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Lori Cox Han

Chapman University, lhhan@chapman.edu

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Chapter 6

The President Over the Public:

The Plebiscitary Presidency at Center Stage

Lori Cox Han

This chapter will begin with a narrower version of the question posed throughout this book—does the public presidency pose a threat to constitutional democracy in America? While the Framers may have been somewhat ambivalent about how strong the president should be, with James Madison arguing for a government that limited itself through checks and balances to diffuse power in *Federalist 51* while Alexander Hamilton argued for a powerful and energetic executive in *Federalist 70*, the public arena has certainly provided some presidents with broader powers than perhaps intended. As with other powers of the office, the public aspects of the presidency have had important historical developments, particularly during the twentieth century. The proliferation of daily newspapers at the turn of the twentieth century, followed by the advent of radio, then television, and then the expansion of newer technologies like the Internet and satellite transmissions, have created myriad opportunities for presidents to communicate. Along with the opportunities came the expectation that the president would be an effective communicator, using the bully pulpit to rally for public policies and to share his vision for America with his fellow citizens. But, since Theodore Roosevelt kicked off what most scholars refer to as the “rhetorical presidency,” several presidents have received less than stellar marks for their public speaking skills and their ability to lead and inspire the public as the ultimate symbol of American political power. And in recent years, scholars have begun to point out that while communication strategies have become a permanent part of the day-to-day

operation within the White House, perhaps presidents' attempts to shift public opinion through public activities are limited.

In this chapter, I will address the question of the usefulness of the public presidency in the current political environment (that is, can a president's communication strategy make a difference in terms of what he achieves), as well as the constitutional danger, if any, posed by a president's attempt at public leadership. Has the public presidency, and its focus on the public aspects of the office, thrown the constitutional balance of power between the three branches out of balance? Does the president really gain political power within the constitutional framework of our government if he is a skilled and effective communicator? Or have we just been duped into thinking that an image of strong presidential leadership on our television screens equates success in the arenas of domestic and foreign policymaking? Finally, I offer a brief assessment of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush and their respective efforts at public leadership, and argue that our definition of what constitutes a "good communicator" may be permanently altered due to Bush's reelection in 2004.

What is Public Leadership?

The notion of leadership—what it is and who has been a good leader, is much debated within several academic disciplines, including political science. No clear definition has yet to emerge, though many scholars have provided useful insights as to what makes a leader successful, as well as which leaders have failed and why. Understanding one particular aspect of leadership—communication, or what some refer to as public leadership—and how it fits within our general understanding of presidential leadership, can provide a useful insight to how several recent presidents have been judged, both while in office and in their post-presidential years.

First, what exactly do we mean by “leadership,” particularly in regards to presidents? Several presidents come to mind when one is asked about presidential greatness—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and even Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton in recent polls (perhaps the latter two presidents because they were both reelected and served two full terms, which is not an easy feat, and/or the fact that the public likes skilled communicators).¹ Americans expect their presidents to be the epitome of political leadership. They are, after all, the steward of the people, the commander-in-chief, and the embodiment of American strength and national unity both at home and abroad. Some presidents have moments of great leadership, but few are great leaders. We do have, after all, several constitutional restraints that tend to limit unilateral actions from the Oval Office, although some presidents have worked around those features. Often, like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s definition of obscenity, Americans know good leadership when they see it. But, how to define such a malleable term like leadership, and apply it to such a complex and paradoxical job as the American presidency, is not an easy task.

Leadership theories abound that discuss specific traits, skills, styles, or personality characteristics that leaders possess, or certain situations that emerge to allow leaders to then act accordingly.² Perhaps one of the most widely recognized theories of leadership would be the work of James MacGregor Burns, who introduced us to the idea of transformational leadership in the late 1970s.³ For Burns, leadership is more than just the act of wielding power; it involves the relationship between leaders and followers. Burns states that transactional leadership refers to what most leaders are able to accomplish—the day-to-day exchanges between leaders and followers that have come to be expected. For example, a presidential candidate may promise to cut taxes, and once elected, he or she follows through with that plan. Transformational

leadership, on the other hand, provides more than just a simple change in the political process. A transformational leader provides broader changes to the entire political system that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower. As Burns states, “transforming leaders define public values that embrace the supreme and enduring principles of a people.”⁴

Bruce Miroff’s work, which focuses on the types of American leaders that have fostered the American democratic ideal, as well as those prominent leaders that have undermined it, is also useful in understanding presidential leadership.⁵ Democratic leaders respect their followers, are committed to the notion of self-government, and nurture the possibilities of civic engagement through a public dialogue. Miroff refers to five presidents as “icons of democracy,” including John Adams, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy. However, two of these men—Theodore Roosevelt and Kennedy—represent a type of heroic leadership based on imagery, where each pursued a kind of self-aggrandizement that jeopardized democratic public life. Adams, Lincoln, and FDR, on the other hand, sought to educate the American public and challenged “the American democracy to fulfill its deeper promise.”⁶ According to Miroff, true political leadership must come from an honest dialogue between citizens and their leader, and the public cannot continue to be viewed through a cynical lens as “an ignorant, emotional force to be managed and manipulated.”⁷

The mention of imagery and an honest dialogue between leaders and followers ties in to the role that communication plays in presidential leadership. While most, if not all, theories of leadership discuss communication on some level, I argue that it is one of the most important features of distinguishing a good leader from a great one. For presidents, this is a particularly salient issue given the dominance of the mass media within our current political environment.

And from the start of the television age, a medium that really took hold of the political process in 1960, we have seen nine presidents in the Oval Office, and only three of those (Kennedy, Reagan, and Clinton) have been considered good communicators. These three men knew how to use the mass media, and particularly television, to their advantage, while the others (Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Bush I) could never quite find their public voices (the ability to positively connect with the American public through public activities) within our media-saturated political culture. (I address George W. Bush and his skills as a communicator later in this chapter).

However, it takes more than just good communication skills, or charisma, to be a great leader. Getting back to Burns' notion of transformational leadership, charisma can be confusing, undemocratic, and at its worst, a type of tyranny. On the positive side, however, charismatic leaders can empower their followers by providing them a clear vision, and by energizing and enabling them to achieve a greater public good. David Gergen, former presidential advisor to Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and Clinton, speaks to this issue as well. In his book *Eyewitness to Power*, he lists seven lessons of leadership. The first three, that leadership starts from within, that a president must have a central, compelling purpose, and that a president must have a capacity to persuade, point out that a president has much to gain from strong communication skills (for example, legislative success and re-election). However, presidents can over-utilize the public aspects of the office and talk too much, thereby "dulling the impact" of their message.⁸

The Rhetorical Presidency and White House Communication Strategies

Why, then, is presidential public leadership important? By all accounts, at least theoretically, we live in a deliberative democracy. The Framers certainly set up a constitutional

system that encouraged a spirited public debate, and those citizens participating in the debate have increased since the Framers' time through the enfranchisement of nearly all citizens. First Amendment case law throughout the twentieth century has also supported the importance of protecting political speech in order to encourage the deliberative aspects and responsibilities of American citizenship (a prominent example would be the Supreme Court's 1964 ruling in *New York Times v. Sullivan*, a landmark decision that gave political speech higher protection in libel cases by creating a higher burden of proof for public officials trying to prove that they had been defamed). Through the unique access that a president has to the bully pulpit, as well as the status as the only elected government official (along with the vice president) that represents all of the people, he has a special responsibility to lead a good portion of the public debate. What a president says publicly is so important in determining how the press will portray a president's actions and policy directives that presidential rhetoric tends to define much of our political reality.⁹

Some have argued, however, that the rhetorical presidency is a danger to our constitutional democracy. As Jeffrey Tulis reminds us in his book, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, the founders were quite suspicious of a popular leader and/or demagogue in the office of the presidency, since such a person might rely on tyrannical means of governing.¹⁰ Tulis argues that the presidency experienced a fundamental transformation by becoming a "rhetorical presidency" during the early part of the twentieth century, causing an institutional dilemma. By fulfilling popular functions and serving the nation through mass appeal, the presidency has now greatly deviated from the original constitutional intentions of the framers, removing the buffer between citizens and their representatives that the framers established. The current political culture now

demands the president to be a popular leader, with "a duty constantly to defend themselves publicly, to promote policy initiatives nationwide, and to inspire the population."¹¹

Roderick Hart also believes that the rhetorical presidency is a twentieth century creation and a constitutional aberration. The president is not merely a popular leader vested with unconstitutional powers, but also uses rhetoric as a "tool of barter rather than a means of informing or challenging a citizenry."¹² Written during the end of the Reagan era, Hart's observations on presidential rhetoric as a tool of leadership still ring true today:

To speak is to be a power monger. . . . All speech is not created equal.

The speech of presidents is more powerful than most. This power derives in part from the office of the presidency, but it also derives from the attitudes presidents have toward the speech act itself. Most presidents, certainly most modern presidents, use speech aggressively. The position they hold and the information at their command give them the tremendous advantages of saying a thing first and saying it best.¹³

In contrast, other scholars view presidential rhetoric as a positive institutional and constitutional feature, as well as one imagined by the framers as a necessary element of a properly functioning republic that allows presidents to speak directly to the public. Rhetoric also plays an important role in the institutional setting of the presidency by enabling different presidents to shape the presidency in a stable and constant manner.¹⁴

Regardless of which side prevails in this debate on constitutional interpretation and the Framers' intent as to how much power they wished the president to have, there is no denying the importance of skilled communication to the contemporary presidency. As I have argued in previous writings, a White House communication strategy consists of various components,

including the leadership style of the president, presidential rhetoric and speechwriting, presidential public activities, the presidential policy agenda, and the presidential/press relationship. Communication strategies have become an important and permanent part of the everyday operation of the White House. An effective presidential communication strategy can be a critical factor, at least for presidents since the emergence of the television age, in developing and implementing the administration's policy goals. To understand how a president communicates is to understand an important base of power for the modern presidency.¹⁵ Mary Stuckey has also aptly labeled the president an "interpreter-in-chief" and the "nation's chief storyteller." Presidential rhetoric has changed over time as media technologies have continued to expand, providing citizens with more in-depth coverage of the president. Due especially to television coverage, presidential advisers now develop communication strategies that seek more support for the president as a person or leader and less support for specific policy proposals. This has led to an emphasis on symbolic and ceremonial, rather than deliberative, speech.¹⁶

But what happens when a president is not a skilled communicator, or even if he is, when he happens to have an off day? With so much attention paid to every presidential public moment each day, the president has virtually no room for rhetorical error. As a result, given the tremendous pressure that presidents now face in this *mediated* political reality, a president poses a strategic risk each time he appears in public to give a major address, to be interviewed by the news media, to take part in a formal or informal press conference, to hold a bill signing in the Rose Garden, or a photo opportunity in the Oval Office. There is hardly a moment when the president is not on center stage. Presidents continue to go public more often and in a growing number of venues than their predecessors. With an ever-increasing number of news outlets, there are even more opportunities for the press to catch a presidential gaffe or misquote on some

specific policy, or to get the president to respond to a question best left unanswered (at least from the strategic standpoint of White House advisors). Even skilled communicators like Reagan and Clinton were known to have an occasional off day. And the risk for a media misstep is especially great for a president as he seeks reelection. The incumbent wants voters to see an image of strong leadership, and hopes that it is his version of political reality, and not his opponent's, that will shape the public debate during the campaign.

Given this political environment, where a president is expected to show mastery of the bully pulpit, can a president use his rhetorical skill to go beyond his constitutional powers to grab power away from the other branches through leading the public? Our two most recent occupants of the Oval Office—Bill Clinton and George W. Bush—provide fascinating yet contrasting case studies as to how each attempted to use public leadership to achieve their policy objectives and, perhaps more importantly, to gain high public approval ratings. While perhaps no president can compare to Clinton's overall political skill, which included a speaking style that was both polished and substantive, he had no real opportunity for grand, or to use Burn's definition, transformative, leadership. The economic prosperity and lack of a serious threat to national security during the 1990s provided Clinton many policy opportunities on the domestic front (some of which he was able to capitalize on), but the nation experienced no real "rally-round-the-flag" moment for Clinton to display bold presidential leadership. Bush, on the other hand, had a tremendous opportunity to provide strong and transforming public leadership following the terrorist attacks on 9/11, yet Bush failed, in part, due to his lack of rhetorical skill (at least in the traditional sense). And, as I will discuss below, both presidents were hampered in their attempts to lead and govern in their respective political environments, which were and continue to be

dominated by media saturation, a partisan divide, and a public dialogue that places greater emphasis on personal style over policy substance.

Bill Clinton's Public Presidency: Setting the Stage for George W. Bush

While president, Bill Clinton's relationship with the news media and the American public was nothing if not complex. Negative and tabloid-style news coverage, particularly of Clinton's personal life, began in the weeks leading up to the 1992 New Hampshire presidential primary and continued even after he left the White House in January 2001. Yet despite many of the personal and political problems that Clinton endured while in office, his approval ratings remained high when he left office and were certainly not negatively impacted during the investigation and resulting impeachment of 1998 and early 1999 (the public's disapproval of Clinton on a personal level, however, was quite high). While most of Clinton's presidential legacy will take years to fully develop, much has already been written about Clinton's success as a communicator in the media-driven age of the 1990s. Clinton's presidential leadership style was often defined by the ability of his media advisors—as well as his own skills at public persuasion—to perpetually spin out of trouble with both the press and the public. An important aspect of Clinton's communication strategy included the use of “new media” outlets—often sidestepping traditional news outlets (including the White House press corps) to speak more directly to the American people through cable news talk shows, regional news conferences with local television and radio stations, and various other forms of electronic town hall meetings.

By most accounts, Clinton was a complex president during a “turbulent” political era in American history; during the 1990s, Americans witnessed both tremendous economic growth and partisan polarization in Washington while trying to sort out the complexities of where

America fit into the post-Cold War “New World Order.”¹⁷ The Clinton years have also been described as a paradox and a time of missed opportunities—a skilled politician governing at a time of economic prosperity yet whose personal scandals diminished his ability to command leadership over the national agenda. Clinton is viewed as “a politician of extraordinary talent [who] missed the opportunity to be an extraordinary president.”¹⁸

In spite of the economic growth during the 1990s (what Clinton referred to as achieving “peace and prosperity”), the achievement of producing a balanced budget, and policy victories like welfare reform, the impeachment in 1998 will forever cast a dark cloud over the Clinton presidency as it “continued the long-term loss of presidential prestige” that began during the imperial presidencies of Johnson and Nixon.¹⁹ The economic boom of the 1990s may have also worked against the ultimate legacy of the Clinton years, since facing a crisis provides a better opportunity for strong leadership: “Except for the scarlet letter of impeachment, Clinton’s presidency is not particularly likely to stand out because the times in which he governed denied much opportunity to make a bold mark.”²⁰

Clinton also faced a difficult political environment in which to govern at the start of his first term in 1993. Successful presidential leadership comes from “understanding the constraints and possibilities in the environment so as to exploit them most effectively,” and Clinton faced several constraints, including the lack of an electoral mandate with only 43 percent of the popular vote in 1992, a policy agenda that included complex and wide-ranging changes to existing policies (i.e. health care), and a lack of resources for his policy initiatives.²¹ That same complex policy agenda did not change for Clinton throughout his eight years in office, and this often posed serious limitations in his ability to properly frame his goals and provide the nation with a clear rhetorical definition of his presidential vision. Clinton often acknowledged the

problem as a lack of clear communication with the American people, yet by 1995, when the Republicans had taken control of both houses of Congress, his rhetorical message was often a defensive one in the sense that he was forced to provide policy alternatives from the opposing party. As George C. Edwards points out, while Clinton may have benefited in terms of approval ratings by opposing Republican initiatives, it shifted his public strategy and diminished his opportunities for strong public leadership: “. . . campaigning, posturing, and pronouncing, although it may have been Clinton’s strength, is not governance—certainly not in the usual sense of precipitating great national debates on important questions of public policy or of driving legislation through Congress.”²²

George W. Bush’s Public Presidency

George W. Bush is a fascinating study of a mediocre communicator who has nonetheless found his public voice. Since the start of the television age, four presidents have won reelection—two that were excellent communicators (Reagan and Clinton) and two that were not known for their polished and inspiring public performances (Nixon and Bush II). Obviously, having strong communication skills does not automatically grant nor preclude one from a second term to any president, but for Reagan and Clinton, this certainly added to their overall popularity and success on the campaign trail. What, then, accounts for the reelection of Nixon and Bush? For a president who is not a strong communicator, at least in the traditional sense, others factors must come into play in order to first govern successfully and then get reelected. For Nixon, despite his long and tumultuous relationship with the press throughout his political career and his obvious discomfort in various public appearances (in spite of his vast knowledge of issues), the news media did not yet dominate the political landscape with 24-hour news coverage as it would

in the coming decades. (Of course, numerous other factors played a role in his reelection as well, including Vietnam, Nixon's 1972 historic trip to China, the relaxing of tensions with the Soviet Union, and a weak Democratic opponent in George McGovern. But Nixon's public image did not harm him as much as it might have in later presidential elections). Bush, on the other hand, does face a media-dominated political environment driven by instant access to news from an ever-expanding list of both channels and medium options. He also faced many political obstacles from his first day in office stemming from a disputed election outcome in 2000 and nearly an evenly divided electorate. Yet as a man "whose syntax and ability at public speaking [has] been the subject of considerable ridicule,"²³ Bush and his advisors have discovered how to capitalize on the president's lack of strong public speaking skills and still succeed in a political environment where the president is expected to adopt the "permanent campaign" strategy of governing. Bush has become the "unrhetorical president" operating successfully in the age of the rhetorical presidency.²⁴

The traditional definition of strong presidential communication, which includes elegant and often poetic political prose delivered flawlessly to a national or international audience by the likes of FDR, Kennedy, Reagan, or Clinton, has been turned on its head by this administration. Bush's communication style may not resonate with those traditional political pundits making such observations and rating presidential speeches (particularly those among the media elite and those within academic circles), but he certainly resonates with a core section of the population that appreciates his simplistic message. So, dismissing Bush as a poor communicator would be, ironically, too simplistic, since it misses the connection he has with many of the voters who appreciate him for other reasons, like his sincerity and religious convictions. As Gary L. Gregg calls it, Bush brings a "dignified authenticity" to the office of the presidency, toning down the

symbolic trappings of the office emphasized by many of his predecessors while emphasizing himself as an “honest and solid” leader.²⁵

During his ascension to the national stage during the 2000 presidential campaign, Bush’s message was simple and consistent in differentiating himself from Bill Clinton, challenging Al Gore’s credibility, and promising to change the partisan tone in Washington (to be a “uniter, not a divider”). Throughout the campaign, Bush was not big on details in his calls for a more “compassionate conservative” agenda, something that did not change once he became president. (Unlike Clinton, who liked to think extensively about decisions before making them, Bush’s leadership style has shown a confidence in his own ability to firmly make decisions without worrying too much about evidence or details).²⁶ Bush was elected without the popular vote, without a mandate, and prior to 9/11, he focused on a fairly limited policy agenda (tax cuts, faith-based initiatives, education reform, and curbing stem cell research). Going in, Americans knew that Bush was not a skilled communicator, and with the close partisan divide in Washington, the expectations for Bush were initially quite low.

Bush’s first eight months in office, forever to be referred to as the pre-9/11 Bush presidency, was as Fred Greenstein calls a “bland beginning.” In his 14-minute inauguration address, the shortest on record in modern history, much of the “moving imagery” about bringing compassion to public issues such as education, Medicare, Social Security, tax reduction, and strengthening the nation’s military in the text of the speech was lost in the lackluster delivery. Bush’s inaugural address was “weakened by his propensity to stumble over words and pause mid-phrase instead of at logical breaking points. By the time Bush arrived at the address’s peroration, his halting presentation made it obvious that he was reading a script rather than speaking in his own voice.”²⁷ Also during the early months, Bush took a low-key approach to

the symbolic aspects of the public presidency while employing a targeted news coverage strategy on specific policy topics.²⁸ He did not address the nation, nor did he hold a primetime press conference, until after 9/11. However, he did continue in the footsteps of Reagan and Clinton in his use of the weekly radio address to push his policy agenda, and he embarked on an extremely busy travel schedule as part of a “massive public relations campaign on behalf of his priority initiatives” that took him to twenty-nine states between January and May 2001 (which included more travel than any other new president in such a short time period).²⁹

Then came the terrorist attacks of 9/11, a time when the nation looked to the President for words of wisdom and comfort. Bush, at least temporarily, became in the eyes of some political pundits a rhetorical president capable of leading the nation through his use of the bully pulpit. Prior to 9/11, Bush was viewed as a “flawed public speaker” who did not recognize the potential of the bully pulpit, and after 9/11, Bush began “presiding over a teaching and preaching presidency, addressing the public regularly and with force, effectiveness, and even eloquence.”³⁰ Since then, Bush’s strengths as a communicator have been his ability to stay on message in his public remarks, and doing so through direct and concise statements. Bush is also known for being a steadfast and resolved leader (although the flipside to that is the fact that the Bush administration never admits to making a mistake). Bush has had several defining rhetorical moments since 9/11. He was given high marks for his address to the nation in the days following the attack, as well as his 2002 state of the union address in which he provided a strong response to terrorism (the axis-of-evil speech, while given high marks for its rhetorical components, was considered controversial for its policy content). Other strong performances were his address to the UN General Assembly in the fall of 2003 in making the case to disarm Iraq, and the 2003 state of the union address in which he readied the nation for war. The Bush administration has

also used the President's personality to his advantage with certain groups, given his ability to connect with those Americans who like to see the president act more like a "regular guy." This has often been accomplished through his use of simple phrases (like "wanted, dead or alive") that not only make perfect sound bytes, but also seem to resonate with his core supporters (the middle-America, rural and exurban voters).

However, Bush's public leadership throughout his first term is, at best, a mixed record. He did not emerge as a strong communicator in the traditional sense during his first four years in office, including his reelection campaign, and he is still awkward and uncomfortable at times while trying to articulate certain points about policy specifics (one of Clinton's strongest communication skills). He has, however, been quite divisive at times in both his policies and rhetoric. While he gave one of his best public performances in his acceptance speech at the 2004 Republican National Convention, the year was marked by several poor public performances as well. The 2004 state of the union address, almost Clintonesque in its listing of policy priorities, was roundly panned, followed by a lackluster appearance on *Meet the Press* in February where he repeatedly labeled himself a "war president." His primetime press conference in the spring of 2004 was an uncomfortable exchange between the president and the White House press corps, and even most Republicans agreed that Bush performed badly during the first presidential debate against Democratic challenger John Kerry in October 2004, and by all accounts "lost" the next two even though he was better prepared. The lesson learned here seems to center on the issue of venue and audience—Bush's speaking style of staying on message through short, pithy statements plays well with some groups and not so much with others. Where Bush's clear message about being a strong war leader and sharing core American values worked well on the

campaign stump in several swing states, most Americans tend to look for more details in events such as prime-time press conferences or presidential debates.

Bush's Reelection and Beyond: Redefining the Public Presidency?

Nonetheless, image still matters in presidential campaigns as candidates—whether the incumbent or challenger—attempt to portray strong leadership qualities. And communication skills, or lack thereof, certainly play a large role in crafting an image of strong presidential leadership. During 2004, the centerpiece of Bush's campaign was his post-9/11 leadership and the war on terror. Bush received consistent high marks in public opinion polls for his handling of the 9/11 attacks, although his numbers regarding Iraq were more volatile due to the failure to find weapons of mass destruction, the rising casualties, and the ongoing instability due to insurgent fighting. For Bush's supporters, his regular verbal gaffes and misstatements, or his shifting rationale as to why American troops were in Iraq, did not seem to matter as much as the resolute brand of leadership he displayed in protecting Americans from further terrorist attacks. He and Kerry also seemed locked in a competition over who could display the most “presidential machismo” out on the campaign trail, an attempt by both candidates to provide voters (particularly male voters in swing states) with an image of strong, “tough-guy” leadership in the face of international uncertainty (a battle that Bush presumably won with his reelection victory).³¹

To go back to what Burns and Miroff have to say about leadership, especially about defining public values, embracing self-government, and engaging in an honest dialogue with citizens to achieve the democratic ideal, how has Bush fared? Crises give presidents unique opportunities to display leadership. Bush has probably done better in the public arena during his

first four years in office due to not only the low expectations when he arrived, but also the desire for Americans to hear a strong message of leadership from their president in a time of national crisis. Presidential communication is an important aspect of leadership and governance, and there does not seem to be much of a learning curve in this area (presidents may become more comfortable in the public arena, but do not tend to improve their overall speaking skills once in office—what Americans see in the presidential election is basically what they get). Bush has had moments that played well in the press and with the public (for example, his impromptu comments with the aid of a bullhorn at “Ground Zero” in New York three days after 9/11), but his administration has not taken advantage of or redefined the rhetorical presidency nor set the standard for strong public leadership. Or has it?

Americans still yearn for a transformational leader, especially in troubled, uncertain times, and every four years we hope to find one during the presidential election. Bush has been a consequential but not a transformational leader, in spite of the many challenges he has faced while in office. A troubled economy, a less-than-perfect strategy for the war in Iraq, and an incredibly divided electorate presented a formidable obstacle to overcome during the 2004 campaign (yet he did win reelection), and presents a difficult terrain for Bush to maneuver in terms of successful leadership during his second term. But can anyone really lead in this political environment, which is an environment imposed on Bush by 9/11 yet shaped by his divisive actions? Is there a leader out there who can possess the right mixture of public style and policy substance? Is there a transformational leader among us who can reshape the current public debate, to move away from the emphasis on personality, image, and money in American politics and instead engage citizens on those issues in the best interest of the public good?

There may be, but we did not find that leader in 2004, and Bush (or John Kerry, for that matter) may not really be to blame. If we try to judge Bush's skills as a communicator based on past presidents, we come up with a record that pales in comparison to those of FDR, Kennedy, Reagan, and even Clinton. But we have to assume that something in Bush's message resonated with enough voters to deliver his narrow reelection victory. While 9/11 changed everything for the Bush presidency, perhaps Bush's style of communication has also changed a lot about how we should view presidential communication. Placing presidents into the categories of "good" versus "bad" communicators has always been too simplistic, but it is even more so now in this complicated political environment driven by a news industry that becomes more competitive with each passing year. By traditional standards, Bush is not a skilled communicator. But by looking at a new demographic of voters that seemed to appreciate the president's simple style, particularly given the bitterness of the current partisan divide that plagues the nation, Bush's performance can and should be viewed in a different light.

The presidential campaign in 2004 may be one of the toughest political environments that any incumbent president or challenger has faced in decades; there really is no previous presidential election to which it can be compared. The role of money, and the ability of special interests to shape the political debate, has surpassed nearly every other factor that comes into play in a presidential contest. We seem to have moved from party-centered politics during the early and mid-twentieth century, to candidate-centered politics during the late twentieth century, to the money-centered politics of the 2004 presidential campaign (as witnessed by the impact of 527 groups). The partisan divide has caused both parties to focus on energizing their base as opposed to going after the moderate, undecided, middle-of-the-road voters. And that shaped the message from both the Bush and Kerry campaigns, leading to more negativity and character

bashing as opposed to more detailed policy discussions. In the final weeks of the campaign, David Gergen chastised both candidates for “ducking and dodging tough questions” on the war in Iraq as well as domestic troubles, urging both to get specific about issues, engage in plain talk, and to level with the American people on how to solve the many policy problems facing the nation. While Bush’s direct and resolute campaign message about national security and values certainly contrasted with Kerry’s more thoughtful and nuanced discussion of foreign and domestic issues, Gergen points out one of the most pressing problems in our current electoral process—this political environment just does not provide a strong enough incentive for candidates, even if one happens to be the incumbent president, to talk frank with the American people about the issues that matter.³² Presidential campaigns, as well as the permanent-campaign style of governing, “invites smash-mouth politics [and] involves large doses of mealy-mouthed politics and a strong propensity to adopt slogans and address issues in abstract ways that offend nobody save, perhaps, detail-oriented public policy wonks and results-oriented public administration experts.”³³

Conclusion: Is the Public Presidency Unconstitutional?

In an update to his work, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, Tulis wrote in 1996, “in an important sense, all presidents are rhetorical presidents. All presidents exercise their office through the medium of language, written and spoken. Even brute power is expressed in words, through orders, through commands.” Tulis also outlined a new rhetorical strategy for presidents, one which encompasses public education and where the president uses his rhetorical powers not to promote his own policy agenda per se, but instead holds other political actors within the constitutional order (particularly Congress, the deliberative body responsible for passing laws

and best suited for developing the policy agenda) accountable. Encouraging more deliberative debate about important policy issues is certainly a laudable goal, and one to which all politicians, particularly presidents, should aspire. Then why has the public presidency in recent years moved us so far away from the ideals of the Framers and a true deliberative democracy? And is this a threat to our constitutional government?

The public presidency, as it currently operates in this mediated age of politics, is at odds with a deliberative democracy and keeps the president from playing a key role in leading the public to be more informed about important policy issues. Style matters more than substance, so there is not much incentive for a president to speak regularly about important public debates since mostly only those in attendance at the event, or perhaps a handful of political elites, will actually be listening. The current media environment also encourages negative news about politicians and the governing process, which alienates many citizens from wanting to take part in the deliberations. As Thomas Patterson has pointed out, the shift of a descriptive reporting style in recent decades to one that is more interpretive (which gives journalists, and not the political actors being covered, more control over the content of news) has contributed to the public's dissatisfaction with our leaders and institutions, thereby making effective governance more difficult to achieve.³⁴

Another impediment to a more effective deliberate democracy comes from the current divided electorate in that the voters are firmly grounded in their beliefs and cannot be persuaded through presidential rhetoric. As George Edwards points out, 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." Rarely are presidents capable of changing

public opinion on an issue—their attempts to lead the public fall on “deaf ears”—yet they persist in pursuing public strategies due to the routines of politics (going public is a presidential act, therefore presidents continue with the tradition); the need to preach to the converted (maintaining preexisting support in the face of opposition to policy changes); and influencing elites (while voters themselves may not change their attitudes through presidential rhetoric, the elite debate among journalists and other policymakers may be influenced).³⁵

All of this, of course, shifts the debate of “going public,” a term first coined by Sam Kernell as 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.” The technological developments of the mass media in recent years have allowed presidents to go public more often, and with much greater ease. Recent trends also show that “the more recent the president, the more often he goes public.”³⁶ Going public, however, is contradictory to some views of democratic theory, but is now practiced by presidents as a result of a weakened party system, split ticket voting, divided government, increased power of interest groups, and the growth of mass communication systems.³⁷ But as Edwards suggests, one possible solution to bridging the current political divide is by “staying private” as opposed to “going public:”

When political leaders take their cases directly to the public, they often frustrate rather than facilitate building coalitions. Such positions are difficult to compromise, and there is less emphasis on providing benefits for both sides, allowing many to share in a coalition’s success and to declare victory. . . . Staying private is likely to contribute to reducing gridlock, incivility, and, thus, public cynicism and deserves a more prominent role in the president’s strategic arsenal.³⁸

However, given the desire for most recent presidents to go public, whether or not they happen to be good at it, it is not now likely for a president to back away from that strategy given the institutional and political expectations for it to occur.

A president, through the bully pulpit, can manipulate the American public through demagoguery and harm the delicate constitutional balance in our system of government. An excellent communicator, coupled with a time of crisis, can go beyond educating the public to dominate the political environment in a way that overshadows the importance of other political actors in the policymaking process. So, to return to the original question, yes, the public presidency can be dangerous to democracy. But, having said that, the mere possibility does not make it certain, and at least for contemporary American presidents, the current political environment makes it difficult and unlikely.

While the bad news may be that we are far from the framers ideal of a deliberative democracy, the good news, if one can view it as such, is that this current political environment makes it nearly impossible for a president to run roughshod over the public as an out-of-control demagogue. Our two most recent presidents certainly illustrate that point. Instead of using his strong communication skills to educate and lead the public on issues that mattered, Clinton was most often forced to defend himself against not only a Republican agenda but also against political attacks for his personal misdeeds. Bush, on the other hand, has governed more like a parliamentary leader with stricter control over his party's agenda, but has not used the bully pulpit to educate Americans and promote public discourse on important policy issues or change public attitudes. Instead, his rhetoric has only hardened voters' opinions on most issues.

While presidents may not have the power to lead the American public off the proverbial cliff with their spellbinding rhetoric, the lack of substance within the current political debate is

nonetheless dangerous. As Frank Rich of the *New York Times* pointed out in the last week of the 2004 presidential campaign, “it's possible for America to overdose on entertainment. No president has worked harder than George W. Bush to tell his story as a spectacle, much of it fictional, to rivet his constituents while casting himself in an unfailingly heroic light. Yet this particular movie may have gone on too long and have too many plot holes. It may have been too clever by half.”³⁹ For at least 51 percent of the electorate in 2004, Bush was able to provide a strong image of leadership based on the need to protect Americans from further terrorist attacks.

But while winning an election may signal one kind of success, Bush has failed in the most important role that a president must play—educating and leading the public for the good of the nation, and not the good of his or her party. This treacherous political environment, which Bush has contributed to during his first four years in office, makes it difficult to cross party lines, compromise, or make bipartisan coalitions, which is required absent a conclusive majority. Bush may have displayed agility as a leader to pass certain items on his agenda in this environment, but he has not been successful at educating the nation. To quote Bert Rockman,

Bush must be reckoned a successful party leader but a failed national leader. In view of the unusual opportunities he was given to do what he said he would do—reduce the partisan distemper in Washington, create conditions of political civility, and promote national cohesion—his failure on these matters has been profound, but apparently also intended. The conditions of his accession and those of national crises created openings that were ignored. Bush did not come to office, as Reagan had, with an overt agenda and a reasonably clear victory. He came to office promising that we would be one kind of president, and he has very much been another.⁴⁰

Bush's communication strategy has also contributed to the divisiveness of the current political environment. His leadership style may differ greatly from Clinton, which some Americans view as a positive change for the presidency, but there have been negative consequences as well.

According to Greenstein, Bush's

    rhetorical manner, coupled with the content of those of his messages in which he asserts his determination to take such controversial actions as the intervention in Iraq, has produced a visceral aversion toward him for many American liberals, an antipathy that is widely shared elsewhere in the world. In a sense, Bush has proved to be a mirror image of Bill Clinton, who was as passionately disliked by some of Bush's most fervent supporters and viewed very favorably by many of his opponents.⁴¹

The role of television and the 24-hour news cycle has certainly altered our view of presidential leadership in that we tend to expect more in terms of performance and entertainment, but we do not seem to have the patience to listen to a substantive message that informs and educates us as voters about important policy issues. The over-saturation of the mass media within our culture has shortened the American attention span, which is not good news for the political process or for our notion of a deliberative democracy. Even a skilled communicator like Bill Clinton had to compete with all of the other messengers through a variety of mediums, which often leaves the president looking like just another talking head. Perhaps our best safeguard against a president using the bully pulpit for unconstitutional means is the very nature of the complex political environment that our constitution has created and allowed to develop and flourish for the past two hundred-plus years. But informing and educating the American public, and engaging citizens in a substantive dialogue that contributes to the best that our

democratic process has to offer, may be the toughest leadership challenge yet that future presidents will and must face.

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¹ For example, see Thomas E. Cronin and Michael A. Genovese, *The Paradoxes of the American Presidency*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 62-3. See also Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing, *Greatness in the White House: Rating the Presidents from George Washington Through Ronald Reagan*, 2nd ed. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., “The Ultimate Approval Rating,” *New York Times Magazine*, 15 December 1996: 46-51.

² See Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, Third Edition (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2004). Northouse outlines a variety of leadership theories that are applicable to understanding presidential leadership, including approaches that focus on traits, skills, styles, situations, and personality.

³ James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

⁴ James MacGregor Burns, *Transforming Leadership* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003), 29.

⁵ Bruce Miroff, *Icons of Democracy: American Leaders as Heroes, Aristocrats, Dissenters, & Democrats* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

⁶ Ibid, 358.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ David Gergen, *Eyewitness to Power: The Essence of Leadership* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 345-9.

⁹ David Zarefsky, “Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 34:3 September 2004, 607-19.

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- ¹⁰ Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 28.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 4-23.
- ¹² Roderick P. Hart, *The Sound of Leadership: Presidential Communication in the Modern Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 212.
- ¹³ Ibid, 110.
- ¹⁴ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 1, 213-9.
- ¹⁵ Lori Cox Han, *Governing From Center Stage: White House Communication Strategies During the Television Age of Politics* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2001), 2.
- ¹⁶ Mary E. Stuckey, *The President as Interpreter-in-Chief* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1991), 1-3.
- ¹⁷ Steven E. Schier, "A Unique Presidency," in *The Postmodern Presidency: Bill Clinton's Legacy in U.S. Politics*, ed. Steven E. Schier (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).
- ¹⁸ E.J. Dionne, "The Clinton Enigma: Seeking Consensus, Breeding Discord," in *The Election of 2000*, ed. Gerald Pomper (New York: Chatham House Publishers, 2001).
- ¹⁹ William Berman, 123.
- ²⁰ Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman, "Introduction" to *The Clinton Legacy* (New York: Chatham House Publishers, 2001), ix.
- ²¹ George C. Edwards III, "Campaigning is Not Governing: Bill Clinton's Rhetorical Presidency," in *The Clinton Legacy*, eds. Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman (New York: Chatham House, 2000), 34-5.
- ²² Ibid, 44.

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²³ Gary L. Gregg II, “Dignified Authenticity: George W. Bush and the Symbolic Presidency,” in *Considering the Bush Presidency*, eds. Gary L. Gregg II and Mark J. Rozell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 88.

²⁴ See David A. Crockett, “George W. Bush and the Unrhetorical Rhetorical Presidency,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2003, pp. 465-86.

²⁵ Gregg, 105.

²⁶ Bert A. Rockman, “Presidential Leadership in an Era of Party Polarization—The George W. Bush Presidency,” in *The George W. Bush Presidency: Appraisals and Prospects*, eds. Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman (Washington: CQ Press, 2004), 351.

²⁷ Fred I. Greenstein, “The Leadership Style of George W. Bush,” in *The George W. Bush Presidency: An Early Assessment*, ed. Fred I. Greenstein (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 7.

²⁸ While Bush received some initial negative coverage from the press and battled with former President Bill Clinton for headlines in his first several weeks in office, the continuing coverage of Clinton’s problems (controversial pardons, missing items from the White House, etc.) provided a positive contrast for Bush in highlighting the differences in their leadership styles and personalities. See Lori Cox Han and Matthew J. Krov, “Life After the White House: The Public Post-Presidency and the Development of Presidential Legacies,” in *In the Public Domain: Presidents and the Challenge of Public Leadership*, eds. Lori Cox Han and Diane J. Heith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

²⁹ George C. Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), ix.

³⁰ Greenstein, 15.

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³¹ See Jill Lawrence and Judy Keen, "Election is Turning into a Duel of the Manly Men," *USA Today*, 23 September 2004; and "Lexington: It's a Man's World," *The Economist*, 7 August 2004, p. 28.

³² David Gergen, "Questions Without Answers," *U.S. News and World Report*, 4 October 2004, p. 64.

³³ John J. Dilulio, Jr., "A View From Within," in *The George W. Bush Presidency: An Early Assessment*, ed. Fred I Greenstein (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 257.

³⁴ Thomas E. Patterson, "Bad News, Bad Governance," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 546, The Media and Politics (July 1996), 97-108.

³⁵ Edwards, *On Deaf Ears*, 241-6.

³⁶ Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*, 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1997).

³⁷ See both Kernell and Richard Rose, *The Postmodern President* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1991), 132.

³⁸ Edwards, *On Deaf Ears*, 253-4.

³⁹ Frank Rich, "Decision 2004: Fear Fatigue v. Sheer Fatigue," *New York Times*, 31 October 2004.

⁴⁰ Rockman, 353.

⁴¹ Fred I. Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style From FDR to George W. Bush*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 207.