under an embargo. A story would then usually appear in the local Sunday paper about the program and note that Clinton had announced it during his weekly radio address. Other topics included standard seasonal stories, like food safety at the start of summer or an annual message related to the observance of Veteran's Day. According to Moloney, "Often, the radio address was an opportunity to address a policy issue for the first time, or to reiterate an issue of major national importance," and pre-recorded addresses could also be changed at the last minute to keep up with developing national or international events.

Clinton occasionally made joint remarks during the radio address, including with his wife, Tipper Gore (on issues of homelessness and mental health), British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and Nelson Mandela. Vice President Al Gore filled in twice for Clinton during the second term, delivering the weekly address once when Clinton had laryngitis, and the other time when Clinton was hospitalized for a leg injury. The recording and broadcast of the address from the Oval Office was always a big event, with usually more than 100 people in attendance, including staff, family, friends, and other individuals related to the topic. Clinton had originally recorded the address in the Roosevelt Room, but it only held forty people and the address later moved to the Oval Office. This was also an excellent chance for photo opportunities, with the event similar to a bill signing in the Rose Garden. Whether live or recorded, Clinton would often go "off-script" when delivering his remarks, and according to Moloney, he was "amazing at inserting information and getting all the necessary information in while not following the script." Clinton would also "go long" with his radio addresses, and during the second term some stations, including WTOP in Washington, D.C. threatened to stop carrying the address. Moloney implemented and imposed the "five minute" rule, insisting that the President finish his remarks

within the allotted time. As a result, Clinton took great pleasure in getting as close to the five-minute mark as possible, and would usually ask, “How long was it?” at the conclusion of each address (Moloney, 2001).

Policy Prioritization: Unlike Reagan, Clinton’s radio addresses focused mostly on domestic issues, with much less attention paid to international issues. During 1994, 1996, and 1999, Anti-Crime issues outranked all other policy issues. During the remaining years, Domestic Fiscal/Monetary policies ranked first in 1993 and 1995, Health Care ranked first in 1998 and 2000-01, with Education ranking first in 1997 (See Table 3). The policy topics covered in Clinton’s radio addresses is consistent with that of his major public addresses in that it was “both expansive and diverse,” especially in his attention to a wide variety of domestic matters (Han 2001, 237-238).

News Coverage: Table 4 shows the frequency of stories in the Sunday edition of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, as well as stories during the Saturday evening broadcasts for each of the network news programs, that focused solely on or prominently featured a discussion of Clinton’s weekly radio address. In general, the number of stories in both papers is slightly higher than for Reagan, while the number of stories on the television networks are similar to those during the Reagan years. Also like the Reagan data, several stories appeared in both newspapers on days other than Sunday that either previewed upcoming or referenced past radio addresses.⁷

Table 4 – News Coverage: Stories on Clinton’s Weekly Radio Addresses

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000-01
NY Times	26	17	38	40	43	30	31	33
Wash. Post	15	18	38	37	34	39	37	45
ABC	13	12	1	9	4	15	11	6
CBS	14	12	9	6	2	3	4	1
NBC	10	9	5	5	9	11	4	2

Analysis

As Reagan wrote in 1986, “I do my Saturday broadcast live because it permits me to talk directly to people, and they know it. There is nothing between us—no editors, no reporters, no third parties of any kind. Live radio is a spontaneous, fresh event.” However, it is safe to assume that most Americans do not actually hear the weekly message live or later in the day. Unlike FDR’s Fireside Chats, which served as an important means for the president to communicate directly with citizens, the use of radio addresses during the television age seem to, first and foremost, satisfy the need for the White House to control as much of the weekend news agenda as possible.

Reagan and Clinton showed similarities in their strategic use of radio addresses, as well as some differences in the overall topic and style of the message. According to Sigelman and Whissell (2002a), Clinton presented a more active and positive image, while Reagan spoke to the average American. “To judge from what they said, the two presidents seem to have approached the broadcasts with more or less the same goals and in more or less the same frame of mind.”

The use of radio by recent presidents serves as yet one more outlet for a policy message in an era saturated by various entertainment mediums. As Baum and Kernell (1999) point out, “[P]residents’ diminished access to the national television audience will present a serious strategic dilemma in the future.” The burgeoning cable industry has “ended the golden age of television” as presidents have begun to lose their television audience. However, some political observers have noted that even if a president is a strong communicator like Reagan or Clinton, too much of a good thing is not always a smart strategy. According to Lee Cullum (Buchanan 2002, 52), a political columnist with the *Dallas Morning News*, “[I]t’s actually the plethora of information that is diminishing the power of the presidency. . . . FDR did only three fireside

chats a year . . . and yet they had enormous influence. I think today there are too many appearances by the president on television. It's become ho-hum. So I would say it has not increased the power of the presidency." So while the news media may be providing an additional outlet for a presidential policy message stemming from the weekly radio address, there is currently no evidence to suggest whether the result is positive or negative for the White House.

Conclusion

From the start of his administration in 2001, George W. Bush has continued the use of weekly radio addresses as a permanent part of his communication strategy. As a rhetorical event, the weekly radio address took on an increased importance and news value following September 11, 2001, as Bush frequently used the weekly event to update the American public on the status of the War on Terrorism. The White House web page also serves as a database for Bush's weekly radio addresses by providing a complete transcript, listed chronologically and by topic, of each address given since January 27, 2001. However, like Reagan and Clinton, Bush has been plagued by the difficulty of getting radio stations to broadcast the speech. According to Taylor Gross, the current White House director of Radio, most stations choose not to carry the broadcast. National Public Radio occasionally airs it on its "Weekend Edition" show, and high-tech listeners can find the live broadcast each Saturday morning at whitehouse.gov (Atkinson 2003).

Strategically, radio addresses have become an important part of the presidential communication arsenal. Advisors to Reagan and Clinton (and now Bush) recognized the importance not so much in the president delivering an address that will be heard by millions of Americans (since that does appear to occur, although exact numbers are impossible to obtain),

but in providing a detailed policy statement that has become a routine part of weekend news coverage. Reagan used his weekly radio address to supplement his overall public agenda with extra discussions about economic, diplomatic, and other international issues. Clinton's use of radio addresses also mirrored his overall public agenda with a vast array of domestic policy discussions. Radio addresses have become a standard and mostly regular weekend news feature in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and the topic of the address does not seem to dictate whether or not a story appears. Network television (ABC, CBS, and NBC) does not provide regular coverage, simply because a radio address does not always fit with the criteria for a good news story (action and pictures). However, the 24-hour news cycle found on the cable networks (CNN, MSNBC, Fox) provide a better opportunity for television news to mention the president's weekly radio address. As such, future research on the topic of presidential weekly radio addresses might consider who actually listens and to what effect?

Notes

¹ See *The Public Papers of the Presidents, Herbert Hoover, 1929-1933* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976-1977).

² The number of fireside chats given by Roosevelt is somewhat disputed; the total of 30 comes from the FDR Presidential Library and Museum's web page at <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/firesi90.html>. Only 21 of these radio addresses are listed as "fireside chats" in the Master Speech File in FDR's presidential papers, but the remaining nine, eight of which were delivered between October 1942 and June 1944, were delivered over the radio in the same format as the earlier addresses and are counted as such in most sources.

³ Several memos detailing plans for radio addresses, including suggested topics, can be found in the White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files of H.R. Haldeman and Dwight

Chapin, Richard M. Nixon Presidential Materials Staff, National Archives at College Park, Maryland. For example, in a memo from William Safire to Chapin dated 10/6/69, Safire states: “I’ve been pushing for a series of radio addresses for so long now, I’ve given up.” By 1971, topics such as Vietnam, the elderly, economic growth, and government reform were suggested, but were postponed, and were eventually covered in the campaign radio addresses paid for by the Committee to Re-Elect the President.

⁴ Categories included: diplomatic and international military policy; international trade and economic policy; domestic fiscal and monetary policy; unemployment, job creation, and industrial policy; defense and defense conversion policy; political reform policy; anti-crime policy; health care reform and other health policy; welfare reform and other entitlements policy; education policy; environment, land management, and energy policy; and science, technology, and transportation policy.

⁵ A full text search was done on LexisNexis for each newspaper using the terms “Reagan” or “Clinton” along with “radio address.” Only those stories within the 24-hour news cycle following the president’s radio address were counted. Articles not counted included those that provided stand-alone excerpts from radio addresses with no news coverage, as well as articles that mentioned the scheduling or location of the address but provided no news coverage of the content of the president’s talk. Feature stories, editorials, Op-Ed columns, or those stories appearing in the respective Metro or Business sections of each newspaper were also excluded.

⁶ The *New York Times* ran the following number of stories on Reagan’s radio addresses that included previews of upcoming talks or references to past talks: 1982 – 9; 1983 – 8; 1984 – 8; 1985 – 17; 1986 – 9; 1987 – 18; 1988-89 – 3. The number of stories for the *Washington Post* are: 1982 – 6; 1983 – 5; 1984 – 7; 1985 – 18; 1986 – 10; 1987 – 17; 1988-89 – 2.

⁷ The *New York Times* ran the following number of stories on Clinton's radio addresses that included previews of upcoming talks or references to past talks: 1993 – 14; 1994 – 5; 1995 – 11; 1996 – 13; 1997 – 8; 1998 – 8; 1999 – 13; 2000-01 – 5. The number of stories for the *Washington Post* are: 1993 – 5; 1994 – 3; 1995 – 11; 1996 – 21; 1997 – 18; 1998 – 14; 1999 – 6; 2000-01 – 1.

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