

THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: A TRANSFORMATION OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS DUE TO MEDIA ADVANCEMENT AND INFLUENCE

Nicholle Jejer

In the minds of many Americans, one figure is the ideological symbol of democracy and nationalism for the country: the president. The basic principles of upholding democracy and nationalism still exist in the qualities that the President of the United States should possess, though there are some elements or characteristics that have changed in the public's view over time. Among the most important social influences that caused those changes in America's view of their leader were inventions and new technologies. These new technologies include various elements of media and cinematic productions, which have caused large influences on how the nation perceives and understands the role of the American presidency today.

The classic view of presidency in the past can be based upon the first president of the United States, George Washington, who most certainly set a precedent for those after him. A founding father associated with the Federalist Party, Washington was first and foremost the Commander and Chief of the Continental Army. He was appointed to this position in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, during the meeting of the Second Continental Congress in 1775. Before that time, he was a delegate from Virginia.⁶⁵ In this role he became known as a Revolutionary War hero, a perfect candidate for the nation's president. His role as president was very militaristic and he said, "To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace."⁶⁶ The papers printed articles about his war stories and his strong belief and pride in the newly founded nation. That was all the newly liberated citizens really wanted and expected of him, for those two elements were

⁶⁵ Frank Freidel and Hugh Sidey, "The Presidents of the United States of America," The White House Historical Association, 2006. Web. Accessed April 29, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/georgewashington>.

⁶⁶ "Biography: 1. George Washington." *American Experience: TV's Most-Watched History Series*. PBS, 2010. Web. Accessed April 29, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/jfk-politics/>.

what they had been striving and fighting for so long. Washington was the perfect person for the presidency; he filled the image that the people desired and required as a leader for the newly founded United States of America. This strong presidential image continued even after his death in 1799, and can still be seen today in Emmanuel Gottlieb Leutze's 1851 painting, *George Washington Crossing the Delaware*. This massive oil painting conveys the nostalgia with which people viewed the role of the presidency during that time.

Just as Johannes Gutenberg's adaptation of the printing press at the end of the sixteenth century changed the media climate in Europe, developments in media technology have altered the views of the presidency. In the early republic and through the nineteenth century, the dissemination of media images of presidents occurred chiefly in newspapers, though the newspaper was not the exclusive source from which people gathered information and entertainment. In the twentieth century, however, radio, television, and film radically altered American society in general and the image of the presidency in particular.

The first twentieth-century invention to have a substantial impact on the American public was the radio. Though it has much older roots, the radio became commercially viable in the United States in the early 1900s. It progressed from limited entertainment broadcasts around 1910, to commercial broadcasts in 1920, to music and game shows in the 1940s and 1950s. The period from the 1920s through the 1950s is considered to be the Golden Age of Radio.⁶⁷ The first president to be heard on the radio was Calvin Coolidge, whose State of the Union Address was broadcast in 1923. He would be the first president to use the media in an effective manner.⁶⁸ For the first time the citizens got to hear their very own president, the keeper of their freedoms and liberty, with their very own ears, which provided a sense of a personal relationship. Perhaps the president most associated with use of the radio during his presidency was Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It has been said that Franklin D. Roosevelt became a friend and neighbor to millions of Americans,

⁶⁷ "The Development of Radio." *American Experience*. PBS, 2009. Web. Accessed April 29, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rescue/sfeature/radio.html>.

⁶⁸ "Biography: 30. Calvin Coolidge." *American Experience: TV's Most-Watched History Series*. PBS, 2010. Web. Accessed April 29, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/presidents-coolidge/>.

delivering reassuring “chats” over nationwide radio often, to the public that encouraged them to help one another transform the bad times into better ones.⁶⁹ This method of interacting with the public helped Roosevelt get the support that he needed to maintain the office of the presidency.

The next invention that substantially altered how America viewed the role of the presidency was the introduction of television. Philo Farnsworth made the first viable television in 1927, though it would not receive funding until much later. The first commercially viable telecasts were not conducted until the early 1940s. The first president to take advantage of this new technology was Harry S. Truman, who had a presidential address televised in 1947. The most well-known and recognized face of any president of the twentieth century that appeared on television is John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s. As historian Burton W. Peretti writes, “Kennedy was the really the first president to bring his family’s experiences into the media, and he therefore created “the first fully cinematic presidential image.”⁷⁰ John F. Kennedy was one of America’s most beloved presidents throughout the years. He was young, attractive, and had a charisma that made the American people feel as if they really had a personal connection to him.

Kennedy’s success on television was a result of his ability to tightly control his media image. Kennedy studied the image-building techniques that were used by Hollywood stars. John F. Kennedy’s presidency was known as “Camelot” after the King Arthur’s tale. His campaign and presidency gave off the illusion that the people were living in a magical place, where people could pursue their hopes and dreams just like they heard in stories or saw in the movies. A skillful media manipulator, Kennedy used television to present a methodically constructed public image to the American people. Citizens that became Kennedy’s supporters and voters saw him as vigorous, healthy, dedicated husband and family man, an ideal of the perfect man. The fact that he was truly none of these things did not matter. Americans viewed televised images of seeming glory of domestic harmony and of majestic splendor,

⁶⁹ “Biography: 32. Franklin D. Roosevelt: Domestic Policies” *American Experience: TV’s Most-Watched History Series*. PBS, 2010. Web. Accessed April 29, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/fdr-domestic/>.

⁷⁰ Burton W. Peretti, *The Leading Man* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 10.

and they believed what they saw.⁷¹

The last area of media that altered how the American people viewed the presidency was film. The first motion picture that had an audience was debuted in 1895, though it was not until the 1920s that film was common across the entire United States. The role of film has changed over time from showing classic simple picture images of scenery to modern day complex source of entertainment and business. Gerald Mast and Bruce F. Kawin have argued that “movies [and film] were very much a part of the process that has produced what today seems a global culture.”⁷² Generally it seems that the American culture reflects upon the subjects of films are produced; however sometimes artistic traits take over that cause different types of films to be produced that can alter American culture as well. Hugo Münsterberg has shown how there is an importance of the genre and actors of films in order for the film to be successful. These elements engage the audience to make a personal connection through attention, memory, emotions, and imagination. If these elements are not present, then most likely the film will not be a success.⁷³ An interest in the idea such as the “American Dream” or many other ideals put into film cause the “imaginary to be perceived as real.”⁷⁴ Like the stories that were written in the past, films too follow a storyline. There is always a setting, a plot, a conflict, characters and an overall theme or lesson. The most important theme in most stories and films is finding a hero. The hero serves as the character that defines the space that he or she occupies, while highlighting the negative aspects such as cultural oppositions of which he or she tries to defeat, therefore saving moral code and providing a positive victory.⁷⁵ In many films, a storyline depicts the role of the Presidency, which is typically the role of a hero.

⁷¹ “Kennedy: Presidential Politics.” *American Experience: TV's Most-Watched History Series*. PBS, 2010. Web. Accessed April 29, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/jfk-politics/>.

⁷² Gerald Mast, Bruce F. Kawin, *A Short History of the Movies* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc, 2003), 23.

⁷³ Hugo Münsterberg, *The Film: A Psychological Study* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 1970), 31-56.

⁷⁴ Tom Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator,” in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 115.

⁷⁵ Thomas Schatz, *Old Hollywood/New Hollywood: Ritual Art, and Industry* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1983), 68.

Since the creation of all of these advancements in technology, presidents have used the media to their advantage. The office of the presidency is the only nationally elected position of government, making popularity important to winning the minds and hearts of the American people so that one can become president. The president does not want to be thought of as a politician; he wants to be thought of as a national leader. Calvin Coolidge and Franklin D. Roosevelt with the radio, and Harry S. Truman and John F. Kennedy with the television, used technology to communicate with the American people, increasing their popularity and their successes. Jack Valenti, who was first a staffer for Lyndon B. Johnson, ultimately became the CEO of The Motion Picture Association of America. When remembering his time in political arena that when it came to the office of the presidency, "most people [will] vote for a president viscerally, not intellectually. Most people choose a president romantically, a choice made in unfathomable ways, which is how romance is formed."⁷⁶ This reflection of voters comes after the time of television, and the presidency of John F. Kennedy, whom Valenti also knew. As mentioned before, Kennedy's campaigning style was designed to depict a strong, attractive man. This image strongly influenced the voters and may have had an impact on the results of the election of 1960. Many other presidents throughout time and to this day use media manipulation to get responses from the American public. For example, presidents can allow or deny access to any media or reporters they want. During the Johnson presidency a CBS White House correspondent was allowed to film White House staff at work showing what they did daily. This showed the public what some of their elected officials were doing and where their tax dollars were going.⁷⁷ The way in which the press or media presents information or policies about the presidency can dictate how he is viewed. This is can be good or bad for the president. This is why the presidency and government hire a specific group of White House correspondents that spend time transmitting stories that include presidential statements and activities to media sources, to uphold the image of the

⁷⁶ Jack Valenti, "The Unpredictable World of Politics: Lessons I Have Learned" (speech, at LBJ Lecture, April 3, 1997), Lecture transcribed by Benjamin Hicklin, graduate research assistant, 2007-08, Web, Accessed April 29, 2013, <http://www.txstate.edu/commonexperience/pastsitearchives/2008-2009/lbjresources/lbjlectures/contentParagraph/010/document/1997-04-03-valenti.pdf>.

⁷⁷ David L. Paletz, Robert M. Entman, "Presidents, Power, and the Press," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 10:3 (Summer, 1980), 418,

presidency.⁷⁸ This permits articles or videos that reflect the president in a respected role, such as representing the nation at a foreign ceremony or conference, instead of a negative role. This gives the illusion of power as well as the idea that the president is doing his job to uphold the citizens' rights and beliefs.⁷⁹ This can especially be seen when there are times of national security threats such as terrorist attacks like that of the Oklahoma City Bombing or 9/11, as well as national strife such as Hurricane Katrina, and even the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting which brought President Barack Obama to tears on national television. Clearly how presidents use the media affect how the American public views them in the role of president.

The best way of seeing how the American public views the role of the presidency today is by looking at some feature films. Considering that films reflect American culture or ideals, films that show the presidency can be thought of as an accurate portrayal of what Americans want in their president. Three films that show roles of American presidents illustrate the ways in which the public looks at the leader of their nation.

The film *The Best Man*, made in 1964, starring Henry Fonda, Cliff Robertson, and Lee Tracy features a fight between rivals for a spot that will almost ensure a nomination for president. Two main characters, academic William Russell played by Fonda and down-to-earth Joe Cantwell played by Robertson, are leading contenders for a party nomination and rivals. Cantwell, known for being ruthless, is prepared to use anything, positive or negative, to achieve the nomination. Meanwhile, Russell sees himself as a man of values, and does not want to stoop to anything below his standards. Both men crucially need the support of the ailing President, and as the stakes become higher each has to make decisions on how dirty they are prepared to get. This movie brings out the best and the worst of American politics by showing what goes on behind the scenes. However, it still shows that the American public is keen on one type of person for the presidency. Russell, being the "good" man, decides to ruin his own chances at the nomination so that ruthless

⁷⁸ Ibid., 417.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 421.

Cantwell has no chance of winning the nomination.⁸⁰ This film renews public faith that there are good people who are willing to make sure that the best man gets the job.

In 1995 *The American President*, starring Michael Douglas and Annette Bening, was released. This is perhaps the most recent film that features the President of the United States directly. This film is about the immensely popular president Andrew Shepherd (Douglas) who is preparing to run for re-election. Shepherd is a handsome man, of good stature, and middle-aged. He provides wisdom and experience, with a strong reassuring tone. He was widowed when his wife died of cancer, and has a daughter. The president and his staff are trying to pass a bill that will help his chances of winning the re-election. Soon a lobbyist Sydney Ellen Wade (Bening), for another bill shows up at the White House. The two characters soon fall for each other, which causes President Shepard possible problems for re-election. All of his qualities make him a very admired and popular president among the people. Since people do not like change, this shows what happens when he makes changes too quickly. This film portrays the Presidency as a role to which the American people want, even need, to relate to. President Shepard comes off as a “real” person, he has faced personal struggle and loss that everyone has dealt with in their lives and it makes an entrance for a strong connection. Though the film is a romantic comedy, it still sheds light about whom the American public deems as acceptable for the role of presidency.⁸¹

A very different view from that of films comes from the television show *Commander in Chief*, which aired in 2005. This is the first instance where a female plays the role of the President of the United States. The storyline follows Vice President MacKenzie Allen, played by Geena Davis, who becomes the first woman American president after the sudden death of President Teddy Bridges. She is asked to step aside twice because of prejudice and discrimination by men in the party. Throughout the season Allen faces many challenges that are directly related to her gender. For example, in one of the episodes Allen learns of a military crisis after

⁸⁰ *The Best Man*, NTSC, Franklin Schaffner, (1964, United States, United Artists) film.

⁸¹ *The American President*, Rob Reiner, (1995, United States, Columbia Pictures, Warner Bros. Pictures, and Universal Pictures) film.

something tragic happens. She is confused and angered that the staff had kept her out of the loop until something went wrong on a mission previously created by President Bridges. This shows how authoritative male figures thought that she had no need to know military operations, since usually it is thought to be a “man’s job.”⁸² Though the show only ran for one season, it was ranked among the top shows of ABC, and the actors were nominated and won awards for their positions on the show, but the time slot kept changing resulting in fewer viewers and ultimately was cancelled. This show helps us understand the media manipulation of public perceptions regarding the potential future female President.

The last film shows not only what people want in their president, but also how the citizens themselves are important to deciding who is voted into office. *Swing Vote*, a comedy-drama released in 2008, shows the story of an entire U.S. presidential election that ends up being determined by the vote of one man. In a presidential election set in the near future, Bud Johnson (played by Kevin Costner) who lacks knowledge and overall awareness in the subject of politics, is forced to make a vote for which a candidate wins the election for president. This all comes about when his daughter, who is in fifth grade, learns about the election and wants her father to participate in the election. When he does not, she sneaks into the polls and places a vote for him. However, the power goes out, forcing a recount of votes in New Mexico (where they reside), which will be used to break the tie of electoral votes, and this forces Johnson into the political spotlight, making him choose for himself who he wants as president. Throughout the movie, both presidential candidates try to persuade Johnson onto their sides. In the end both candidates end up getting to know Johnson as a person and not as politicians, which makes Johnson respect them both. A humorous twist is that the final scene of the movie depicts Johnson going to cast his vote; the audience wonders which candidate he picked.⁸³ In the end what mattered was that Johnson could relate to both candidates, which was important to him as a voter. This film shows a great perception that demonstrates exactly what the American people look for in a president, represented

⁸² *Commander In Chief*, ABC, September 27, 2005- June 14, 2006, written by Rod Lurie.

⁸³ *Swing Vote*, Joshua Michael Stern (2008, United States, Touchstone Pictures), film.

through the lens of an average American citizen, even including the viewpoint of a young adult.

The media has contributed to the profound changes in the views that Americans have of the presidency. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the presidency was typified by the rugged and stern image associated with war hero George Washington. Today, the ideal presidential media image is that of an attractive, charismatic and wise male. The influence of media as shown throughout this paper has had a large effect on how the American people view the office of the American president today. In a positive light this has caused more people to be aware and involved in politics and political beliefs. One negative aspect is the fact that people now understand how politics work, which usually has a negative connotation. The one element that has remained constant, though it may seem rudimentary, is the belief in national pride and the desire to uphold that nation. The American people remember their presidents in that very way, no matter what mistakes may have been made. Whether its documentaries or feature films of past presidents such as *FDR*, *JFK*, or *Nixon* all make the president out to be a hero, despite the conflicts or actions they faced during their careers, simply because they were still the leaders of the country, and patriotism is an important selling point for these films.

The role of the American president has undoubtedly changed since the founding of this country. The uses of technology, such as media and cinematic productions, have become key tools in how politics and history intertwine. Whether the media is used directly by the presidency and its staff towards the public, or creating a fantastic image of the presidency, it has shaped the public's view. Though it remains a prestigious position, people today have a greater understanding of what the role entails—even if that reevaluation involves a healthy degree of skepticism. This is in large part due to media advancements. Compared to the days of stories passed along about the illustrious George Washington that could only be imagined by the citizens, today there is ability to see, hear, and interact with the President of the United States causing greater public support of the most powerful office in the world.