

**Going Public**  
**New Strategies of Presidential Leadership**

*Second Edition*

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A Division of Congressional Quarterly Inc.

## Acknowledgments

The proximate motivation to sit down and write the first edition of this book was Ronald Reagan. It was his success in 1981 that so confirmed and clarified my own views on the direction of presidential leadership. A fellowship at the Hoover Institution (and in particular the cookie hour banter there) gave me the needed time and additional inspiration to write *Going Public*. I am also grateful to the National Science Foundation, which supported the statistical analysis of public opinion in Chapter 7.

The revision of this text was prompted by the thoughtful comments and criticism generously offered by numerous colleagues over the past six years. In many respects, my conversations and correspondence with them have been as satisfying as writing the book.

Much of the text assumes the form of argument, but more of it is engaged in presenting statistical analysis and marshaling other kinds of evidence. Hardly any of these data originate with me. At various times I have called upon colleagues for assistance in obtaining hard-to-come-by facts and figures. The following individuals, some of whom I have never met, were most charitable in helping me obtain important material to sustain my argument: Roger Davidson, Denis Steven Rutkus, and Sula Richardson at the Congressional Research Service; Laura Kapnick at CBS News; Dianne Colonitas at Gallup; Teri Luke at A. C. Nielsen Company; and fellow scholars Richard Brody, Michael Baruch Grossman, Susan Webb Hammond, Martha Joynt Kumar, William Lammers, Richard W. Steele, and Jeffrey Tulis.

For the second edition, I'd like to acknowledge the contributions of Joe Foote, who gave me television ratings data he had employed in his fine book, *Television Access and Political Power*; Diane Buono at A. C. Nielsen Company, who updated Foote's series to include President Bush; and Gerald Rafshoon, who in interviews offered telling insights into President Carter's media strategy.

I'm grateful to Conrad, Herblock, and Jim Morin, whose cartoons of President Bush's public strategies are reproduced here. These cartoons aptly—and humorously—demonstrate that going public is a strategy fully appreciated by contemporary editorialists. Finally, students from my presidency class helped classify the public activities of President Bush in order to update the trends in public activities reported in Chapter 4.

## Introduction: Going Public in Theory and Practice

1

When President Bush delivered his State of the Union address to the joint assembly of the mostly Democratic Congress in January 1992, he assumed what has become a familiar stance with Congress:

I pride myself that I am a prudent man, and I believe that patience is a virtue. But I understand that politics is for some a game. . . . I submit my plan tomorrow. And I am asking you to pass it by March 20. And I ask the American people to let you know they want this action by March 20.

From the day after that, if it must be: The battle is joined. And you know when principle is at stake, I relish a good fair fight.

Once upon a time, these might have been fighting words, but in this era of divided government, with the legislative and executive branches controlled by different parties, and presidents who therefore routinely enlist public support in their dealings with other Washington politicians, such rhetoric caused hardly a ripple in Congress.

By 1992, presidential appeals for public support had, in fact, become commonplace. Jimmy Carter delivered four major television addresses on the energy crisis alone and was about to give a fifth when his pollster convinced him that he would be wasting his time. Richard Nixon employed prime-time television so extensively to promote his policies on Vietnam that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) took an unprecedented step when it applied the "fairness doctrine" to a presidential appeal and granted critics of the war response time on the networks.<sup>1</sup> (In the past, the FCC had occasionally invoked the "equal time" rule during presidential campaigns.) More than any other of Bush's predecessors, Ronald Reagan excelled in rallying public opinion behind presidential policies, but by the end of his second term, he had worn out his welcome with the networks, who stood to lose at least \$200,000 in advertising each time he delivered one of his prime-time addresses. They instituted an independent assessment of the likely

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newsworthiness of the president's address, thereby managing to pare down the frequency of Reagan's televised speeches.<sup>2</sup>

I call the approach to presidential leadership that has lately come into vogue at the White House "going public." It is a strategy whereby a president promotes himself and his policies in Washington by appealing to the American public for support. Forcing compliance from fellow Washingtonians by going over their heads to appeal to their constituents is a tactic not unknown during the first half of the century, but it was seldom attempted. Theodore Roosevelt probably first enunciated the strategic principle of going public when he described the presidency as the "bully pulpit." Moreover, he occasionally put theory into practice with public appeals for his Progressive reforms. During the next 30 years, other presidents also periodically summoned public support to help them in their dealings with Congress. Perhaps the most famous such instance is Woodrow Wilson's ill-fated whistle-stop tour of the country on behalf of his League of Nations treaty. Another historic example is Franklin D. Roosevelt's series of radio "fireside chats," which were designed less to subdue congressional opposition than to remind politicians throughout Washington of his continuing national mandate for the New Deal.

These historical instances are significant in large part because they were rare. Unlike President Nixon, who thought it important "to spread the White House around,"<sup>3</sup> these earlier presidents were largely confined to Washington and obliged to speak to the country through the nation's newspapers. The concept and legitimizing precedents of going public may have been established during these years, but the emergence of presidents who routinely do so to promote their policies in Washington awaited the development of modern systems of transportation and mass communications. Going public should be appreciated as a strategic adaptation to the information age.

The regularity with which recent presidents have sought public backing for their Washington dealings has altered the way politicians both inside and outside the White House regard the office. The following chapters of this book present numerous instances of presidents preoccupied with public relations, as if these activities chiefly determined their success. Cases are recounted of other Washington politicians intently monitoring the president's popularity ratings and his addresses on television, as if his performance in these realms governed their own behavior. Also examined are testimonials of central institutional figures, such as the Speaker of the House of Representatives, citing the president's prestige and rhetoric as he explains Congress's actions. If the public ruminations of politicians are to be believed, the president's effectiveness in rallying public support has become a primary consideration for those who do business with him.

### Presidential Theory

Going public merits study because presidents now appeal to the public routinely. But there is another reason as well. Compared with many other

aspects of the modern presidency, going public has received scant attention in the scholarly literature. In part this can be attributed to its recent arrival in the president's repertoire, but by itself this explanation is inadequate. Although going public had not become a keystone of presidential leadership in the 1950s and 1960s when much of the influential scholarship on the subject was written, sufficient precedents were available for scholars to consider its potential for presidential leadership in the future.

Probably the main reason going public has received so little attention in the scholarly literature is its fundamental incompatibility with bargaining. Presidential power is the "power to bargain," as Richard E. Neustadt taught a generation of students of the presidency.<sup>4</sup> When Neustadt gave this theme its most evocative expression in 1960, the "bargaining president" had already become a centerpiece of pluralist theories of American politics. Nearly a decade earlier, Robert A. Dahl and Charles E. Lindblom had described the politician in America generically as "the human embodiment of a bargaining society." They made a special point to include the president in writing that despite his possessing "more hierarchical controls than any other single figure in the government ... like everyone else ... the President must bargain constantly."<sup>5</sup> Since Neustadt's landmark study, other major works in the field have reinforced and elaborated on the concept of the bargaining president.<sup>6</sup>

Going public violates bargaining in several ways. First, it rarely includes the kinds of exchanges necessary, in pluralist theory, for the American political system to function properly. At times, going public will be merely superfluous—fluff compared with the substance of traditional political exchange. Practiced in a dedicated way, however, it can threaten to displace bargaining.

Second, going public fails to extend benefits for compliance, but freely imposes costs for noncompliance. In appealing to the public to "tell your senators and representatives by phone, wire, and Mailgram that the future hangs in balance," the president seeks the aid of a third party—the public—to force other politicians to accept his preferences.<sup>7</sup> If targeted representatives are lucky, the president's success may cost them no more than an opportunity at the bargaining table to shape policy or to extract compensation. If unlucky, they may find themselves both capitulating to the president's wishes and suffering the reproach of constituents for having resisted him in the first place. By imposing costs and failing to offer benefits, going public is more akin to force than to bargaining. Nelson W. Polsby makes this point when he says that members of Congress may "find themselves ill disposed toward a president who prefers to deal indirectly with them [by going public] through what they may interpret as coercion rather than face-to-face in the spirit of mutual accommodation."<sup>8</sup> The following comment of one senator may well sum up commonly felt sentiments, if not the actions, of those on Capitol Hill who find themselves repeatedly pressured by the president's public appeals: "A lot of Democrats, even if they like the

President's proposal, will vote against him because of his radio address on Saturday."<sup>9</sup>

③ Third, going public entails public posturing. To the extent that it fixes the president's bargaining position, posturing makes subsequent compromise with other politicians more difficult. Because negotiators must be prepared to yield some of their clients' preferences to make a deal, bargaining proverbially proceeds best behind closed doors. Consider the difficulty Ronald Reagan's widely publicized challenge "My tax proposal is a line drawn in dirt" posed for subsequent budget negotiations in Washington.<sup>10</sup> Not only did the declaration threaten to cut away any middle ground on which a compromise might be constructed, it also probably stiffened the resolve of the president's adversaries, some of whom would later be needed to pass the administration's legislative program.

④ Finally, and possibly most injurious to bargaining, going public undermines the legitimacy of other politicians. It usurps their prerogatives of office, denies their role as representatives, and questions their claim to reflect the interests of their constituents. For a traditional bargaining stance with the president to be restored, these politicians would first have to reestablish parity, probably at a cost of conflict with the White House.<sup>11</sup>

Given these fundamental incompatibilities, one may further speculate that by spoiling the bargaining environment, going public renders the president's future influence ever more dependent upon his ability to generate popular support for himself and his policies. The degree to which a president draws upon public opinion determines the kind of leader he will be.

### Presidential Practice

The distinction between bargaining and going public is a theme one hears more and more often from presidents and those who deal with them. No president has enlisted public strategies to better advantage than did Ronald Reagan. Throughout his tenure, he exhibited a full appreciation of bargaining and going public as the modern office's principal strategic alternatives. The following examples from a six-month survey of White House news coverage show how entrenched this bifurcated view of presidential strategy has become. The survey begins in late November 1984, when some members of the administration were pondering how the president might exploit his landslide victory and others were preparing a new round of budget cuts and a tax reform bill for the next Congress.

**November 29, 1984.** *Washington Post* columnist Lou Cannon reported the following prediction from a White House official: "We're going to have confrontation on spending and consultation on tax reform." The aide explained, "We have somebody to negotiate with us on tax reform, but may not on budget cuts."<sup>12</sup> By "confrontation" he was referring to the president's

success in appealing to the public on national television, that is, in going public. By "consultation" he meant bargaining.

**January 25, 1985.** The above prediction proved accurate two months later when another staffer offered as pristine an evocation of going public as one is likely to find: "We have to look at it, in many ways, like a campaign. He [Reagan] wants to take his case to the people. You have a constituency of 535 legislators as opposed to 100 million voters. But the goal is the same—to get the majority of voters to support your position."<sup>13</sup>

**February 10, 1985.** In a nationally broadcast radio address, President Reagan extended an olive branch inviting members of Congress to "work with us in the spirit of cooperation and compromise" on the budget. This public statement probably did little to allay the frequently voiced suspicion of House Democratic leaders that such overtures were mainly intended for public consumption. One Reagan aide insisted, however, that the president simply sought to reassure legislators that "he would not 'go over their heads' and campaign across the country for his budget without trying first to reach a compromise."<sup>14</sup> In this statement the aide implicitly concedes the harm public pressure can create for bargaining but seeks to incorporate it advantageously into the strategic thinking of the politicians with whom the administration must deal by not forswearing its use.

**March 9, 1985.** After some public sparring, the administration eventually settled down to intensive budget negotiations with the Republican-led Senate Finance Committee. Failing to do as well as he would like, however, Reagan sent a message to his party's senators through repeated unattributed statements to the press that, if necessary, he would "go to the people to carry our message forward."<sup>15</sup> Again, public appeals, though held in reserve, were threatened.

**March 11, 1985.** In an interview with a *New York Times* correspondent, a senior Reagan aide sized up his president: "He's liberated, he wants to get into a fight, he feels strongly and wants to push his program through himself. . . . Reagan never quite believed his popularity before the election, never believed the polls. Now he has it, and he's going to push . . . ahead with our agenda."<sup>16</sup>

**May 16, 1985.** To avoid entangling tax reform with budget deliberations in Congress, Reagan, at the request of Republican leaders, delayed unveiling his tax reform proposal until late May. A couple of weeks before Reagan's national television address on the subject, White House aides began priming the press with leaks on the proposal's content and promises that the president would follow it with a public relations blitz. In the words of one White House official, the plan was to force Congress to make a "binary choice between tax reform or no tax reform."<sup>17</sup> The administration rejected bargain-

ing, as predicted nearly six months earlier by a White House aide, apparently for two strategic reasons. First, Reagan feared that in a quietly negotiated process, the tax reform package would unravel under the concerted pressure of the special interests. Second, by taking the high-profile approach of "standing up for the people against the special interests," in the words of one adviser, tax reform might do for Republicans what social security did for Democrats—make them the majority party.<sup>18</sup>

During these six months when bargaining held out promise—as it had during negotiations with the Senate Finance Committee—public appeals were held in reserve. The White House occasionally, however, threatened an appeal in trying to gain more favorable consideration. On other occasions, when opponents of the president's policies appeared capable of extracting major concessions—House Democrats on the budget and interest groups on tax reform, for example—the White House disengaged from negotiation and tried through public relations to force Congress to accept his policies. Although by 1985 news items such as the preceding excerpts seemed unexceptional as daily news, they are a recent phenomenon. One does not routinely find such stories in White House reporting 20 years earlier when, for example, John Kennedy's legislative agenda was stalled in Congress.

Clearly, going public appears to foster political relations that are quite at odds with those traditionally cultivated through bargaining. One may begin to examine this new phenomenon by asking, what is it about modern politics that would inspire presidents to go public in the first place?

### Notes

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3. Robert B. Semple, Jr., "Nixon Eludes Newsmen on Coast Trip," *New York Times*, August 3, 1970, 16.
4. Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1980).
5. Robert A. Dahl and Charles E. Lindblom, *Politics, Economics, and Welfare* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), 333.
6. Among them are Aaron Wildavsky, *The Politics of the Budgetary Process* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964); Graham Allison, *The Essence of Decision* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971); Hugh Heclo, *The Government of Strangers* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1977); and Nelson W. Polsby, *Consequences of Party Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
7. From Ronald Reagan's address to the nation on his 1986 budget. Jack Nelson, "Reagan Calls for Public Support of Deficit Cuts," *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 1985, 1.
8. Nelson W. Polsby, "Interest Groups and the Presidency: Trends in Political

- Intermediation in America," in *American Politics and Public Policy*, ed. Walter Dean Burnham and Martha Wagner Weinbey (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978), 52.
9. Hedrick Smith, "Bitterness on Capitol Hill," *New York Times*, April 24, 1985, 14.
10. Ed Magnuson, "A Line Drawn in Dirt," *Time*, February 22, 1982, 12-13.
11. See David S. Broder, "Diary of a Mad Majority Leader," *Washington Post*, December 13, 1981, C1, C5; David S. Broder, "Rostenkowski Knows It's His Turn," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, June 10, 1985, 13.
12. Lou Cannon, "Big Spending-Cut Bill Studied," *Washington Post*, November 29, 1984, A8.
13. Bernard Weinraub, "Reagan Sets Tour of Nation to Seek Economic Victory," *New York Times*, January 25, 1985, 43.
14. Bernard Weinraub, "Reagan Calls for 'Spirit of Cooperation' on Budget and Taxes," *New York Times*, February 10, 1985, 32. On Democratic suspicions of Reagan's motives see Hedrick Smith, "O'Neill Reflects Democratic Strategy on Budget Cuts and Tax Revisions," *New York Times*, December 6, 1984, B20; and Margaret Shapiro, "O'Neill's New Honeymoon with Reagan," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, February 11, 1985, 12.
15. Jonathan Fuerbringer, "Reagan Critical of Budget View of Senate Panel," *New York Times*, March 9, 1985, 1. Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole told reporters that if the president liked the Senate's final budget package he would campaign for it "very vigorously . . . going to television, whatever he needs to reduce federal spending." Karen Tumulty, "Reagan May Get Draft of Budget Accord Today," *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 1985, 1.
16. Bernard Weinraub, "In His 2nd Term, He Is Reagan the Liberated," *New York Times*, March 11, 1985, 10.
17. David E. Rosenbaum, "Reagan Approves Primary Elements of Tax Overhaul," *New York Times*, May 16, 1985, 1.
18. Robert W. Merry and David Shribman, "G.O.P. Hopes Tax Bill Will Help It Become Majority Party Again," *Wall Street Journal*, May 23, 1985, 1. See also Rosenbaum, "Reagan Approves Primary Elements of Tax Overhaul," 14. Instances such as those reported here continued into summer. See, for example, Jonathan Fuerbringer, "Key Issues Impede Compromise on Cutting Deficit," *New York Times*, June 23, 1985, 22.

## The Growth of Going Public\_\_\_\_\_

4

The preceding chapters have presented the reasons modern presidents go public. Modern technology makes it possible. Outsiders in the White House find it attractive. And the many centrifugal forces at work in Washington frequently require it. The frequency with which presidents in the past half century have communicated directly with the American public shows that the more recent the president, the more often he goes public.

The most memorable such occasions occur when the president goes on national radio or television to solicit public support for his legislative program stalled in Congress or to define the U.S. position in an international crisis. Although these dramatic forms of going public have become more commonplace in recent years, they still constitute only a small share of the many kinds of public activities in which modern presidents daily engage. Going public usually involves quieter overtures to more select audiences. Just as bargaining presidents must continually nurture the good will of their trading partners, so, too, must public-styled presidents diligently cultivate public opinion. We commonly call the routines by which presidents do this "public relations."<sup>1</sup>

Like advertising generally, public relations perform the homeostatic function of maintaining public support of the president. Whenever the president's popularity begins to wane or press coverage appears unduly critical, the White House compensates with increased public relations. As much as the occasional dramatic moment when the president rallies the country behind his policies, these routines define the style of modern leadership from the White House.

The following two episodes illustrate the variety of resources available to the modern president seeking to promote himself and his policies with the American public. In February and March of 1971, Richard Nixon faced widespread criticism and protest of the U.S. invasion of Laos. To offset this opposition the president took his case to the public. Biographers Rowland

Evans and Robert Novak leave little doubt that Nixon's public relations campaign was precipitated by a five-point drop in his popularity rating.

Shortly after that Gallup finding, it was decided by Nixon's public relations experts to give the American people the largest concentrated dose of this president on television and in interviews with journalists. The purpose was to stimulate an immediate upward movement in the polls and thus prevent further deterioration of the president's position on Capitol Hill and in the nation.

In quick succession, in the six weeks ending March 22, Nixon made these appearances: an interview on February 9 with conservative Peregrine Worsthorne of the *London Sunday Telegraph*; a non-televised press conference on February 17; a special televised press conference on March 4 limited to foreign policy questions; an interview on March 11 by Barbara Walters of NBC's *Today* show for broadcast on March 15; an interview on March 11 by nine women reporters for publication on March 13; a one-hour live televised interview on March 22 by ABC's Howard K. Smith—a rate of exposure to major media outlets of more than one a week.<sup>2</sup>

Ronald Reagan faced somewhat different circumstances in the spring of 1982. Falling as unemployment rose, his popularity had begun a gradual but cumulatively greater overall descent than Nixon's in 1971. Whereas Nixon could try to convince the public of the merits of his policy, there was little President Reagan could do to sell the country on unemployment. He could, however, shore up his softening support with appeals on other issues. After learning from in-house polls that he was losing the approval of blue-collar workers at an alarming rate—many of whom were Democrats who had crossed over to vote for him in 1980—Reagan decided to target special appeals to them.<sup>3</sup>

Along with other public activities directed to this constituency, President Reagan addressed a conference of Catholic lay organizations in Chicago in behalf of a proposal to have the federal government subsidize private school tuition. For the Catholic church, financially strapped by rising costs and declining enrollments in many communities, and for parents who send their children to these schools (or would like to), enactment of the president's proposal would be a godsend. Because of Reagan's penurious domestic budget and his heavy cutbacks in funds for education, the trip to Chicago was widely interpreted to have been inspired more by an immediate political need to shore up support with this constituency than by any expectation that this might give his stalled legislation on this issue a boost in Congress. It also promised an enthusiastic reception before a traditionally Democratic audience, one that would ensure prominent coverage on the networks' evening news programs.

Though the reasons for Nixon's and Reagan's difficulties in the polls were quite different, both men sought remedy in rhetoric. In neither instance did the loss of popular support prompt the president to reconsider those policies that displeased the public. The loss was sufficient in each case, however, to

speaking, political travel, and appearances before special constituencies outside Washington constitute the repertoire of modern leadership.

## Trends in Going Public

Going public can take a variety of forms. The most conspicuous is the formal, often ceremonial occasion, such as an inaugural address or a State of the Union message, when official duty places the president prominently before the nation. Going public may, however, involve no more than a pregnant aside to a news reporter. This sort of casual, impromptu activity eludes systematic analysis, but speeches, travel, and appearances—all of which take place in public view and therefore can be easily counted—form a good record of significant events with which to measure the rise of going public. Each of these nonexclusive activities can be further divided according to its locale or prominence.<sup>4</sup> (More detailed definitions of these categories can be found in the Appendix.)

## Public Addresses

Appeals for support to constituencies outside Washington are the core activities of going public. Form, audience, and content make each appeal unique. Kennedy's October 1962 address to the nation, in which he announced a quarantine of Soviet ships laden with surface-to-surface missiles en route to Cuba, is different in each respect from Carter's trip to Iowa in 1977 to sell his agricultural policies before a gathering of farmers. With such diversity, one may reasonably wonder what any trends discerned from a large volume of public addresses could mean.

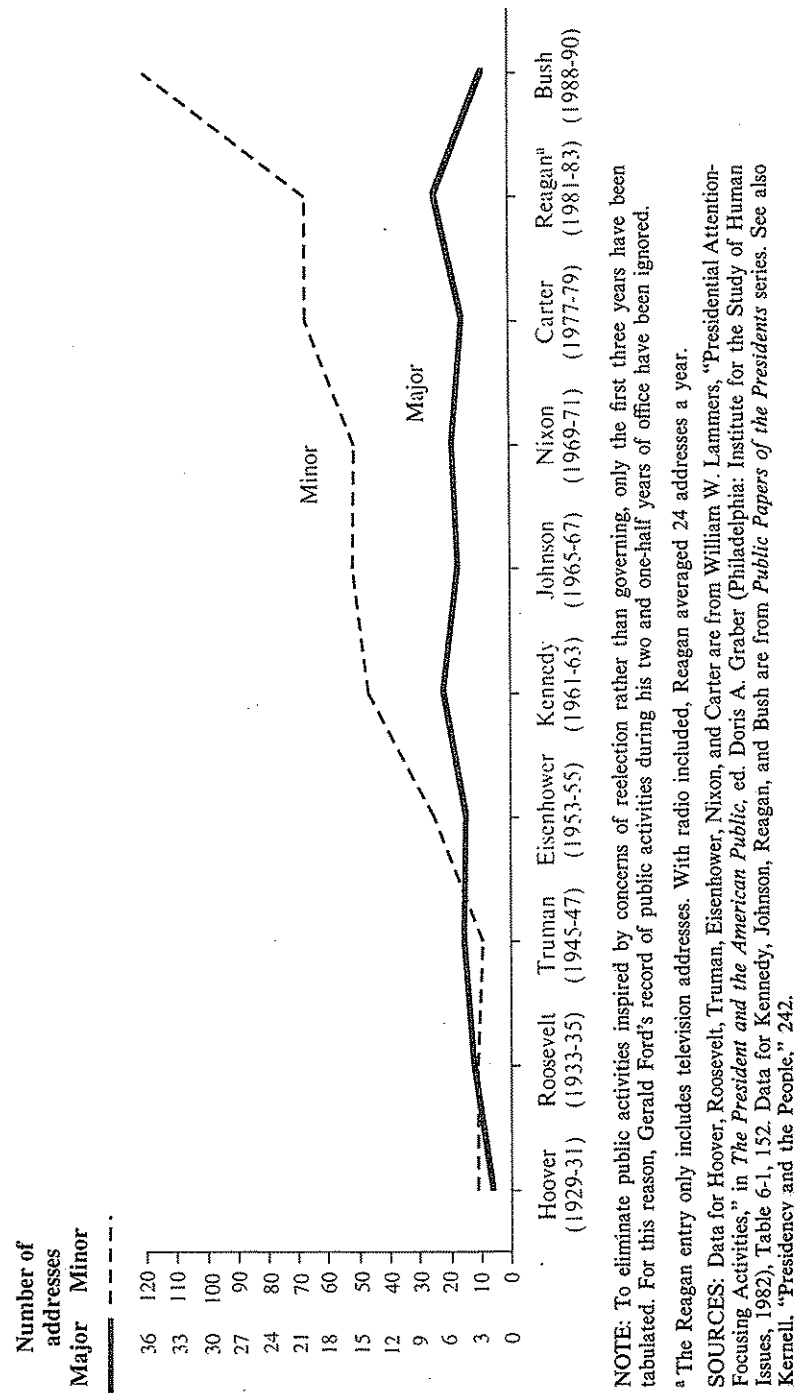
Without delving too deeply into form, audience, and content, I shall offer a general distinction by classifying public addresses as major and minor. Major addresses are those in which the president speaks directly to a national audience over radio or television. Minor addresses, by comparison, are those the president delivers to a special audience either in person or via some broadcast medium. By these definitions, Kennedy's statement on the Cuban missile crisis qualifies as a major address and Carter's farm speech as a minor address.<sup>5</sup>

The average yearly numbers of major and minor addresses for each elected president since Herbert Hoover are displayed in Figure 4-1.<sup>6</sup> Both forms of going public have been on the rise, although to far different degrees. Given the opportunity costs, as well as network resistance to presidents commandeering prime time television, it is not surprising that the use of major addresses has increased only slightly.

Ronald Reagan's major addresses in Figure 4-1 include only television broadcasts. In 1982 after becoming unhappy with press representation of his policies, he initiated a lengthy series of Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts. To include these addresses, which attracted small audiences, would misrepresent the frequency with which he issued dramatic national appeals. Nonethe-



Figure 4-1 Presidential Addresses, 1929-1990 (Yearly Averages for First Three Years of First Term)



less, the eight major televised addresses by President Reagan in 1981 (a month of which was spent convalescing from an assassination attempt) is a first-year record for any president. President Bush's major addresses, by contrast, have returned to the level of Reagan's predecessors.

Of the major addresses, the most dramatic and potentially the most effective are the special reports presented by the president on prime-time television to the nation. The subjects of these television talks, listed in Table 4-1, provide a calendar of the crises and national exigencies that have preoccupied presidents since 1953. Carter's appeals for energy conservation and for support of his legislative program and Reagan's regular appeals for support of his economic policies suggest that domestic issues are replacing international crises as the main occasion for prime-time addresses.<sup>7</sup>

Although major addresses may be the most dramatic and most effective approach for influencing public opinion, they also can be the most taxing. The public's attentiveness corresponds to the number of such appeals. If every presidential tribulation were taken to the country on prime-time television, people would soon lose interest. In private correspondence with a friend, Franklin Roosevelt said as much: "The public psychology ... [cannot] be attuned for long periods of time to the highest note on the scale ... people tire of seeing the same name, day after day, in the important headlines of the papers and the same voice, night after night, over the radio."<sup>8</sup> As noted earlier, John Kennedy and members of his staff had the same misgivings after his first, prime-time news conference and scheduled subsequent conferences for daytime television.<sup>9</sup> During the Carter presidency, Gerald Rafshoon, upon assuming his duties in the rejuvenated White House Office of Communications in the summer of 1978, sent a memorandum to the president that established his media strategy for the rest of his tenure. Rafshoon cautioned, "The power of presidential communication is great, but not unlimited. You may be able to talk to the people all day ... but the people can handle so much. *Investment of that power in too wide a range of issues will dissipate it. This has happened over the last eighteen months.*" After elaborating this theme, Rafshoon concluded, "Your involvement should always be weighed with an eye towards preventing the devaluation of presidential currency."<sup>10</sup> By potentially reducing the size and responsiveness of the audience for his next appeal, each prime-time address entails opportunity costs for the president.<sup>11</sup>

Although these concerns are still pondered in the White House, presidents in the past 25 years have continued to expand their prime-time exposure. Table 4-2 shows that Kennedy appeared on national television more frequently than did any president elected after him, but, with four exceptions, he limited himself to daytime exposure. By holding his press conferences in the early afternoon and delivering few direct television addresses—surprisingly few given the unsettled state of international affairs—Kennedy accumulated fewer than two hours of prime-time television during his first 19 months in office.





Table 4-1 (Cont.)

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
1979				Energy		SALT II	Crisis of confidence		Soviet troops in Cuba			
1980			Economy				Tax bill		Economy; budget	Economy	Arms control	Poland
Reagan 1981:	Farewell (Carter)	Economy		Budget					Middle East (2)			
1982				Central America					Korean airliner	Lebanon, Grenada		
1983			Defense-national security									
1984					Central America							
1985				Budget	Tax reform						Soviet-U.S. Summit	
1986	Space Shuttle explosion	State of the Union; National security	Nicaragua				Independence Day		Drug abuse	Meetings with Gorbachev	Elections Iran and Contra aid	Iran arms and Contra aid
1987	State of the Union		Iran arms and Contra aid			Economic summit		Iran arms and Contra aid				Soviet-U.S. Summit
1988	State of the Union											
1989	Farewell to the nation											Panama

	Inauguration	Administration goals										
Bush 1989									Drug control strategy	Thanksgiving		
1990	State of the Union							Kuwait invasion	Persian Gulf; budget deficit	Budget agreement		
1991	Desert Storm; State of the Union	Persian Gulf; Iraqi withdrawal	Persian Gulf						Nuclear weapons reduction		Thanksgiving	Christmas

SOURCES: The entries from 1953 through November 1963 are from "Presidents on TV: Their Live Records," *Broadcasting*, November 8, 1965, 55-58; those from December 1963 through December 1975 are from Denis S. Rutkus, "A Report on Simultaneous Television Network Coverage of Presidential Addresses to the Nation" (Congressional Research Service, Washington, D.C., 1976, Mimeographed), appendix; entries since 1976 are from the *Public Papers of the Presidents* series and a tentative compilation by Denis Rutkus.

**Table 4-2** Presidential Television from Kennedy to Bush, First 19 Months in Office

President	Number of Appearances in Prime Time	Time on Air in Prime Time (hours)	Total Number of Appearances	Total Time on Air (hours)
Kennedy	4	1.9	50	30.4
Johnson	7	3.3	33	12.5
Nixon	14	7.1	37	13.5
Carter	8	5.1	45	32.2
Reagan	12	8.9	39	26.5
Bush	7	3.7	56	22.3

NOTE: Gerald Ford has been omitted from analysis since his first 19 months in office cross into the reelection period.

SOURCES: For Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, data were supplied by the White House Press Office, quoted in *New York Times*, August 3, 1970, 16. For Carter, Reagan, and Bush, data are from program logs at CBS News, New York. Data are for speeches (including inauguration) and press conferences broadcast live on national television.

Richard Nixon surpassed this figure by nearly fourfold and in doing so raised the ire of network executives and their news departments. His mix of daytime and evening television was the reverse of Kennedy's. While holding fewer news conferences (hence, his low total number of hours), Nixon delivered more direct, prime-time addresses to the nation. With barely a third of Kennedy's overall television exposure, Nixon dominated the medium in a way none of his predecessors had come close to doing. He paved the way for Carter and Reagan, who relied upon equally heavy television schedules, but with a greater share of it during non-prime-time hours. Surprisingly, President Bush eclipsed all of his predecessors in the number of television appearances during his first nineteen months in office, but comparatively little of his network exposure occurred during prime time.

Going public is neither premised on nor does it promote a perception of America as a homogeneous society. Nor does it reduce politics to a plebiscite in which the president seeks continually to bring the weight of national opinion to bear in the resolution of policy questions.<sup>12</sup> Governance under individualized pluralism remains largely a process of assembling temporary coalitions from among diverse constituencies. For this purpose, minor presidential addresses directed toward special constituencies are particularly well suited. Not only are they less taxing on some future opportunity to gain the nation's attention, they may succeed where an undifferentiated national appeal may not. President Reagan's Chicago speech before Catholic orga-

nizations is a good illustration of why and how presidents cast appeals to particular publics.

Aside from being more focused and less obtrusive than major addresses (and therefore less taxing on future public appeals), minor addresses are attractive to presidents because the opportunities to give them are plentiful. The president is importuned daily to appear before graduation exercises, union conferences, and the conventions of trade and professional associations. With such advantages, minor addresses are understandably an integral component of a more general strategy of going public.

President Bush's calendar of speaking engagements for September 1991, presented in Table 4-3, illustrates how heavily presidents sometimes engage in these kinds of activities. During that month he delivered remarks and formal addresses on 19 occasions in 11 cities throughout the country. What makes this schedule even more impressive is that he also found time to deliver four national television and radio addresses, far exceeding any previous month of his tenure.

The real explosion in presidential talk has occurred in the class of minor addresses. Reagan, Carter, and Nixon on average surpassed Truman, Roosevelt, and Hoover by nearly fivefold in the use of such rhetoric. And President Bush managed to double these already high levels of targeted addresses. During his first three years in office he averaged a minor address nearly every other day. While this heavy schedule involved an unprecedented amount of travel to his audiences, he also addressed distant gatherings from the Oval Office by means of teleconferencing technology, which had been less available to his predecessors.<sup>13</sup>

If asked to name a president who could speak skillfully, one probably would think first of Franklin Roosevelt or perhaps John Kennedy, two men whose speeches have weathered time and relistening well. Nixon's pronouncements—such as his pre-presidential "Checkers" speech and later the Watergate denials—will be remembered mostly as objects of ridicule and, ultimately, of historical curiosity. Carter's and Bush's addresses will be recalled, if at all, as instructive examples of poor elocution and syntax. Of the recent class of presidents going public, only Ronald Reagan scores well as a thespian. The trends reported here reveal that it is not success but the type of politician recruited to the office and the strategic environment within which he operates that determine the volume of presidential rhetoric.



### Public Appearances

Visual images can at times convey messages more effectively than talk. The audience to whom the president speaks and the location and circumstances of the event may contribute as much to his message's effectiveness as what he has to say. Jimmy Carter's inaugural stroll down Pennsylvania Avenue and the cardigan he wore at his first fireside chat on national television were gestures calculated to set the tenor of his administration in the

**Table 4-3** President Bush's "Minor" Addresses, September, 1991

Date	Location	Audience	Subject
Sept. 3	Lewiston, Maine	High school faculty/students	Improvement of schools, education
Sept. 12	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	Veterans' Hospital	Drug abuse
Sept. 17	Teleconference	School children	Education, NASA
Sept. 18	Grand Canyon, Arizona	Environmental-agreement signing ceremony	Environment policy
Sept. 18	Salt Lake City, Utah	Upon arrival	Education, volunteerism
Sept. 18	Salt Lake City, Utah	Children's Hospital staff	Infant mortality, Healthy Start
Sept. 18	Salt Lake City, Utah	Republican Party dinner	Choice in family affairs and education
Sept. 19	Portland, Oregon	Fundraising breakfast	Education, domestic policy
Sept. 19	Los Angeles, California	Construction workers	Transportation issues
Sept. 19	Los Angeles, California	Fundraising dinner	America 2000 (education), crime bill
Sept. 20	Chicago, Illinois	National convention of U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce	North American free trade agreement, America 2000
Sept. 23	United Nations	General Assembly	Free trade, coup in U.S.S.R., Saddam Hussein, Zionism
Sept. 24	East Brunswick, New Jersey	Republican Party dinner	Energy, education, transportation
Sept. 25	Washington, D.C.	Blue Ribbon schools	Education reform, America 2000
Sept. 30	Orlando, Florida	575 Points of Light	Volunteering in community to help others
Sept. 30	Miami, Florida	Beacon Council annual meeting	Crime package, free trade agreement, education
Sept. 30	New Orleans, Louisiana	Fundraising dinner	Child care, civil rights, crime, transportation, capital gains, America 2000

SOURCES: Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, Office of the Federal Register, vol. 27, nos. 36-40. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office).

public's mind. Similarly, the image of President Nixon donning a hard hat and waving to cheering construction workers on the scaffolding above him made a strong pitch for support among his "silent majority."

Appearances are usually accompanied by public speaking, although, as in the Nixon example above, they need not be. Like minor addresses, appearances before select audiences offer the president an opportunity to target his appeals. In a preinaugural memo, Carter's pollster Patrick Caddell urged the president-elect to use "his personal leadership—through visits and political contacts—to maintain his base in the South."<sup>14</sup> As another example, President Reagan made some 25 appearances around the country in 1983 promoting his views on "excellence in education" (principally, merit pay for teachers and classroom discipline) after polls indicated a two-to-one public disapproval of his budget cutbacks in education.<sup>15</sup>

Appearances are distinguished in Figure 4-2 by locale, those in Washington from those throughout the rest of the United States. The number of public appearances outside the city generally reflects the president's non-Washington origins and divided party control of government.<sup>16</sup>

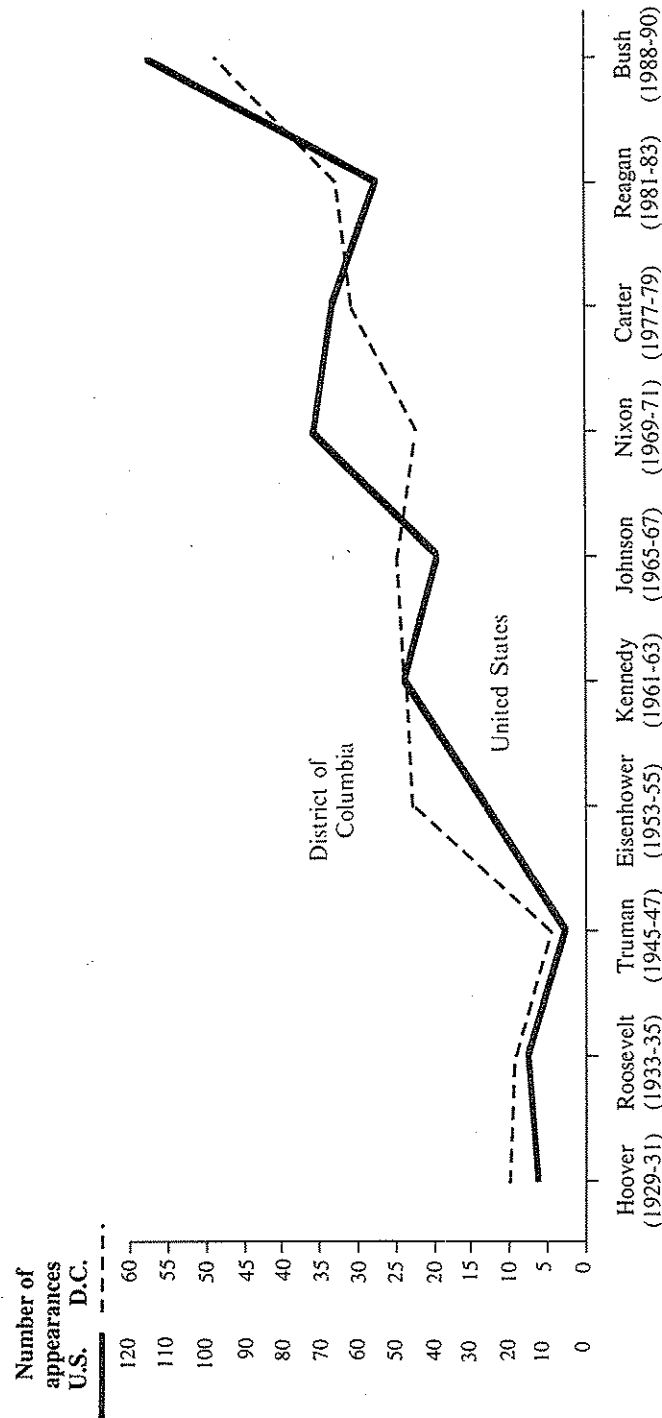
### **Political Travel**

Generally, presidents travel in order to appear before particular constituencies or to find locations suitable for sounding a particular theme. Ronald Reagan kicked off his tax reform proposal in 1985 in Williamsburg, Virginia, to play up the plan's theme as "the new American Revolution." Days logged in domestic travel have no importance beyond the appearances or addresses before non-Washington audiences they reflect and the telegenic evening news spots they attract. As such, they offer another useful measure of the president's public activity.

When presidents travel abroad, however, they frequently do so in search of special opportunities to appear presidential. Meetings abroad with other heads of state are especially valuable in reminding the electorate of the weighty responsibilities of office and of the president's diligence in attending to them. Could future incumbents fail to notice the salutary effects of Kennedy's confrontation with Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna in 1961 and of Nixon's celebrated trip to China in 1972 on these presidents' images as national leaders? One may reasonably argue that affairs of state rather than voracious demands for publicity were the real reasons for these trips. Kennedy's biographers make clear his strongly felt need to impress the Soviet leader with America's commitments to its allies. And without the dramatic expression of national good will that Nixon's trip conveyed, the thaw in relations between the United States and China might not have been so complete. The considerable diplomatic merits of these trips notwithstanding, the fact is that both presidents thoroughly exploited their opportunities for publicity at home.

Kennedy's staff rushed film of the president with the Soviet leader to the Paris airport to give it the earliest possible airing on the networks' evening news.

Figure 4-2 Public Appearances by Presidents, 1929-1990 (Yearly Averages for First Three Years of First Term)



NOTE: To eliminate public activities inspired by concerns of reelection rather than governing, only the first three years have been tabulated. For this reason, Gerald Ford's record of public activities during his two and one-half years of office have been ignored.

SOURCES: Data for Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon, and Carter are from Lammers, "Presidential Attention-Focusing Activities," Tables 6-2 and 6-3, 154-156. Data for Kennedy, Johnson, Reagan, and Bush are from *Public Papers of the Presidents* series. See also Kennell, "Presidency and the People," 245.



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By the time Nixon visited China, 11 years later, new technology had greatly expanded the opportunities for public relations. Hours of President Nixon's tour of famous sites and formal expressions of mutual friendship with China's leaders were televised by satellite. Air Force One landed in Peking during prime time at home; the president's tour of the Great Wall and ancient palaces and the state banquet in the Great Hall were broadcast live back to the United States; and for a finale, after a timely nine-hour layover in Anchorage, Air Force One touched down in Washington just in time to make the evening network news. All in all, the networks broadcast more than 41 hours of the seven-day trip. Afterwards, syndicated columnist Art Buchwald satirized the whole affair by reporting his wife's assumption that the television set must be broken because Nixon's program was not available on any channel.<sup>17</sup>

The logistical planning of the China trip remains an impressive example of making the most of the opportunities for favorable publicity at home. Advances in transportation and communications, of which the China trip took full advantage, have so reduced travel time and so enhanced its public relations value that modern presidents might contemplate trips abroad solely for this purpose. Insiders increasingly voice suspicion that, in fact, they already do.

In 1973, President Nixon went to Iceland for a special meeting with France's President Georges Pompidou. No major policy decisions were made

as those privy to the trip's preparations had predicted. The *New York Times* reported the comments of one foreign service officer: "All they cared about was how things would look on television. White House aides fussed about the lighting, about who would stand where, what the background would be, and the furniture. The entire time I was assigned to the detail, no one asked me a substantive question. I'm sure they didn't care. All they seemed to care about was television."<sup>18</sup>

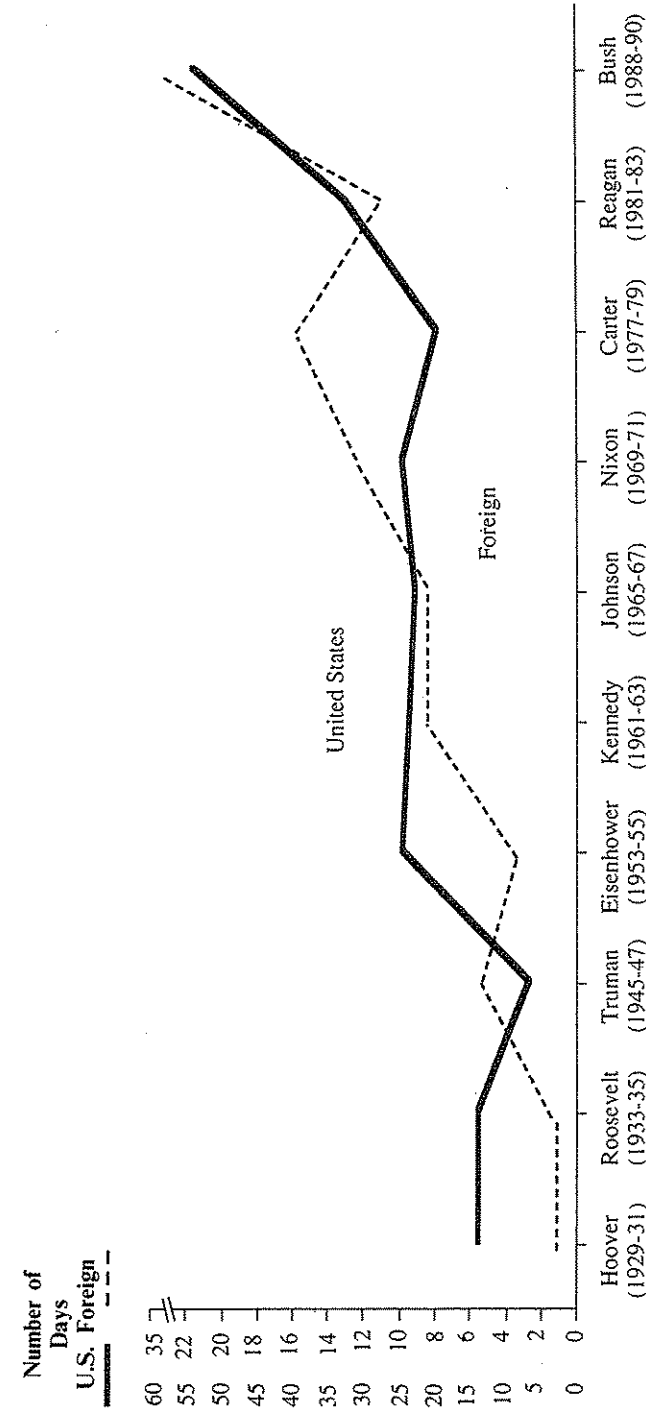
Since Nixon's world travels during the Watergate investigation, in what turned out to be the last months of his presidency, White House correspondents have been especially mindful of the public relations value of trips abroad. During Reagan's first presidential trip to Europe, it was not surprising that network correspondents pointed out the publicity purposes of the visual images so carefully produced by Reagan's aides. What is remarkable, however, was the willingness of White House staffers to discuss openly the trip's value in just these terms. Taken together, their comments reveal the motive of the trip. Because the polls were showing a drop in the president's popularity—which made him vulnerable in Washington—his advisers decided that conferring on location with European heads of state would be good for his image as a leader. After assessing the poll results that shortly followed the trip, White House aides voiced delight that their goal had been achieved.<sup>19</sup>

In the age of television, every president may be suspected of, and perhaps forgiven for, engaging in strategic travel and posing for the continuous "photo opportunities." The president who rests his leadership on going public will be tempted to travel frequently, in search of sympathetic audiences and "presidential images."

Because foreign and domestic travel often have different political purposes, they are measured separately in Figure 4-3. Each increased significantly in the past half century. Domestic air travel for presidents began with Truman, but aside from brief vacation trips to his home in Independence, Missouri, he seldom took advantage of this new opportunity. Eisenhower was the first president to travel extensively around the country.<sup>20</sup> Not until Reagan and Bush, however, did presidents spend a total of a month away from Washington each year. Bush even challenged the two-month marker every year, and in 1991 he broke it, despite getting off to a late start because of the outbreak of the Gulf War in January of that year.

International political travel by presidents increased most sharply during the late 1960s. Eisenhower's 1959 "good-will" tour around the world is generally recognized as the first international presidential travel where favorable publicity appeared to all to be the primary consideration. As the figures for subsequent presidents suggest, it was an idea whose time had come. Both Presidents Carter and Bush, who enjoyed their major policy successes in foreign affairs, traveled extensively. By the close of his third year in office, Bush's overseas travels had become so conspicuous that his critics found a

Figure 4-3 Days of Political Travel by Presidents, 1929-1990 (Yearly Averages for First Three Years of First Term)



NOTE: To eliminate public activities inspired by concerns of reelection rather than governing, only the first three years have been tabulated. For this reason, Gerald Ford's record of public activities during his two and one-half years of office have been ignored.

SOURCES: Data for Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon, and Carter are from Lammers, "Presidential Attention-Focusing Activities," Table 6-5, 160. Data for Kennedy, Johnson, Reagan, and Bush are from *Public Papers of the Presidents* series. See also Kernell, "Presidency and the People," 244.

paying enough attention to the nation's troubles. Under pressure to focus more on domestic issues, Bush announced in November 1991 that he was postponing an Asian trip late that year, ostensibly to keep tabs on the Democratic Congress. Whatever the Bush presidency lacked in vision during its first three years, it certainly made up in motion.

During the past half century, trends in presidents going public—from political travel to public addresses and appearances—have moved steadily upward. There are some differences among them, however, in both the overall rate of growth and the timing of the sharpest increases. The number of minor public addresses, for example, has increased dramatically, even leaving aside Bush's exceptional level of activity. Political travel and public appearances also show differences in pace and timing. Cumulatively, these trends point toward a president today who is far more personally involved in public relations than were his predecessors 30 and 40 years ago.<sup>21</sup>

### The Incremental Growth of Going Public

The rise of going public has proceeded more or less incrementally with each president taking advantage of the precedents and extensions of public activity offered by his predecessors. For the purpose of discussion, the various reasons for gradual change can be classified broadly as technological and political. The former have to do with opportunity, the latter with inspiration.

#### ① Incrementalism as a Function of Technology

Any explanation of the emergence of public strategies in the standard repertoire of presidents must take into account the continuous technological advances in transportation and mass communications during the past half century. Consider the difficulty a president 50 years ago would have encountered had he sought to rally the country behind his policies. By today's standards, the national transportation and communications systems of the early 1930s were primitive; barely 40 percent of all households owned radios. The president's potential audience was not only relatively small, one may assume that during the Great Depression it was also heavily skewed toward more affluent citizens. When Herbert Hoover defended his depression policies on national radio—and he did so regularly—he preached mainly to the converted.<sup>22</sup>

Transportation in the 1930s posed even greater difficulties. Air travel for presidents would not come for another two decades, and rail transportation was so slow and arduous that one did not undertake it casually. In the early 1920s, President Wilson suffered a stroke and President Harding a fatal heart attack during long political trips. Anxious to gain the legitimacy and the audience shares regular presidential appearances would provide, radio executives commonly cited these instances in promoting heavier presidential use of the new medium.<sup>23</sup> A decade later, a round trip from the east to the west coast still took about a week.<sup>24</sup> Obviously, slow transporta-

tion limited a president's appearances before and appeals to select audiences around the country.

International travel was even more time consuming and therefore infrequent. Woodrow Wilson's trip to Europe in 1919 to make the peace was a rare gesture befitting the historic moment. The first international flight by a president came in 1943 when Franklin Roosevelt secretly traveled to North Africa to meet with Winston Churchill. Compare the logistics of this trip with those described on page 101 for Nixon's trip to China 29 years later.

The straight-line distance from Washington to Casablanca is 3,875 miles. A modern jet transport could have made the trip comfortably and without stopovers, in seven hours. But in 1943, the limited range, slower speeds, and lack of sophisticated navigational aids in the Boeing 314 and Douglas C-54 had required four legs of flying, three stopovers, a change of planes, and more than three days' travel time for the President—in each direction. The circuitous route required the President to touch three continents, cross the Equator four times, and spend approximately ninety hours in the air. When his train travel between Washington and Miami was included, Roosevelt had covered more than 17,000 miles before he was once more back home in the White House.<sup>25</sup>

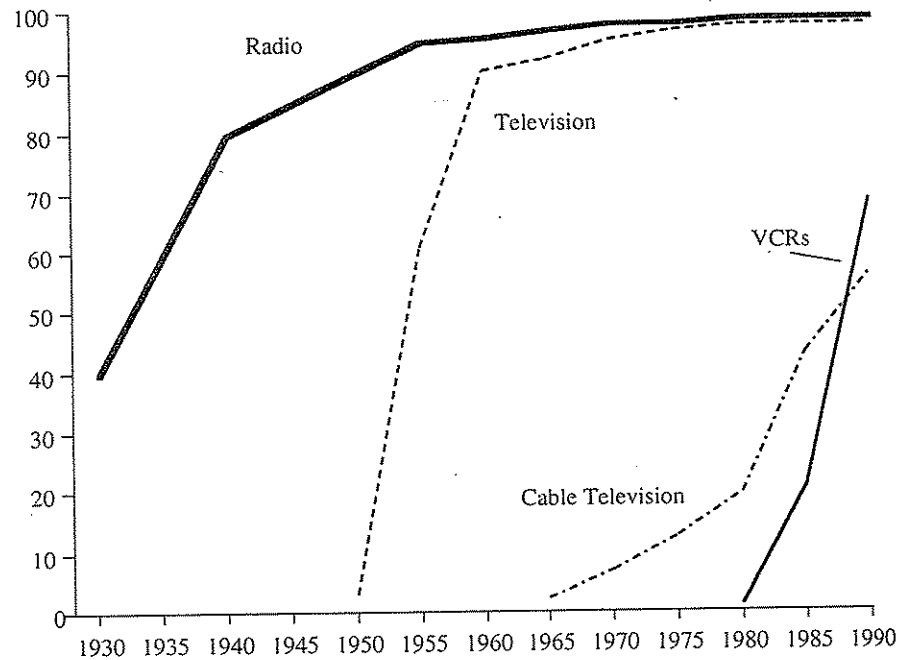
The growth in presidential travel occurred piecemeal, with each new opportunity made possible by an advance in transportation technology. The 55 years shown in Figure 4-3 span the period in which travel shifted from rail to air and from prop to jet.

Technological breakthroughs in broadcast communications have had an even more profound effect on the opportunities for presidents to go public. Radio and television are, of course, the major developments, but smaller technological advances also had their effects. In 1955, for example, Kodak introduced its Tri-X film, which reduced the lighting requirements of television cameras; shortly thereafter Eisenhower admitted film crews into his news conferences.<sup>26</sup> The subsequent development of live satellite communications created a variety of new opportunities for live presidential television. Nixon's prime-time trip to China, Carter's town meetings at home and abroad, and Bush's teleconferences with national conventions in distant locales illustrate the kinds of public activities modern satellite communications make possible. The steady growth of going public during the past half century follows the sequence of technological advances in communication as well as transportation.

Going public increased incrementally not only with the introduction of new means of communication, but also with their dissemination. One may assume that the appeal to presidents of communicating via radio and television relates to the size of the audience. President Roosevelt's participation in an experimental television broadcast at the 1939 World's Fair had no real political significance if for no other reason than that only a minuscule audience could view the broadcast.<sup>27</sup> Figure 4-4 displays the rate with which



**Figure 4-4** Households with Radios and Televisions, Cable TV and VCRs, 1930-1990 (Percent)



SOURCES: *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, vols. 1 and 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), series R104, R105, and A335. Data for 1975 through 1990 are from *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1991), 556.

radio and television entered America's homes. By the early 1960s, the market was virtually saturated: more than 90 percent of households owned these appliances. During that decade presidents began more actively devising new ways to gain access to the nation's airwaves.

Although trends in going public follow the stepwise introduction and dissemination of technology, the correlation is not perfect. Presidents have adopted new technology cautiously.<sup>28</sup> In some instances this caution has resulted in a substantial time lag between a technology's availability and its political use. Harry Truman was the first president to go to the country on national television, but by modern standards he did so sparingly. Truman generally reserved television for moments of crisis, such as his announcement of the Korean War and seizure of the steel mills. On many pressing domestic issues of the day, he spoke to the country exclusively over radio and via newsreels. In the judgment of one observer, Truman failed "to use broadcasting consciously as a lever for increasing his influence on the Congress."<sup>29</sup>

Presidential television came of age in the 1952 election when Dwight Eisenhower became the first candidate for president to use television commercials heavily in his campaign.<sup>30</sup> In the postelection euphoria, press secretary James Hagerty referred to the advent of presidential television as a "new age" and raised the prospect of a regularly scheduled, monthly television program from the White House. Nothing came of this idea, however. During his eight years in office, Eisenhower instead continued Truman's practice of reserving television addresses mainly for international crises. Not until Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon did routine affairs of state become the subjects of presidential, prime-time television.

There is a similar time lag between technology and practice in presidential travel. Harry Truman valued the mobility offered by a plane designated for presidential use, but more for personal reasons (returning home to Missouri) than for possible political advantage. One might think that Truman, having assumed office on the death of FDR, would also have found good reason to travel around the country to gain national exposure and build support among local party organizations. But, as shown in Figure 4-3, Truman took few political trips. Eisenhower in turn was tardy in using jet transportation to travel abroad. It was left to his successors, principally Nixon, to make foreign travel a standard feature of the president's public repertoire and to discover, notably in the case of Bush, that the political limitations of extensive travel are more severe than the physical. These instances of a time lag between the availability of an innovation and its use suggest that something other than availability enters a president's decision to exploit new technology in going public.

### ② Incrementalism as a Function of Politics

Going public is a strategic choice grounded as much in contemporary political relations as in available technology. The decline of party and institutional leadership in Congress and the rise of divided government have made the Washington community progressively more susceptible to public opinion throughout the past several decades. At the same time, the decay of protoalliances has made bargaining at once both more difficult and less likely to suffice. Moreover, presidential selection reforms are sending people to the White House who are neither trained nor interested in learning the "ways" of Washington. These outsiders frequently prefer to go public rather than engage in quiet diplomacy. Technology has offered ever expanding opportunities, but changes within the political environment have provided the inspiration.

The decision to bargain or to go public is based upon a comparison of the relative costs and benefits of each strategy in a particular setting. Technology and evolving political relations have made the public approach increasingly attractive. But there are also costs that attend innovation and going public, which at times have applied a brake on the rapid expansion of public strategies. During an era of entrenched leaders, going public would generally

be construed as an exercise in pressure politics and unless practiced delicately could easily backfire. Any public activity—but especially innovation—runs this risk of violating established expectations and triggering hostile reactions from other political elites in Washington.

Franklin Roosevelt's court-packing campaign illustrates this well. Fresh from a landslide reelection victory and perhaps suffering from euphoria, Roosevelt early in 1937 unveiled at a press conference his proposal for legislation to increase the number of Supreme Court justices and thereby gain more sympathetic treatment of New Deal programs.<sup>31</sup> In doing so, he broke with existing protocol by failing to brief key members of Congress before making a public announcement of a legislative initiative. In the opinion of many participants and commentators, this early mistake contributed to the proposal's eventual defeat. Even Roosevelt's staunchest supporters in Congress were taken aback; his detractors, predictably outraged. The court packing proposal was FDR's most stunning legislative failure in his 12 years in office. It was also the only time he used one of his famous fireside chats to ask the public to pressure Congress in behalf of his policies.<sup>32</sup> From the Senate, Harry Truman witnessed firsthand the ill will sowed by Roosevelt's innovative use of the press conference. Citing it a decade later, Truman as president would refuse to use the press conference for unveiling congressional initiatives.<sup>33</sup>

The court-packing episode is instructive in two ways. First, it shows that in the realm of public opinion, where politicians will understandably be quite sensitive, departures from established practices can easily backfire, even for someone as popular as Franklin Roosevelt. Second, Truman's response reveals how the experiences of one president become lessons for the next. Whether learned firsthand or observed from the sidelines, the negative reactions of other politicians serve to bring presidential strategy into conformity with expectations founded upon established practice. To the degree these forces impress themselves on political behavior, one president's activity will not much differ from that of his predecessor. Innovation occurs "at the margin." The results can be seen in the aggregate trends—both in the steady growth of direct communication and, as shown in Chapter 3, in the gradual decline of the traditional press conference.

### **Resistance to Innovation in Going Public**

A president's decision to go public by enlisting a new technology or by employing an old one in a novel fashion brings forces of change into conflict with those of stability. New opportunities made possible by advances in technology and rising incentives brought on by changing political circumstances run up against the established prerogatives of other politicians. When the choice favors innovation, the president can try to minimize the political costs by having it conform to, or at least resemble, existing practices as much as possible. Two strategic devices are available to the president. First, he can summon precedents in introducing a new form of public activity. Second, he

can expand a base by simply doing more of a familiar public activity. Both are venerable strategies of incremental politics.

In Chapter 3 we encountered an instance of the former in President Kennedy's introduction of the televised news conference. He adapted existing arrangements to a new purpose—direct communication with the public—and thereby managed to undo the old order even as he conformed to its expectations.

Examples of an incremental expanding of the base can be found in the gradually rising trends in going public presented in this chapter. Presidents have tended to increase their public activities only marginally beyond a base of accepted practice. As long as a president can credibly argue that his activity does not much differ from that of his predecessor, he should be able to blunt criticism from those who are adversely affected by his public activities. The greater the departure of current from past practice, of course, the less credible the president's claim becomes and the greater the likelihood of a negative response. This is precisely what happened after Nixon's first year in office when he began appearing on evening network television to an unprecedented degree. By one count Nixon appeared on national television 17 times within nine months beginning in late 1969. On 11 of these occasions, he preempted evening commercial television.<sup>34</sup>

The sudden surge in presidential television appearances generated complaints from various quarters and assumed the status of a prominent news story in its own right. During the summer of 1970, Washington correspondents began pressing Nixon at news conferences with pointed questions about his television strategy. The White House responded by arguing that the president was simply subscribing to the practices of past presidents. Aide John Ehrlichman compiled figures on the television appearances of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, as well as Nixon, arguing that his president had been on television less than Kennedy and about as often as Johnson.

Ehrlichman's argument did little to allay criticism, however. A group of antiwar activists, citing repeated instances of Nixon's use of television to promote his Vietnam policies, had petitioned the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for network time to respond to the president's remarks under the fairness doctrine. The Democratic National Committee appealed directly to the networks for a similar opportunity to rebut the president. In midsummer the FCC ruled for the first time that a president's repeated addresses on a subject had produced an imbalance in public debate and that those holding opposing views should be given network air time to respond.<sup>35</sup> Independent of the FCC ruling, the networks liberalized access of Democrats to answer the president's remarks.

The idea of granting air time to the president's opponents was not new. After Harry Truman blasted "greedy" steel company executives in announcing his seizure of the mills in 1951, the networks gave rebuttal time to the president of Inland Steel Company. During the mid-1960s, networks began

the practice of granting air time to congressional opponents to answer the president's annual State of the Union message. According to archival research performed by the Library of Congress, opposition spokespersons—whether individuals, congressional leaders, or representatives of the opposition party—were allotted free response time on national television on only 4 occasions from 1961 to 1964. But from 1970 to 1974, during Nixon's administration, there were 14 such occasions; from 1975 to 1984, there were 34.<sup>36</sup>

Today, the right of opposition parties and congressional spokespersons to respond to presidential addresses remains a subject of some dispute and negotiation between politicians and network executives. Chief among the many issues yet to be resolved are which presidential statements warrant equal time, who is to respond, and when opposition responses will be aired.<sup>37</sup> Congressional and party opponents assert their right for equal time, the networks their prerogative to judge each request on its merits, and the FCC its intention to remain uninvolved. What is clear from the record, however, is that Nixon's heavy use of television helped establish strong precedents that will ensure opposition parties in the future their time on television.<sup>38</sup>

Opposition groups are not alone in complaining about the frequency of presidential rhetoric. After the heavy dose of prime-time television during President Nixon's first year, CBS head Frank Stanton publicly began to characterize the White House strategy as an attempt to monopolize the airwaves.<sup>39</sup> Given that a prime-time, thirty-second commercial can cost \$200,000 or more, it is understandable why network executives might be concerned that the president was enjoying undue political advantage through his special access to national television. Granting the opposition party response time would seem to restore political parity, but this would, of course, result in an additional lost opportunity for the network to sell products.

In October 1975, the networks hit upon a less expensive way to rein in presidential television. Although the next election was over a year away, CBS and NBC refused to carry President Ford's address on tax reform on the dubious grounds that they would have to provide equal time to other announced candidates. (At that early date, there was apparently only one—an obscure, perennial candidate in Massachusetts.) Not until Reagan's second term did the networks enlist their prerogative to turn down a presidential request, but it is apparent that this first instance made gaining access to the airwaves an important factor as presidents and their aides considered their options. In late 1978, President Carter's communications director planned a media strategy involving unprecedented levels of national television. He advised the president to cultivate warm relations with the network heads, so that they would be less likely to balk at complying with his subsequent request for air time.<sup>40</sup>

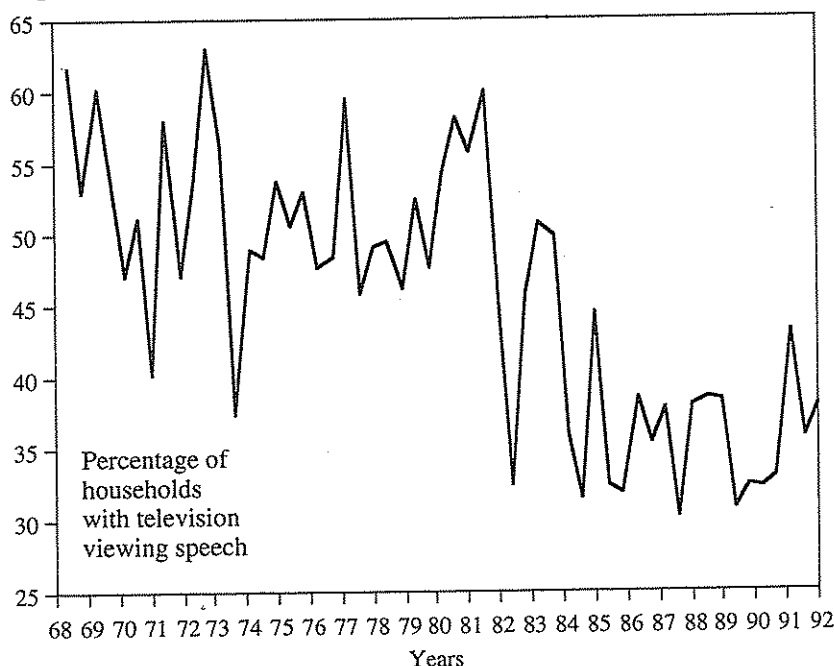
From mid-1986 through the fall of 1987, one or more of the networks refused to give President Reagan air time on at least three occasions. Two of these involved appeals for public support for aid to the Nicaraguan *contras*;

the third concerned support for Judge Robert Bork, Reagan's nominee to the Supreme Court. During this nonelection period, the networks could not fall back on equal time for opponents as their rationale for denying the president's request. Instead, they used the criterion of newsworthiness, which would appear difficult to apply since little more than the topic of the address would have been known to those making the decision. One network comment struck directly at the strategy of going public: "Tonight's address is really directed at a small group of people on Capitol Hill, so my recommendation is not to interrupt our prime-time broadcast to carry that."<sup>41</sup>

The adverse reaction to presidential television from the opposition party in Congress and network executives pales in comparison to that from a third class of participants—the viewing public. Broadcast technology enabled the president to enter the homes of citizens, and the development of VCRs and cable technology, shown in Figure 4-4, is allowing these same citizens to usher him out.

In the 1960s and 1970s, when the three networks controlled 90 percent of the audience share in most markets, the president enjoyed a seemingly captive audience for his addresses to the nation. There is no evidence, based on audience size, that an appreciable number of viewers chose to turn off their televisions.<sup>42</sup> But with the rise of new technology providing alternative programming and tape formats, people have proven nimble at changing channels. However well they may be doing in the Gallup polls, recent presidents are clearly slipping in A. C. Nielsen's audience ratings. Figure 4-5 depicts a point-a-year decline on average in percentages of households with televisions that have tuned in to presidential addresses during the past five administrations. The high point is the first observation available in this series: President Nixon's statement of the Vietnam War in November 1969. Presidents Carter and Reagan nearly matched him once, in their first addresses to the nation, but Bush has not come close. His first address to the nation garnered only 38 percent of the households with televisions.<sup>43</sup> Despite a brief war and dramatic world events in which President Bush played a significant role, he managed no better than a 43 percent audience rating—that after the Gulf War in 1991.

Undoubtedly, many citizens who were unenthusiastic and hence inattentive viewers when they had few choices have now abandoned the president's audience. But since these were probably the least responsive members of the audience, their departure will not greatly affect the president's capacity to generate vocal support for his policies. Of greater strategic concern to a president is the fact that other viewers, as a result of the new technology, can now decide on each occasion whether to watch the president or turn their attention elsewhere. Their choice will rest on the comparative appeal of the president's message. In March 1986 when President Reagan spoke to the nation on increased U.S. support for the *contra* rebels in Nicaragua, an estimated 16 million households switched to alternative programming. Eight

**Figure 4-5** The Declining Presidential Audience: 1969-1992

SOURCE: Nielsen Media Research. Reprinted with permission.

months later during the Irangate scandal, the president defended himself at a nationally televised press conference. This time only 4 million households defected.<sup>44</sup> Today, with uncertainty about whether the networks will decide to broadcast the president's message and about whether viewers will opt to receive it, the availability of the audience becomes a serious consideration in planning the president's public strategies.

### Conclusion

A proposition of this book is that the degree to which a president goes public determines the kind of leader he will be. With it I have argued that the style of leadership in the White House is changing. Modern presidents rely upon public opinion for their leadership in Washington to an extent unknown when Dahl and Lindblom in the early 1950s described the president as "an embodiment of a bargaining society," or later when Neustadt predicated presidential power on bargaining.<sup>46</sup>

The above proposition, claiming a change in the degree of going public and inferring a change in the character of leadership, is subject to rejoinder on

two fronts. Because every president since Theodore Roosevelt has sought at some moment to rally public opinion to his side, and each in his public activity has drawn on the precedents and departed only marginally from the base lines of his immediate predecessor, one can easily miss the striking degree to which presidents today go public compared with the presidents of the 1930s, the 1940s, or even the 1950s.

Moreover, I suspect that the increasing quantity of public activity has tended to be obscured by the varying quality of public rhetoric, which is always more memorable than the quantity. To those who compared Ronald Reagan's rhetorical talents with those of Franklin Roosevelt, little appears to have changed in the past 50 years.

One misconception that results from incremental change is that in retrospect the past resembles the present. This, after all, is the purpose of the incremental strategy. A case in point is the story Arthur Schlesinger recounts of a phone call he received one morning from President Kennedy. The president asked how frequently FDR had held fireside chats. He said that *New York Times* correspondent Lester Markel was with him complaining that he ought to go before the American people more often. "Lester . . . seems to think that Roosevelt gave a fireside chat once a week." Schlesinger subsequently reported to Kennedy that before the war, Roosevelt averaged no more than two of these now famous radio addresses a year.<sup>46</sup> A couple of years later the issue was still current when Schlesinger passed along to Kennedy a letter from Samuel Beer, a prominent political scientist and former national chair of the Americans for Democratic Action, which said:

I certainly do not agree, let alone sympathize, with my liberal friends who say that it is all the fault of the President; that if he would only resort to the magic of the "fire-side chat" he would create great waves of public opinion which would wash away Congressional obstruction. They simply don't remember the way FDR actually worked—e.g. the prolonged and tortured operation by which he got the Wage-Hour bill—and totally forget the political situation that gave him leverage.<sup>47</sup>

When it comes to collective memory of presidential performance, one seems as inclined to impose the present on the past as vice versa. Either way, the result is that nothing much *appears* to have happened.

Another counter-argument accepts the trends examined in this chapter but holds that they have little bearing on the character of presidential leadership. The president may be a more familiar face on television, and he may spend more time on the road, but his public relations have not reduced the role of bargaining in presidential leadership. Against this argument, quantitative indexes of public activity, no matter how dramatic the changes they depict, stand mute.

To conclude that the multitudinous public activities of modern presidents do matter—that they have altered the character of leadership in Washington—one needs to consider more qualitative evidence, such as the transactions between the president and those whom he seeks to influence. The next chapter examines the ways Ronald Reagan promoted his budget with Congress during his first three years in office. The budgetary politics of these years show how a president, who took pride in his skills as a communicator, enlisted public support in his dealings with congressional leaders and how these activities substituted for and at times interfered with bargaining.

### Notes

1. In an early study of what has only recently become a prominent fact of presidential governance, Stanley Kelley, Jr., described the linkages between presidential activities (including campaigning) and professional public relations in *Professional Public Relations and Political Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956).
2. Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, *Nixon in the White House* (New York: Random House, 1971), 388-389.
3. Since fall 1981, Reagan's pollster, Richard Wirthlin, had been advising the president of his slipping popularity among blue-collar Democrats—many of whom are Catholic—who had supported him against Carter in 1980. See B. Drummond Ayres, Jr., "G.O.P. Keeps Tabs on Nation's Mood," *New York Times*, November 16, 1981, A20; and Howell Raines, "Reagan's Gamble: Bid for Popularity," *New York Times*, March 30, 1982, A27. Similar evidence of Reagan's decline in the polls is reported by Hedrick Smith in the CBS-*New York Times* survey in "Blue-Collar Workers' Support for Reagan Declines," *New York Times*, March 8, 1982, 1. The association between the president's decline in the polls and his tuition tax credit proposal is made by Dennis Williams, Lucy Howard, and Frank Marer, "Tax Credits for Tuition?" *Newsweek*, April 26, 1982, 86. See also Seymour Sudman, "The President and the Polls," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 46 (Fall 1982): 301-310; and Harrison Donnelly, "Little Hope Seen for Tuition Tax Credit Plan," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, April 24, 1982, 911-913.
4. These categories of going public correspond to those developed by William Lammers, who was the first to examine systematically trends in presidents' public activities. William W. Lammers, "Presidential Attention-Focusing Activities," in *The President and the American Public*, ed. Doris A. Graber (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1982), 145-171.
5. Omitted from major addresses are presidential press conferences and purely ceremonial functions (for example, calls to astronauts and Christmas tree lighting ceremonies). See Table 3-2 for the decline in the use of press conferences. Lammers provides evidence that presidents adapt conference schedules to their strategic goals and to more direct means of communication in "Presidential Press Conference Schedules: Who Hides and When?" *Political Science Quarterly* 96 (Summer 1981): 261-267.
6. In Figures 4-1, 4-2, and 4-3, only the first three years have been tabulated in order to eliminate activities inspired by concerns for reelection rather than governing.

Since Gerald Ford's tenure does not include three nonelection years, his record of public activities has been ignored.

7. As a cautionary note, the sources used to compile this list of television addresses appear to provide a more inclusive definition in recent years.
8. Roosevelt continued, "If I had tried [in 1935] to keep up the pace of 1933 and 1934, the inevitable histrionics of the new actors, Long and Coughlin and Johnson, would have turned the eyes of the audience away from the main drama itself." Cited in Douglass Cater, "How a President Helps Form Public Opinion," *New York Times Magazine*, February 26, 1961, 12.
9. Pierre Salinger, *With Kennedy* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 138-144. For a discussion of other presidents' concerns with overexposure, see Godfrey Hodgson, *All Things to All Men* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 188-189.
10. From a memorandum to President Carter, June 30, 1978, personal papers of Gerald R. Ford.
11. Although systematic evidence on the size of the president's audience as a function of the number or recency of previous addresses is not now available, a cursory inspection of scattered audience rating data does not suggest a strong relationship. The series of Nielsen ratings below do show that the two largest television audiences came for Presidents Carter and Reagan in their first national address within weeks of their inauguration. Audience share and size have not otherwise varied significantly in the past 15 years.

Figure 4-1 Yearly Average  
Major Addresses: 9  
Minor Addresses: 120

Figure 4-2 Yearly Averages  
Washington D.C. Appearances: 49  
U.S. Appearances: 114

Figure 4-3 Yearly Averages  
U.S. Travel: 54 days  
Foreign Travel: 33 days

12. Examples of such statements are Hodgson, *All Things to All Men*, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).
13. Enlisting a new technology and enlisting it well are, of course, different matters. On the problems Bush experienced in adapting to the teleconferencing format, see Michael Wines, "In Scripts for Bush, Questions on Images," *New York Times*, November 28, 1991.
14. James T. Wooten, "Pre-Inaugural Memo Urged Carter to Emphasize Style Over Substance," *New York Times*, May 4, 1977, 1.
15. Mark Hertsgaard adds that these efforts turned public opinion around on Reagan's education policies to a 2:1 favorable ratio. "How Reagan Seduced Us," *Village Voice*, September 18, 1984, 12.
16. An example of this genre is President Reagan's warm-up routine at a Jaycees convention in San Antonio the summer of 1981 while pressuring Democrats in Washington to accept his budget. To a roaring audience Reagan intoned, "Where on earth has he [Tip O'Neill] been for the last few years?" After a pause he continued, "The answer is, right in Washington, D.C." See "Reagan's Sweet Triumph," *Newsweek*, July 6, 1981, 18.
17. Newton N. Minow, John Bartlow Martin, and Lee M. Mitchell, *Presidential Television* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 65-68.
18. Cited in George C. Edwards III, *The Public Presidency* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 75.

19. Another example of modern press treatment of presidential travel is Hedrick Smith's observation that Reagan's trip to China in the spring of 1984 was intended in part to "enhance his bid for reelection by casting himself as a negotiator for peace" ("The Road to Peking," *New York Times*, April 25, 1984, 6).
20. J. F. terHorst and Col. Ralph Albertazzie provide a lively chronology of presidential air travel in *The Flying White House* (New York: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, 1979).
21. Because the categories of public activity are not mutually exclusive, it is not possible to obtain comparable averages for other presidents by simply adding their appearances, travel days, and speeches.
22. "Hoover, with 37 Radio Talks in Past Year, Made a Record," *New York Times*, December 28, 1930, 1.
23. "Health of President Coolidge Conserved by Broadcasting," *New York Times*, February 24, 1924, 15.
24. Travel time during this era is nicely displayed in the isochronic map "Rates of Travel, 1930" in Charles O. Paullin, *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution, 1932), plate 138D.
25. terHorst and Albertazzie, *Flying White House*, 33.
26. Douglass Cater, *The Fourth Branch of Government* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 40-42.
27. Roosevelt reportedly expressed to a friend his wish that the development of television would speed up. See Hodgson, *All Things to All Men*, 186.
28. See Samuel L. Becker, "Presidential Power: The Influence of Broadcasting," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 47 (October 1961): 17.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Eisenhower spent \$800,000 on television time compared with \$77,000 spent by the Democratic candidate, Adlai Stevenson. See Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 43.
31. Joseph Alsop and Turner Catledge, *The 168 Days* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1938), 13-79.
32. Although as a *New York Times* commentary on earlier fireside addresses pointed out, the implications of the direct public approach in motivating Congress were clear. "His use of this new instrument of political discussion is a plain hint to Congress of a recourse which the president may employ if it proves necessary to rally support for legislation which he asks and which legislators might be reluctant to give him." Cited in Becker, "Presidential Power," 15.
33. *Memoirs by Harry S Truman: Years of Trial and Hope*, vol. 2 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1956; reprint New York: New American Library, 1965).
34. Minow, Martin, and Mitchell, *Presidential Television*, 69-72.
35. Denis Steven Rutkus, "President Reagan, the Opposition and Access to Network Airtime" (Congressional Research Service, Washington, D.C., 1984, Mimeographed), 69-71.
36. The figures for the years 1961-1966 come from Robert Lee Baily, *An Examination of Prime Time Network Television Special Programs, 1948-1966* (New York: Arno Press, 1979), Appendix A; for the years 1967 and 1968, network program logs and secondary sources were used, and for the years 1969-1984, Denis Steven Rutkus, "President Reagan, the Opposition and Access to Network Airtime," Congressional Research Service, August 1984, Appendix C.
37. Rutkus, "President Reagan," 36-59.
38. More recently, Republicans claimed that President Jimmy Carter similarly violated established protocol. In an article in 1978, Ronald Reagan cited Republican National Committee figures in calling for greater opportunities for opposition spokespersons. See Ronald Reagan, "Do the Networks Always Short-change the 'Loyal Opposition?'" *T.V. Guide*, March 11, 1978, 4-5.
39. Robert B. Semple, Jr., "Nixon Eludes Newsmen on Coast Trip," *New York Times*, August 3, 1970, 16.
40. Rafshoon to Carter, June 30, 1978.
41. Peter J. Boyer, "Networks Refuse to Broadcast Reagan's Plea," *New York Times*, February 3, 1988.
42. Nielsen estimates comparing audience size during presidential addresses and normal programming have found no significant differences. One study actually found that during President Ford's tenure, the audience grew slightly when he was on television. These findings are reported in Newton N. Minow and Lee M. Mitchell, "Incumbent Television: A Case of Indecent Exposure," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 425 (May 1976): 74-77.
43. While the 54 ratings graphed in Figure 4-5 do not represent all presidential prime-time addresses, they come close. I wish to thank Professor Joe Foote and Diane Buono at A. C. Nielsen for making available the data reported here. Various statistical tests of the change in the way Nielsen monitors viewers in the fall of 1987 did not turn up a significant effect on declining presidential audience shares.
44. This discussion is based on information provided in Joe S. Foote, *Television Access and Political Power* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 152-156.
45. See Robert A. Dahl and Charles E. Lindblom, *Politics, Economics, and Welfare* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960); and Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1980).
46. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 715. The following memorandum from Schlesinger to Kennedy, dated March 16, 1961, indicates that other members of the press were already forming similar expectations of the president.  
  
There is increasing concern among friends in the press about the alleged failure of the Administration to do as effective a job of public information and instruction as it should and must. Lippmann had a column about this last week. Joe Alsop has been haranguing me about this over the telephone and plans to do some columns about it soon. Lester Markel is going to do a long piece about it in the *Times Magazine*.
47. Cited in William E. Leuchtenburg, *In the Shadow of FDR* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 114.