

MANAGING *the President's* MESSAGE

The White House Communications Operation



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PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS: LESSONS LEARNED*

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Though the press is not part of the government, presidents and their White House communications staff have developed ways of using the press to carry the chief executive's messages to the general public and to particular groups they want to target. But it is not easy to establish an effective communications system and, once created, to maintain its success. As we saw with Presidents Clinton and Bush, creating an effective system requires the right people, resources, and strategies to advocate for the president, to explain his policies, to defend his actions and ideas, and to coordinate publicity inside and outside of the government.

Since World War II, five of the seven presidents who served during those years and ones who served a full first term, have been reelected. Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, Clinton, and George W. Bush represented different political views and parties, but did have one thing in common: at some point during their first term in office, all of them developed effective communications operations. In each case, the president and his staff understood the importance of helping others realize what their priorities were and how they were achieving them. They also had substantial challenges in their second terms that tested the strength of their communications operations.

Two presidents who served full first terms sought a second one and lost. What Republican George H. W. Bush and Democrat Jimmy Carter had in common was minimal interest in presidential communications as an integral aspect of their presidency. Neither ever created a communications apparatus capable of integrating policy initiatives with plans to sell them to the Washington community and the public, difficulty winning the support of the public and members of the Washington community on specific initiatives. In spite of the large numbers of personnel and organizational resources available to them, presidents have difficulty getting their constituents inside and outside of Washington to respond to them in the ways they wish.

There are four areas where we can view trends and developments in the area of White House communications in order to understand their worth. First are the basic elements of an effective presidential communications operation. There are at least five elements important to the ability of a presidential communications operation to accomplish its goals. Second are the benefits that a good communications buy for a president. Third, there are considerable limits to what a White House communications operation can do for a president. And fourth, we can understand the nature of the institution of the presidency by studying its communications operations.

THE ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OPERATION

In order to establish communications operations that advocate, explain, defend, and coordinate on behalf of their president, there are some basic elements related to how effectively they carry out the above four functions. Those elements include what an administration is trying to sell, the communications savvy of the president himself, the organizational components of the communications operation; all are important to the ability of a president and his communications team to perform the basic functions. The organization needs central control, an infrastructure that meets the continuing news needs of reporters, and a communications staff that understands reporters' routines.

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Policies with Public Support

In his first year in office, President George W. Bush signed into law two of his policy priorities. During the 2000 presidential campaign, Bush spoke about a half dozen issues that formed his legislative priorities. Among them were education reform and tax cuts. During his first year, he won congressional support for his "No Child Left Behind" education reform bill, which featured student testing and performance-based analysis of schools. He also succeeded with his tax reform plan to eliminate the estate tax and to provide tax cuts to people in most income categories. During the campaign, he discussed both education and tax reform with specific ideas of what he wanted to see enacted by Congress. Both proposals were popular with voters, both before and after the election.

It is hard to sell illusions. Good communications operations have to be grounded in solid policies and effective performances. No matter how good a presidential communications team, if a policy or its implementers are weak or absent, it will be difficult to make it appear otherwise.

In the case of Hurricane Katrina, the federal government's disaster plans and organizational resources were inadequate for confronting the problems spawned by the hurricane. President Bush's apparent slowness in responding to Hurricane Katrina mirrored the demonstrably slow response by federal government agencies tasked with disaster planning, as broadcast far and wide by news media. Context also counts. Since billions have been spent on homeland security since September 11, 2001, both the Washington community and the public were surprised and dismayed that the federal government's capacity for handling a domestic disaster was so poor. There was no way to portray the federal government's handling of the hurricane as successful. Thanks to extensive media coverage, too many people saw that it was not.

So too were the reforms in Social Security a hard sell for the George W. Bush administration in 2005. The president, his cabinet officers, and his agency heads went on the road from March to May in a high-profile campaign, "60 Cities in 60 Days," to sell his twin ideas: that the Social Security system was in a perilous state and that personal retirement accounts would benefit the public. That campaign was a renewed effort to build on his administration's actions following his 2005 State of the Union message in which he discussed his proposal. The more the president spoke about the issue, the more the public disapproved. In early February, a CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll found 44% approval, 50% disapproval, and 6% unsure with respect to George W. Bush's approach to addressing the Social Security system. By late July, the approval number had dropped to 29%, the disapproval number had risen to 62%, and unsure stood at 9%.

After five months in Washington and on the road discussing the problems of Social Security and the importance of personal retirement accounts, the public was less likely to support the president's account plan. People responding to an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll showed greater concern about personal retirement accounts after the president's tour than before he began it. When asked whether they would support or oppose a plan in which people could invest some of their Social Security contributions in the stock market, in mid-March 56% supported the idea, with 41% opposed and 3% unsure. By early June, support had dropped to 48% while those opposed had increased to 49% and unsure had fallen to 2%.¹ The public simply was not buying personal retirement accounts.

A President Adept at Communications

Communications operations reflect the president they serve. The White House staff is not a complement to a president but a reflection of him. If the president is adept at communications, his apparatus reflects it. If he is uninterested in communications, that, too, will be reflected in the staff operation.

President Reagan's decades of experience in show business equipped him for his extraordinary success as a presidential communicator. James Baker recalled, "We had a president who loved communicating. That was his medium. He was terrific. Boy, was he good. So it was sort of easy for us."² President George H. W. Bush had little experience as a performer, was ambivalent about public relations, and invested low resources in developing communications plans for his programs. At one point, he asked Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater to run his communications operation as well as the Press Office. John Sununu, Bush's chief of

¹ Poll data available at pollingreport.com/social.htm.

² James A. Baker III, interview with the author, Houston, Texas, May 14, 2001.

staff, was equally uninterested in communications. So it was difficult for other members of the White House staff to develop and implement public relations initiatives.

When the president was preparing to introduce a cooperative venture with Latin American countries, "Enterprise for the Americas," Sununu insisted that no news come out beforehand. His restriction extended to advance preparation of reporters in the White House press corps as well as journalists in involved countries. When the subject of this impending event came up in a senior staff meeting, Fitzwater asked, "How can we just do that today? Why isn't there some buildup to this? Haven't we told the countries that we're going to have the ambassadors over here? We should have them supporting this and putting out statements in support of it and talking to the press in the driveway. And what about Congress? There must be committees who love this, who want to join us, committee chairmen."

Sununu was adamant. He told the staff, "No. I'm not going to have this leak. I'm telling you right now: we're going to do it at ten o'clock."³ The chief of staff had his way, and no groundwork was laid for this initiative. The result was lackluster stories in the press. The *New York Times* reported the next day about the policy announcement, "The initiative was presented in vague terms that made it difficult to assess its potential impact on trade, industrial development or debt reduction in the hemisphere."⁴

Control at the Top

Whether the president is a Democrat or a Republican, successful communications operations have been controlled at a central point, where the chief of staff or another senior staff member has a view of all the elements of a chief executive's presidency, including the status of his initiatives, his political strengths and weaknesses, and his goals. There are different ways of centralizing such operations. All but one of them calls for coordinating communications at the senior staff level. Generally, the chief coordinating official is the chief of staff. The chief alone controls all of the essential levers for information-gathering, policymaking, and implementation. No other member of the White House staff has access to all of the elements needed to make communications work.

Chiefs of staff interested in centralizing their administration's communications operations have followed three models. In the first model, the chief coordinates White House communications personally or through deputies but also deals directly with reporters. When James Baker was Reagan's chief of staff, he made a point of having deputies who were experienced in communications, but he would also make his administration's case personally. He recalls Richard Cheney, who had served as President Ford's chief of staff, telling him: "Be sure you spend a lot of time with the press giving them your spin, why you're doing these things. Talk to them. But always do it invisibly."⁵ Both Michael Deaver and David Gergen, responsible for the hands-on management of Reagan's operations, reported to Baker. Clinton Chief of Staff Leon Panetta followed Baker's model. He, too, coordinated White House communications through his deputies and would also often talk to reporters personally.

The second model for centralized control of communication has the chief of staff working through deputies but spending little time briefing reporters. Erskine Bowles, who served in the Clinton administration, had deputies responsible for press contacts, but he avoided public media presentations and briefings with reporters. Bowles put Deputy Chief of Staff John Podesta in charge of communications. When Podesta replaced him as chief, he reverted to the first model by taking responsibility not only for coordinating communications but also for making the administration case on Sunday news programs and elsewhere.

The third model for centralizing communications has an appointed communications adviser oversee the coordination of information. President George W. Bush opted for this model when he made Karen Hughes responsible for coordinating all of his publicity. During the remainder of Andrew Card's tenure as chief of staff, Dan Bartlett was responsible for all communications units. Under Josh Bolten, Bartlett's portfolio remains the same.

³ Marlin Fitzwater, interview with the author, Deale, Maryland, August 8, 1998.

⁴ Andrew Rosenthal, "President Announces Plan for More Latin Debt Relief," *New York Times*, June 27, 1990.

⁵ Martha Joynt Kumar and Terry Sullivan eds. *White House World: Transitions, Organization, and Office Operations*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2003, 133.

Where there is a central communications adviser, the chief of staff tends to avoid interfering with that role. Bush's chief of staff, Andrew Card, occasionally appeared on Sunday news programs and did some traditional Thursday briefings with journalists from *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News and World Report*, but he was not an explainer of policy unless he was involved in the policymaking process himself, as he was with transportation issues. This model is most similar to that of Press Secretary James Hagerty in the Eisenhower administration. While serving as press secretary, Hagerty also performed functions similar to those that a communications adviser would perform today. Eisenhower's chief of staff, Sherman Adams, left both the briefing of reporters and the development of communications plans to Hagerty.

The alternative to one of these centralized communications models has neither the chief of staff nor a communications adviser taking responsibility for the public presentation of a presidency. In the Carter administration and in part of the George H. W. Bush administration, there was no chief communications officer. Instead, the press secretary was expected to perform communications functions on an ad hoc basis.

As these two administrations demonstrate, however, there is no substitute for having some sort of official in charge of communications. The press secretary spends too much time on daily operations to plan ahead effectively. If there is no one to oversee the planning and implementation of communications, those jobs tend to end up haphazard or undone.

An Available Publicity Infrastructure

Administrations tend to centralize their communications operations in different ways, but the infrastructure of publicity offices has grown more similar over time. President Clinton had a centralized communications structure operating out of his chief of staff's office, while President George W. Bush has centralized his with a communications czar. Yet both of these structures incorporate permanent White House units. In every recent administration, the Press Office has handled daily press matters, the Office of Communications has served as a planning vehicle, and the Office of Media Affairs has worked with news organizations at the regional, state, and local levels, with special offices overseeing photography and speechwriting. President Carter did not have an Office of Communications during some years in his term in office, but he did have all of the other functions represented. President George H. W. Bush had an Office of Communications, though it was not active in the way it has been in the last two administrations.

Who reports to whom can vary from one administration to another, but where to go for what remains the same. Each cog in the White House publicity apparatus has a group of constituents who depend on what these units do for them. If an incoming White House team wanted to eliminate any of these publicity offices, there would be a well-orchestrated campaign to save it.

Staffers Familiar with the Routines of News Organizations

The kinds of stories that news editors assign and news reporters write are fairly predictable. They deal with conflict, disaster, policy setbacks, personal turnarounds, and reversals of political fortune. After all, the word news implies something new.

Even so, a clever presidential communications operation can get the news media to channel and to sustain its focus. The Reagan White House made focus the primary objective of its publicity effort. In 1981, when Reagan arrived in the capital, the issue the public found most pressing was the economy. By having President Reagan devote the vast majority of his public remarks to this subject, then segueing to a succession of specific planks in his economic plan, such as his tax cut program, the administration succeeded in keeping the press focused on his economic plans. Administrations ever since, particularly that of George W. Bush, have copied the Reagan administration's strategy of focusing attention on one issue at a time. While events often overtake plans, acting on the basis of strategies and schedules planned in advance remains the best bet for getting the press to follow a lead.

Hiring staffers who are aware of the routines of news organizations is the best way to anticipate what reporters are likely to do, and when. Increasingly, knowing the routines of news organizations has competed with loyalty and experience demonstrated in a campaign as a prerequisite for work on presidential publicity. The Clinton administration had a rough start when it arrived in the White House because its communications team was unfamiliar with the routines of news organizations. Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers and

Communications Director George Stephanopoulos split the job of briefing the press, in public as well as in private. It was a system that did not work, as there can be only one official spokesperson for the president. But President Clinton learned that appointees familiar with the routines of news organizations were the most appropriate people to handle the press. His communications operation improved markedly when his second wave of picks included two of the savviest press veterans in Washington: David Gergen and Mike McCurry.

WHAT A GOOD COMMUNICATIONS OPERATION BUYS A PRESIDENT

The benefits of a skilled publicity operation range from effective organization to the efficient acquisition and allocation of resources. Benefits can be personal as well as institutional. And they include what does not happen as well as what does.

The Opportunity to Reach the Public on His Terms

While it is easier for the president than for any other official to get the attention of the American public, of other government officials, and of world leaders, he still has to compete for publicity. Members of Congress and leaders of interest groups try to define the president and his ideas, as they want people to see them. The most sophisticated of his critics know how to insinuate themselves and their own ideas into news stories about him.

By coming in with a clean slate of items to discuss and a plan of how to do it, President Bush made certain that his critics did not get the opportunity to define him before he set forth who he was and what his agenda would be. His critics did begin to make gains, but it took several months for them to do so, and then their efforts proved fleeting after September 11.

When Eisenhower was in the White House, the challenge of getting and keeping public attention was much less difficult than it is today. Interest groups were far more inclined to influence the inner workings of Congress and the executive branch than to challenge the president in print. Often groups felt that they could operate more effectively without publicity. Today, interest groups spend a great deal of money on communications operations. When President George W. Bush traveled the country to defend personal retirement accounts as a facet of his plan for Social Security reform, he faced a barrage of television commercials produced by the American Association of Retired Persons and MoveOn.org, a group sponsored by billionaire George Soros.

Arriving in the White House with a communications operation that is already up and running makes it possible to take immediate advantage of publicity opportunities. A campaign platform is not the same as a governing agenda. When a president takes over the White House, he has the public's attention, but he cannot use it as an opportunity to convey what he wants to do until he has a well-schooled publicity effort in place. In President George W. Bush's case, he was ready and able to discuss his agenda when his term began.

During the first two months of his administration, Bush and his staff focused on one issue a week, and the press followed suit. By focusing on what they wanted to talk about, they channeled the attention of everyone else. Education was the subject for the first week, followed by increased funding for the military, creating a network of faith-based organizations to help carry out certain government programs, and tax cuts. During the first week, President Bush spoke in the East Room of the White House about his "No Child Left Behind" initiative. As with his other issues, he spoke in town but traveled outside of Washington as well. By planning the subjects and locations of his speeches well in advance, he took advantage of the opportunities for publicity afforded every new president and limited his risks of making mistakes.

During his administration, President George W. Bush has, more than any other recent president, focused on the agenda he wants to discuss. Through this discipline, his administration has been drawn off their topics less frequently than has been the case when policy divisions in other administrations have dominated reporting from the White House. "They have been much more focused on the substance of the

policy that they're trying to deliver to the American people, and less discussion around the theatrics or the infrastructure or the process behind the curtain," observed Mike McCurry.⁶

Fewer Mistakes

Even as George W. Bush was campaigning for the presidency, well before the transition that followed his election, Karl Rove studied earlier transitions with an eye to learning what mistakes to avoid and how to lay the groundwork for an effective tenure in office. Rove knew that his candidate had treated communications as a vital component of his politics and his governance. "We did take a look at the seven [presidential transitions], essentially [John F.] Kennedy forward," he recalled. "We actually looked at the first 180 days and tried to draw lessons about not only the things that happened in the first 180 days, but what were the things that allowed them to then move on to have a successful period after that. We looked also at the structures of the offices and examined those, but our starting point was really the President [George W. Bush]'s office in Texas, and then the campaign where there had been this close integration between policy and politics and publicity--communications."⁷

Rove's research confirmed Bush's view that publicity gaffes made early, when the public's attention is high, can be very costly. During his own first press conference on January 29, 1993, President Clinton had responded to a question about gays in the military in a way that drew so much attention to this position that it was difficult for him and his team to shift its focus to programs they wanted to highlight. When an administration has mapped out its publicity plans in detail, there is less chance of its "speaker-in-chief" being led or thrown off track.

Advance Warning of Political and Communications Problems

Problems often surface in the Briefing Room or in conversations reporters have with officials. Sometimes, the warning comes in the form of reporters' questions, which are asked because news organizations regarded the issue as an important question--this was very much the case with persistent questions about President Bush's State of the Union address claim that Iraq had sought yellowcake uranium. Some reporters raised the issue of the accuracy of the presidential claim in the press secretary's gaggles and briefings before the White House responded to it adequately. During the interim, the White House received was its bad publicity over the issue mount.

An area where President Clinton received a great deal of bad publicity was his series of meetings in the White House with contributors to his campaign. If communications staff had chased down the information reporters had sought about possible sessions with contributors, one scandal might have not occurred. "Had I been a little more inquiring and been a little more emphatic about trying to get information for reporters, I would have dug harder in uncovering all these sessions that Bill Clinton was having with his contributors, including some who had no business being in the White House in the first place," said Mike McCurry. If McCurry had asked questions about suspicious events on the president's calendar or the identity of the attendees, "me asking those questions probably could have stopped from happening one of the crises that I would argue was the most debilitating scandal that impacted the Clinton presidency. . . . It was the campaign finance questions that really tarnished the impact of his election in 1996."⁸

Reporters can share White House information in another valuable way. Veteran *Washington Post* correspondent Ann Devroy remembered the mistakes the Clinton staff made in the early days of their administration. In part, she believed, their problems could have been avoided by talking to press people who knew the rhythms of White House operations. Citing the 1993 firing of White House Travel Office personnel, Devroy explained exactly how veteran reporters could have been useful to the new staff members. "The press could have warned them, had they had any kind of working relationship, that they were going to get themselves into deep doo-doo if they did this," she said. Firing the long-serving White House personnel

⁶ Mike McCurry, interview with the author, "The President, the Press, and Democratic Society," Towson University course, Washington, DC, April 19, 2006. http://www.ucdc.edu/aboutus/whstreaming_archive.cfm.

⁷ Karl Rove, interview with the author, May 8, 2002.

⁸ Mike McCurry, interview with the author, "The President, the Press, and Democratic Society," Towson University course, Washington, DC, March 1, 2004. http://www.ucdc.edu/aboutus/whstreaming_archive.cfm.

“was so stupid, because they could have said that we are going to save money, and we are going to do this, and we are going to transfer these people to other places. Instead, they walk up and accuse them all of being crooks, and not only did they do that publicly, but people from the White House were calling people here, at the *Post* and elsewhere I know, to directly accuse those people of being criminal and of stealing.”⁹ After operating in the dark, President Clinton had to deal with fallout for this issue for years to come. The issue could easily have been avoided.

Supplementary Resources

Coordinating with communications strategies within a number of departments makes it easier for the White House to leverage the resources available for particular publicity campaigns. Department secretaries can serve as effective surrogates for the president on issues important to the administration. Agencies have resources of their own to contribute to particular campaigns.

When President Bush was ready to sign the farm bill, the Department of Agriculture provided him with a 6:30 a.m. live radio feed to farmers via Farm Radio. Dan Bartlett commented, “There, the Department of Agriculture used its resources. They just called in a feed to WHCA [White House Communications Agency], and they had the bridge over there, which Farm Radio stations throughout the country could call in and link up to. So we used their communications apparatus to execute that communications.” Once the broadcast took place, the Department of Agriculture could estimate how many stations took the feed: “There is a service that tracks the ratings of radio markets, and then we can tell through the Department of Agriculture how many of them picked up the feed live, how many took tape feeds of it, et cetera. Our estimation, I think, was probably a half million homes, farm homes, that that morning listened to it.”

While presidential campaigns tend to have the latest communications technology, the same is not true of the White House. If a president and his staff want to keep up their speaking schedule and reach particular parts of the country, they have to come up with creative ways to share the costs. Here is how Dan Bartlett explained the issue of resources: “Planning the schedule helps husband our resources for bigger events. The other thing is, particularly after 9/11, the president was so much on, and so many people were watching him, and so many people were tuning into network live coverage of things, that we spent a lot more time making sure that the environment we put him in looked well, and that’s very expensive.” When he spoke from Atlanta about homeland security, the scene was set for an international audience. “There were ten thousand people in that hall, and we lit the entire arena. Lighting for that alone is \$75,000. You don’t think about those things during the course of a campaign, but you do . . . when you’re on a budget that the Congress controls.”¹⁰

THE LIMITS OF PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OPERATIONS

White House communications operations provide the president with personnel, resources, and strategies as he seeks to develop, articulate, and reach his policy and political goals. We have seen the time and energy an administration puts into thinking about communications issues and acting on them. Yet there are limits to what a communications operation can do for a president. Among the limits are ones related to the president himself, his staff, his policies, and the public. Some presidents produce and perform for top-flight communications operations. Others allow their publicity efforts to drift. How a communications apparatus is structured depends on a president’s choices, including how he organizes his staff. How it operates depends on the ability and desire of the president and his staff to explain his administration’s policies and goals. It also depends on the interest the public has in hearing what the president has to say.

⁹ Ann Devroy, interview with the author, August 1995, Washington, DC.

¹⁰ Dan Bartlett, interview with the author, May 22, 2002, Washington, DC.

A President's Personal Style

The emphasis of an administration in part mirrors a president's personal style. For the most part, the chief executive's personal style is a strength. It usually helps presidents get elected, after all. Yet a president's personal style can also be a limitation in how an administration operates. President George W. Bush is known for his management style emphasizing long-range planning. While his ability to set out goals and plans and stick to them has been a personal strength and an administrative one as well, it has also caused him problems. Once he makes plans, he and his team find it difficult to switch to another course of action.

President Bush was late in responding to Hurricane Katrina, which happened in part because he was enjoying a long-planned vacation in Crawford, Texas. His communications and administrative staffs were taking the same weeks off as well. When asked about antiwar protester, Cindy Sheehan, who had camped out near his Crawford ranch during August 2005, Bush replied, "I think it's important for me to be thoughtful and sensitive to those who have got something to say." Sheehan, whose son died in Iraq serving in the U.S. military, wanted the president to talk to her about the Iraq War. "But I think it's also important for me to go on with my life, to keep a balanced life. I think the people want the president to be in a position to make good, crisp decisions and to stay healthy. And part of my being is to be outside exercising. So I'm mindful of what goes on around me. On the other hand, I'm also mindful that I've got a life to live, and will do so."¹¹ He was sticking to his carefully planned schedule--as he was when Hurricane Katrina hit two weeks later.

As the hurricane gained strength, government officials issued warnings to residents in its potential path. Saturday, August 27, Bush declared a state of emergency in Louisiana from his Crawford ranch and authorized the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) to provide aid. On Sunday, August 28, the day before the hurricane struck, he tucked a few comments on the emergency into longer remarks about the Iraqi constitution. He had two Medicare speeches scheduled in Arizona and California on Monday and then a speech about the war on terrorism on Tuesday in San Diego. All three sets of planned remarks incorporated remarks at the beginning of the speeches dealing with the hurricane. But referring to the unfolding crisis exclusively in such using tacked-on remarks made him seem strangely out of touch.

The situation on the ground in the hurricane zone was grave. Soon after the hurricane struck New Orleans, its levees were breached and serious flooding ensued. Gulf Coast towns in Mississippi and Alabama were also hit very hard. Still the president stuck with his schedule. Not until he was flying back to Washington on Wednesday did he get even a glimpse of the area that had been affected--and, that view he got from his plane. By this time, New Orleans was flooded, people were stranded on their rooftops, conditions at the Superdome and the convention center, where evacuees had been sheltered, were unsanitary and unsafe, and, except for the Coast Guard, the federal government agencies had little presence.

With the president out of Washington, Michael Chertoff, secretary of homeland security, as overseer of the department in which FEMA is housed, was in charge of handling the federal response to the effects of this hurricane. In a news conference in Washington, he declared that he was "extremely pleased with the response" of the federal government. But he had yet to visit the affected areas. So his comments gave the impression that even the administration officials who had remained in Washington were remote and out of touch. All of this was being shown on television, to an audience swelled with viewers entirely free to watch television because, like the president, they too were on summer vacations. Two additional elements of President Bush's personal style made it difficult for him and his staff to alter the perception that he was out of touch and disengaged: his reputation for not following the news and his well-known reluctance to fire, or even criticize, officials working for him.

President Bush often made a point of describing himself as someone who neither read newspapers addition to relying on others, including her, to fill him in. Because he was traveling during those first days of the hurricane, he saw little more than snippets of the television coverage. When an article in *Newsweek* reported that communications adviser Dan Bartlett had made a DVD of news broadcasts to show the president as he traveled to the Gulf for the first time, the impression of an out-of-touch president was cemented.¹²

¹¹ White House internal transcript of session with reporters biking with him, August 13, 2005. Not a public document.

¹² Evan Thomas et al, "How Bush Blew It," *Newsweek*, September 15, 2005, 26-40.

By the latter part of the week on September 2nd, officials in both parties were critical of the way federal officials and their agencies had handled both the preparation for the consequences of Hurricane Katrina. But Bush believed it bad for team morale to criticize in public those who were working for him. "A lot of people are working hard to help those who've been affected, and I want to thank the people for their efforts." Immediately following this praise, he said, "The results are not acceptable." But he did not specify why the results were unacceptable or who was at fault. Critics of the federal government effort singled out FEMA. Later the same day, Bush stood next to the director of FEMA, Michael Brown, and said, "Brownie, you are doing a heck of a job." The scene was widely seen as evidence of a president who had lost touch with the realities of one of the most devastating natural disasters in the history of the United States.

Smooth communications operations are hard to come by, because they must handle short-term, nuts-and-bolts emergencies as well as long-term, policy-oriented campaigns. Each poses different demands on the lifestyle and governing style of a president.

Hurdles in Altering Established Presidential Reputations

There is usually a context to a presidency. The chief executive comes into office with a reputation in terms of his leadership and his personal style. Once they are established, reputations and images are difficult to alter. Sometimes a president's communications team can make some headway in altering a negative image, but most often this is not possible. President George H. W. Bush provides an example of the difficulty of turning around an image once formed. Viewed as a patrician from a long line of wealthy political and financial leaders, Bush was also seen as a person who was not in touch with the average citizen. News stories emphasizing those points were difficult for his staff to counter. One example makes the point.

When Bush was traveling around the country at the beginning of the reelection campaign in February 1992, he went to an exhibit at the convention of the National Grocers Association. An article in the *New York Times* by Andrew Rosenthal described his encounter with a grocery store scanner in the following way: "As President Bush travels the country in search of re-election, he seems unable to escape a central problem: This career politician, who has lived the cloistered life of a top Washington bureaucrat for decades, is having trouble presenting himself to the electorate as a man in touch with middle-class life. Today, for instance, he emerged from 11 years in Washington's choicest executive mansions to confront the modern supermarket." Rosenthal added, "Then he grabbed a quart of milk, a light bulb and a bag of candy and ran them over an electronic scanner. The look of wonder flickered across his face again as he saw the item and price registered on the cash register screen. 'This is for checking out?' asked Mr. Bush. 'I just took a tour through the exhibits here,' he told the grocers later. 'Amazed by some of the technology.'"¹³

White House staff later maintained the machine that so amazed the president was not an ordinary scanner.¹⁴ But contemporaneously, his staff was not able to counter the impression the president was confronting the same things that housewives saw every day. As a response that day, Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater "told reporters that Bush had seen this [older] technology at work before. At least once. In Kennebunkport, Maine."¹⁵ Fitzwater explained: "I had made the case that Bush could never have seen the new scanner technology before because NCR told us it was experimental and had not been sold. Then the press asked if the president had ever seen checkout scanners before, implying he had never been to a grocery store. I replied that he had been to the grocery in Kennebunkport, where they presumably had the older technology."¹⁶

¹³ Andrew Rosenthal, "Bush Encounters Supermarket, Amazed," *New York Times*, February 4, 1992.

¹⁴ Marlin Fitzwater, *Call the Briefing: Bush and Reagan, Sam and Helen. A Decade with the Presidents and the Press*. New York: Times Books, 1995, 328-32.

¹⁵ John E. Yang, "Bush Says Tax Plan Critics Are Divisive; President Goes to Grocers to Seek Support for Economic Incentives," *Washington Post*, February 4, 1992.

¹⁶ Email message from Marlin Fitzwater to Martha Kumar, October 27, 2005.

It did not take long for an image to take hold. The second- and third-day articles bore titles such as "President Bush, Checkout-Challenged" and "Message for Rip Van Bush; A Primer on the Technology Thing."¹⁷

The Problem of Simultaneously Listening and Advocating

One of the byproducts of a communications operation geared toward action is the difficulty in listening while selling the president's ideas. Operations focused on an agenda require the president and his staff to have a sense of their mission, to articulate it, to repeat it, and to adhere to it. They want to discuss their issues and not to spend time responding to the agendas of others, particularly their critics. In doing so, those same people can fail to listen to alternate interpretations held by others or items worth putting on their agenda.

Both the Reagan and the George W. Bush administrations developed exceptionally well-run communications operations. By the same token, each had difficulty getting those operations to change course. The Reagan administration's communications plan for promoting the nomination of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court relied on fielding short press releases and interviews to local news organizations. The premise of this strategy was that the elite national media would have little interest in covering the nomination during the summer months. Even when it turned out that the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were in fact very interested in covering the Bork nomination, Reagan's communications team stuck with their original plans. Analyses of Bork's long and controversial legal record contained in stories coming out of Washington and New York went uncountered. The opposition succeeded in defining the nature of both the debate and the nominee. Admittedly, the nominee did prove a difficult person to sell to the public and to the Senate.

The George W. Bush administration took months to add corporate responsibility to its slate of pressing issues. While President Bush discussed it repeatedly in his campaign speech in 2004, it was a long time before he and his staff viewed it as a salient issue when it surfaced in 2001. It took several months after the Enron collapse in December 2001 and the corporate fraud issues raised in the telecommunications field with the downfall of WorldCom, Global Crossing, and Qwest Communications International before the president highlighted the issue. It was not until July 9, 2002, that the president gave a major speech on the issue. The following month he held an August 13 conference in Waco, Texas, focusing on corporate responsibility as one of several key economic issues.

The Tendency to Communicate with One's Friends

Rare is the staff that is truly ecumenical in providing information to news organizations. Most place primary attention on those reporters and news organizations they know and ones they believe have a wide effect in the Washington community and among the public.

Communications staffers provide information to sources with whom they are comfortable. That puts a premium on contacts with reporters and organizations they know and reduces contacts with those they may not know, and thus not trust. White House staff work from a viewpoint of distrust for news organizations. One senior staff member explained the apprehension of staff in talking to reporters. Sometimes a particular item is pulled out of an interview in a manner, this staff member said, that characterizes the interviewee's sentiments in a way that is unfair: "So what tends to happen--and this requires a long history in this business--you develop your own sources. I know who my friends are in the press who I can trust, and they get better information. They get better contacts, they get better color."¹⁸

In reality, the more broadly a White House disseminates information and the more quickly and accurately it does so, the better the publicity they receive. The opposite holds true as well.

A measure of the difficulty the Bush White House has had letting in contrary viewpoints can be seen in the manner in which their allies communicated with them in the runup to the Iraq War. Two Republican supporters of the administration, James A. Baker III, who managed the Florida recount for George W. Bush, and Brent Scowcroft, member of the administration's Foreign Intelligence Board, both wrote newspaper

¹⁷ Jonathan Yardley, "President Bush, Checkout-Challenged," *Washington Post*, February 10, 1992, and Joel Achenbach, "Message for Rip Van Bush: A Prime on the Technology Thing," *Washington Post*, February 6, 1992.

¹⁸ Background interview.

commentaries in the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* to communicate their concern to the administration over the Iraq situation. They were not persuaded that they could reach the president in a traditional way, so they took a public strategy instead.

Reluctance to Admit Mistakes

Most administrations do not like to admit mistakes. A good staff operation can help an administration reduce the number of mistakes it makes, but once committed, errors are difficult to handle. Allowing mistakes to drift without correcting the record proves to be costly because the issues in question will remain in people's minds until they are dealt with. But most administrations learn the lesson the hard way, and many times over.

Ron Nessen remarked that in the White House the "same set of rules always apply year after year, administration after administration: Tell the truth, don't lie, don't cover up, put out the bad news yourself, put it out as soon as possible, put your own explanation on it, all those things." What he also found, though, was the difficulty of getting others to sign on to those rules, especially if it involves mistakes: "A lot of times, other members of the staff don't want to do that; they don't understand it. They're political strategists; they have a slightly different set of goals. Sometimes you have to fight that battle inside the White House, and sometimes the president is reluctant to do that."¹⁹

COMMUNICATIONS AND THE PRESIDENCY

Studying White House communications operations teaches us valuable lessons about the presidency. Communications is a major activity of presidents and their staffs, so we can find out about the office of the presidency and the staff operations. Communications trends point to overall presidential patterns.

The White House Staff Reflects the President

No matter what administration it is, the White House staff structure reflects the president the staff serves. Of course, if a staff representing the president's strengths, it also reflects his weaknesses. They do not provide what he lacks. Those presidents who are good communicators spend their time and energy on publicity--as do their staffs. Those chief executives who are weak communicators choose to devote few staff resources to strengthen their own shortcomings. Instead, they focus resources on the areas they prefer to emphasize.

With his background in Hollywood image-making, President Reagan made certain that he had a publicity operation that would carry the messages and actions of his presidency to the American people as well as to specific publics inside and outside of government that he wanted to reach. He had Michael Deaver, who was close to him and to Nancy Reagan, handle issues and events related to his image on television and in person. Reagan created a White House staff structure in which communications was important to those at the top level as well as throughout the organization.

James Baker explained why staff reflect, rather than complement, a president. "I think the staff is always going to reflect the president's strengths and weaknesses because everything is derivative from him. There is no power that is not derivative from him." Thus, staff makes certain to respond to the president's interests. If he is not focused on a particular organizational area or policy, neither are they.

Baker said that staff reflects a president in more than the area of communications: "I think that's true on foreign policy. I think it's true in domestic policy. I think it's true generally." During the George H. W. Bush administration, "what a wonderful time it was to be secretary of state . . . because we had a president who understood foreign policy, he liked foreign policy, he devoted presidential time, resources, and attention to it,

¹⁹ Ron Nessen, interview with the author, White House Interview Program, Washington, DC, August 3, 1999.

and he was good at it. And we were good at it, as a consequence. I think the same thing is true whether it's communications, whether it's campaigning, whether it's domestic policy, no matter what it is."²⁰

On the other hand, President George H. W. Bush did not enjoy communications and developed a system that reflected his lack of interest in presidential publicity. He met with reporters and gave speeches, but he did not work on them as a coordinated whole. His most important communications staff member was Marlin Fitzwater, his press secretary, not his communications director.

White House Staff Are Often Risk Averse

In the first term, communications staff was reluctant to risk the president's popularity by having him or someone else in his administration make a communications mistake. Above all, they wanted to avoid putting him or his surrogates in a position of vulnerability. "I think staffers or administration people have the fear of making a mistake," Bartlett said. "And when you are making a mistake before the president is going before the people for reelection it has a different consequence than making a mistake when he is no longer running for reelection." The fear is that something will be used in a way the administration official may not have intended. In the "campaign environment things can be taken out of context or misconstrued or used against you in a way-that somebody would fear it would be used in a politically harmful way to their boss. And obviously no one wants to be put in that precarious situation."²¹ Such a case for the Bush team occurred early in the campaign season in February 2004.

The annual economic report prepared by the Council of Economic Advisers had been the centerpiece for a week of events highlighting how well the economy was doing--but not, alas, without its share of fallout. The report made mention of the sensitive issue of outsourcing of jobs by American corporations to other countries. In releasing the report, Gerald Mankiw, chairman of the CEA, told reporters, "outsourcing is just a new way of doing international trade." He explained, "More things are tradable than were tradable in the past and that's a good thing." Mankiw was an immediate target of criticism by Democrats but also by midwestern Republicans, such as Representative Donald Mazullo of Illinois, who called for his resignation: "I know the President cannot believe what this man has said. He ought to walk away, and return to his ivy-covered office at Harvard."²² Others in the administration came to Mankiw's aid, which kept the issue in the news.²³

Republicans and Democrats Are Developing Similar Communications Approaches

From Eisenhower through Carter, there were partisan differences in the way the White House was run. Republicans from Eisenhower to Nixon to Reagan organized their White House communications in a similar manner, with a sophisticated organization controlled by senior aides with a broad view of administration operations. Except for the Eisenhower administration, where Hagerty handled planning as well as daily press operations, the key communications figure in the Nixon and Reagan administrations was the director of communications, who organized planning. Of all the post-World War II Republicans, only President George H. W. Bush eschewed a long-range planning operation in favor of a daily press strategy controlled by Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater.

Democrats during this time held to a different pattern, mainly in that Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Carter did not have chiefs of staff who organized and managed White House operations. Instead their staff structures were loose ones, with several different key players in senior posts. For all of them, the press secretary was the most important official in the communications area.

President Clinton broke from the pattern once he opted for a strong central staff structure under Chief of Staff Leon Panetta. Even though the press secretary was still the key communications official, the chief of

²⁰ James A. Baker III, interview with the author, Houston, Texas, May 14, 2001.

²¹ Dan Bartlett, interview with the author, "The President, the Press, and Democratic Society," Towson University course, Washington, DC, March 8, 2004. http://www.ucdc.edu/aboutus/whstreaming_archive.cfm.

²² Jonathan Weisman, "Bush, Adviser Assailed for Stance on 'Offshoring' Jobs," *Washington Post*, February 11, 2004.

²³ Later in the month, Secretary of the Treasury John Snow refused to condemn the outsourcing of jobs: "I think American corporations need to do what they need to do to be competitive, and as they're competitive, it's good for their shareholders, it's good for their consumers and it's good for their employers, because enterprises - and I come out of the American business system. Enterprises that don't succeed don't create many jobs." Capital Reports, CNBC News Transcripts, February 24, 2004.

staff was a central figure and, to a lesser extent, the communications director. They saw planning as important, even if they felt that their ability to adapt to events and situations was crucial as well.

Future Democratic and Republican administrations will most likely adopt a strong staff system under the control of a chief of staff who values communications. If learn from the lessons of what works from their predecessors, they will have a system that emphasizes planning, discipline, targeting audiences, and adaptability to changing circumstances.

Presidents and Their Staffs Treat Political and Policy Difficulties as Communications Problems

Fresh off of his 2004 reelection win, President Bush in one year met with strong resistance to his handling of Hurricane Katrina, his Social Security package, his plans for immigration reform, his nomination of Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court, and the administration-backed deal involving a Dubai company managing container terminals at several major U.S. ports. On top of this, throughout the year he faced increasing criticism of his handling of the war in Iraq. Having Republican control of both houses of Congress did not bring about support for his policies. It did, however, bring calls for him to make changes in his communications team.

The response of an administration to the pressure of political and policy difficulties is often to assume their problems lie in communications. Presidents will change their communications staff and sometimes their chiefs of staff as well. Under the weight of the Iran-Contra scandal, President Reagan brought in a new chief of staff, former Senator Howard Baker, and a communications director, Tom Griscom. When his job approval numbers appeared stuck in the 30 percent range for the better part of a year, President George W. Bush opted to bring in Josh Bolten as his chief of staff and Tony Snow as his press secretary. After several months, his job approval numbers had hardly budged.

In reality, what presidents have are political and policy problems, not communications problems. The expectations of what presidential communications can deliver are much greater than what they can really do. Yet there is still much an effective communications operation can do for a president.

Presidents Adapt to Communications Opportunities

Presidents and their staffs have demonstrated the adaptability of the presidency to a changing environment in the important area of communications. When George B. Cortelyou served as an assistant secretary and then secretary to Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt, he was very aware of developing technology, especially photography. He made certain that his presidents were well covered by the new medium and that photographers were included when the president traveled. Twentieth-century presidents adjusted to radio and then television. Presidents and their staffs viewed technological change as an opportunity, not as a burden.

President Eisenhower included the new medium of television as a central part of his publicity plans. He and his advisers saw television as a method of reaching the public directly. Since his time, other presidents have worked with technological changes to accomplish the same goal: to reach an audience with minimal edits and interpretation by reporters and their news organizations.

In Eisenhower's day, reaching the public regularly occurred through his twice-monthly press conferences. Although they were presented on tape delay, the broadcasts gave a full picture of the president responding to a variety of questions. President Kennedy saw the advent of live news conferences carried in full by the networks as a regular feature of his effort to explain to the public his thinking and actions. For Presidents Nixon and Reagan, it was nighttime East Room news conferences at a time where there were three national networks (ABC was not a major news player in the 1950s and 1960s). A large audience stopped their routines and watched.

Today, getting to the public in as unfiltered a manner as possible still involves television, but now presidents can choose a combination of cable news networks and local ones. No matter what the available technology is, presidents have developed ways to maximize their time with the public.

While the fast-paced news cycle makes it difficult for presidents to get ahead of the news to explain their case in their terms, both Clinton and Bush managed to do so. In both cases, they talked about the subjects

they wanted to discuss, and in both cases, the viewers understood their meaning. People may not have liked what both presidents had to say, but the public had the opportunity to listen to them many times.

In order to lead effectively, a president needs to be able to communicate with the public on important issues and events. While at one time the president could handle his own communications planning, it is no longer possible for him to do so. Today, effective presidential communications requires the chief executive to put together an organization capable of arranging his publicity. He needs to have an organization behind him that is capable of crafting messages for the public and then of managing those messages in a way that appeals to the public he is interested in reaching.

The technology that presidents use to get to the public has developed into many different forms. Even so, presidents continue to need news organizations. News organizations represent the vehicle for the president to reach the public on a daily basis with news of himself and his administration. For the press, the president is just as important as news organizations are for him. He is central to the concept of news their readers or viewers have. It is the need that each side has for the other that makes the presidential-press relationship an important feature of the modern presidency. It is a relationship that provides the president with his needed link to his supporters, whom he informs, encourages, and activates on behalf of himself and his programs.