

TIMOTHY E. COOK

GOVERNING WITH THE NEWS

*The News Media as a
Political Institution*

STUDIES IN COMMUNICATION, MEDIA,
AND PUBLIC OPINION

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and Benjamin I. Page*

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To the memory of my mother,

Audrey J. Cook

1913-1972

and to the memory of her mother, my Gran,

Hilda Jackson

1891-1987

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THE USES OF NEWS: THEORY AND (PRESIDENTIAL) PRACTICE

If there was a classic era in American political science, it undoubtedly would be located in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when many famous accounts of American politics were carried out and published. It was the heyday of the theory of pluralism, where officials amidst shifting coalitions were seen to be engaged in constant bargaining, usually directly and often behind closed doors, whether among themselves or with leaders of organized groups. With the status quo as the starting point, and through the constant give-and-take of negotiation among elite actors responsible to diverse constituencies, many authors were seemingly assured that viable democratic decision making was alive and well in the United States.

The news media were rarely seen in these “mid-century” accounts of American politics. Richard Neustadt’s famous model of presidential influence saw the presidents’ popularity (what he termed “public prestige”) as merely conditioning the far more essential continuing assessments by Washingtonians of the incumbent’s willingness and skill to use the powers of bargaining.¹ Scholars studying Congress saw a miniature political system, with cohesive folkways and norms that discouraged open conflict and dominated by effective leaders—Lyndon Johnson in the Senate or Sam Rayburn and Wilbur Mills in the House—who avoided the media that might force them to stake out public positions that would restrict their freedom to strike a deal.² Justices of the Supreme Court, presumably apprehensive about their legitimacy and wishing to be perceived as above politics, maintained a tradition of aloofness, speaking on record only on the most general matters of jurisprudence; but behind the august image thereby provided, they were bargainers as well, circulating and recirculating opinions in search of a winning coalition.³

To be sure, the normative theory of pluralism that undergirded the empirical theory of bargaining was always fragile. The political scientist E. E. Schattschneider revealed as much in 1960 when he demonstrated that the choice of a particular contest influences the outcome at least

as much as the actual contest itself. Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz expanded Schattschneider’s insight to encompass nondecisions, the standing tacit agreements not to raise certain options or issues.⁴ As the sixties wore on, the theoretical confidence that a system of bargaining elites would protect popular government became ever more contested.

But the *descriptive* model of pluralism from the studies of the 1950s and early 1960s is quite a contrast, too, with the politics of the 1990s. Nowadays, descriptions of American politics stress atomization, dispersion, unpredictability, and confusion as the natural state of things.⁵ Instead of a small set of bargainers, there are many single-issue interest groups, often able to exert influence by the increasing role of their political action committees in financing elections. And the multiplication of interest groups is self-perpetuating: “[I]n the process of creating structures to control or adapt to uncertainty, they have contributed to the development of a more complex and rapidly changing policymaking environment. Interest representation has thus become a self-reproducing organizational field.”⁶

The growth of government since the 1960s means more political actors within the three branches, too—as witnessed by the explosions in the number of congressional staffers and in the size of executive bureaucracies. Instead of slowly shifting games among a stable set of participants, more recent models show participation to be fluid and unpredictable, with the rise of political entrepreneurs selling particular issues and, along with them, their preferred solutions, which are, as often as not, in search of problems as much as the other way around. Instead of incrementally “muddling through,” then, issues rise and fall with dizzying speed, and political fortunes along with them. While there have been centralizing tendencies in recent years as well—most prominently a resurgence in party organizations and congressional leadership—these can only partially counterbalance the complexities of contemporary governance. Indeed, in some ways, such centralization does not affect the problem at all; for instance, the resurgence of parties occurs by offering greater service to candidates who continue to be as autonomous as ever.⁷ Add to this the growing uncertainties of the post-Cold War world and the globalization of the political economy, and the pluralist descriptions begin to sound like something from another era indeed.

The news media, too, have also become a more central and visible political player between the 1950s and the 1990s, as we have seen in the preceding chapters. Whether this development is a cause of the dispersion of American politics, an effect thereof, or a mere coincidence has been a subject of debates I will not enter into here.⁸ What is more important for

my purposes in this chapter is that American governmental officials, faced with an unpredictable and volatile political process, increasingly rely upon the news media in order to communicate strategically among and within its disparate parts—and without having to do so by being conveyed through public opinion. Indeed, the separation-of-powers political system in the United States may particularly encourage the news media to act in governmental terms as a political institution, given both the greater independence of journalists from political pressure as well as the greater need for intermediary institutions to bridge the gaps between the constitutional branches.⁹

When one compares the 1950s and the 1990s, not only do we find a more dispersed political system but *every* branch of government is more preoccupied with and spends more resources on the news media today than it did forty years ago. Presidents not only spend more and more time and energy in order to give speeches, but their activities and those of the executive branch as a whole are increasingly geared toward the “line of the day” charted out by the Office of Communications. Congress has opened up its floor deliberations to live cable television and its committee proceedings to the news media, while individual members’ offices have, in the last twenty years, turned greater attention to the news media by the help of designated full-time press secretaries who often pursue not only local publicity for electoral purposes but national publicity for policy purposes. To the extent that congressional leadership has taken charge of an increasingly individualistic institution, it is in no small part due to those leaders going increasingly public themselves, with the apogee reached in the ascendancy of House Speaker Newt Gingrich. Even the Supreme Court has gotten into the act, with the justices giving speeches and interviews on a variety of subjects, including the decisions that they have reached, the philosophies they have used, and the implications for future politics; at the very least, justices now find they have to make public speeches in order to safeguard the private discretion they have long enjoyed.

In short, the work of the news media has been increasingly incorporated into the activities of the constitutional three branches, without becoming a mere extension of any one of them. After all, just because officials aim to get things done through the news media does not mean that they usually—or even often—succeed. This is, of course, exactly what we would have expected from seeing the news media as one among a number of semi-independent political institutions in Washington.

After all, a simplistic conception of separation of powers that neatly divides executive, lawmaking, and adjudicating powers into distinct pres-

idential, congressional, and judicial spheres was specifically rejected by the founders in favor of what Madison (in *Federalist* 48) termed a “blended” political system.¹⁰ Thus, to take one example, the president and the Justices of the Supreme Court are part of the legislative process itself: the former before and during deliberation as agenda setter and chief lobbyist and thereafter as arbiter through the veto, and the latter before and during deliberation as delineators of constitutionally available options and thereafter as arbiter through judicial review. In other words, the legislative process includes institutions other than just the legislature, and it includes institutional actors other than just legislators.¹¹ Much the same could be said of executing or of adjudicating.

As Neustadt famously put it in *Presidential Power*, “The Constitutional Convention of 1787 is supposed to have created a government of ‘separated powers.’ It did nothing of the sort. Rather, it created a government of separated institutions *sharing* powers.”¹² The work of each branch is implicated in the work of the others, and vice versa. None of the three branches can act unilaterally without the cooperation—or at the very least the passive consent—of the other two. The result is a system marked, in Justice Robert Jackson’s words, by “separateness but interdependence, autonomy but reciprocity.”¹³

We have seen in the previous chapter how governmental officials are key participants in the process of newsmaking. What about the other way around: Are journalists now key participants in the process of governing? If the news media now enter into the process of separated institutions of sharing power, then we need to investigate the question: What uses does newsmaking serve for policymaking?

NEWSMAKING AS POLICY MAKING

As we have seen, if government officials need to enlist the news media to help them accomplish their goals, this assistance cannot come without some cost. After all, the news media have their own concerns and priorities which are never identical with those of the official sources upon whom they rely to help them make the news. This disjuncture was deemed so great by scholars in the 1950s and 1960s that they saw an almost inevitable clash between officials’ pursuit of secrecy, in order to preserve maximum leeway, and reporters’ devotion to publicity, in order to have enough content to write a story.¹⁴ To be sure, the media can probably do more to derail an initiative through their negative coverage than they can assure its success by favorable coverage.¹⁵ And indeed, insofar as newsmakers enter the ongoing negotiation of newsworthiness with important

resources of their own and divergent understandings of importance and interest, any political actor who relies on the news media must feel their impact.

Yet for officials seeking strategies to govern, running this risk is often acceptable for several reasons.¹⁶ *First*, making news can be making policy in and of itself, particularly when the deeds of government are directly accomplished by words. *Second*, making news can call attention to one's preferred issues and alternatives (and build one's reputation in the process) and focus the public debate on their importance. *Third*, making news can persuade others to adopt one's stance, whether explicitly (by broadcasting one's inflexibility or amplifying threats) or implicitly (by influencing the context of others' decisions—establishing seemingly indisputable facts or representing public moods that are favorable to one's interests and positions). In a political system where centrifugal forces pulling outward seem to outnumber centripetal forces reinforcing power, both within and across organizations and institutions, the news media's assistance to officials should not be underestimated. Thus, as Martin Linsky's survey of federal officials concluded, "When these policymakers talk about time with the press, they do not see the press as an intrusion into their lives, but as a resource for them in doing their job."¹⁷

Words as Actions

In the most direct use of the news media in governing, publicity is policy in and of itself. One could easily think of rhetoric as a substitute for or a spur to action, but many governmental pronouncements partake of what the philosopher J. L. Austin dubbed "performative" language, where "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action."¹⁸ As contrasted with purely descriptive statements, performatives are actions in and of themselves that could not be accomplished without the words. Take the examples of naming a ship or congratulating a graduate.

The epitome of performative language in political news is the noon briefing of the State Department, where the United States is placed on record as condemning, congratulating, doubting, agreeing, warning, and (in perhaps the most virtuosic use of performative language) not commenting.¹⁹ But elsewhere in government, officials engage in the performative: presidents order, legislators proclaim, judges rule. By making statements in public and encouraging their use in the news, officials both enact policy and alert larger audiences to these actions presumably so that the latter may take this new information into account in planning what they do next.

Performatives are handy for both official and reporter. Reporters ha-

bitually use politicians' performatives in their stories because it enables them to produce an account without laborious, time-consuming fact-checking. A defining characteristic of the performative is that it cannot be said to be either true or false; we can doubt whether people who say "I'm sorry" are genuinely sorry or not, for instance, but we cannot doubt that they have apologized.²⁰ Consequently, as sociologist Gaye Tuchman pointed out in her famous account of the uses of objectivity, quotations are indispensable to journalists, who may not be able to say whether a given statement is a fact but who can confidently point to another fact: that the statement was made, and by a person presumed, usually by their institutional position, to be "in a position to know."²¹

For their part, officials doing something with words have the satisfaction of accomplishing something quickly and directly in a way that otherwise often evades them.²² Performatives are accessible to officials who are also structurally advantaged through their control over the correct setting and timing of such utterances. Though performatives cannot be true or false, they can be what Austin termed "infelicitous." To work right, performatives must be accomplished by the "uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances . . . appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure."²³ Performatives can thus go awry if misapplied; after President Reagan was shot and wounded in 1981, Secretary of State Alexander Haig probably alarmed his audience and undermined his authority by rushing to the podium in the White House press room to peremptorily announce, "I am in charge in this White House."²⁴ But more often than not, officials are provided with the trappings of office—the White House Oval Office, the well of the Senate, the state department briefing room complete with world maps, the Supreme Court's high bench—which endow them with the authority to make words into authoritative policy actions.

Setting the Agenda

When policy requires the assent of others, media strategies are useful for persuading others to act. As face-to-face communication has become more difficult with the growing reach of government, the increasing number of participants and the dispersion and confusion of power and authority, media persuasion is a more attractive and efficient use of resources.²⁵ By appealing to the media, one can attempt to indicate one's preferences, respond to ongoing events, and attempt to persuade en masse an entire and disparate set of political actors across branches and levels to the correctness of one's stance.

Officials rely on the news for information, which they often receive

more quickly than through the bureaucratic channels of their institution, particularly with the rise of all-news stations on cable television and radio which enables new information to be accessible around the clock.²⁶ Although we usually think of political actors resorting to publicity to communicate across institutional divides or to leak information from the bottom to the top of a political organization, even those in collegial institutions rely upon the news media to reach the colleagues they could easily buttonhole. As far back as 1960, the political scientist Donald Matthews noted how senators relied on the news for understanding their own institution, even though the potential of persuasion that this thereby offered was not much availed at that time:

[I]t is not so well known that the senators often find out what is going on in the Senate by reading the papers. Senators are incredibly busy people. Most of them have specialized legislative interests. Most important legislative events take place in the myriad committee and subcommittee meetings occurring all over the Hill. Senators have neither the time nor energy to keep tab on this hundred-ring circus. The newspapers help immeasurably in the senators' neverending struggle to keep track of what is going on in the Senate. It is ironic but still true that the members of so small a legislative body should find it necessary to communicate with each other via public print, but often they do.²⁷

If Matthews was right about the intimate, clubbish Senate of the 1950s, imagine the uses of the news for individuals seeking to grasp a far more complex political system. It is not far-fetched to suggest that the American news media construct a conception of what any political institution is and does, from which audiences construct their understanding of that institution, even for the individuals who are within it. In thereby saying what an institution should be and what it should do, the news media contribute to the process of institutional leadership.

To use the news, a political actor must initially call attention to one's issues and concerns and place them on the political agenda as problems that demand attention and that could be solved rather than conditions to be endured; issues that are not judged consequential or soluble tend to be bypassed more frequently than those that are.²⁸ The publicity provided by the news media can offer key assistance to officials here in two ways. First, public opinion tends to see those issues discussed in the news as more important, and citizens are more likely to judge politicians by their stances on those issues, whether or not the news is linked to those officials or not.²⁹ Second, even if public opinion is not activated, politicians respond differently to more salient issues. As the political scientist

David Price found in his superb 1978 study of the House Commerce Committee, legislators understandably gravitated toward issues with high public salience that had little conflict among organized groups and spurned issues which generated high group conflict and low salience; in the former case they could only make friends, and in the latter they could only make enemies. But less obviously and more interestingly, committee members felt compelled to deal with high-salience issues even when they engendered group conflict, for the simple reason that they might be blamed for inaction if they did nothing about it.³⁰ In other words, increasing the visibility of a particular issue also enhances the odds that political actors will do something about it in a way that is responsive to public attention.

Of course, political actors rarely call attention to an issue merely for the sake of doing so; instead, they stress issues that hold together their coalition and fragment the opposition.³¹ Moreover, they also strategically define the incipient dispute through terms that, if accepted, would almost automatically guarantee their success. Thus, much of political debate is not merely over what issues should be on the agenda but also what those issues are "really all about" and what "the" two sides of the issue are. Such debate often occurs behind the scenes, but it emerges into the open when an accident breaks the standard routines of officials and reporters alike.³²

To take an example, how should we have conceptualized the enormous oil spill in Prince William Sound in 1989 caused by the *Exxon Valdez*, and how should we respond with appropriate policy responses? Was it a case of bad navigation by a drunken captain (in which case the courts can take care of it by punishing the infractor, and legislatures can increase penalties for navigating while under the influence)? Or was it the consequence of the use of fragile single-hull vessels (in which case the flow of oil can proceed but with the introduction of double-hull ships)? Or was it simply the inevitable risk of overconsumption of petroleum in the lower forty-eight states (in which case stringent conservation would have to be imposed)? As you can see, even though all sides would presumably see an oil spill of this magnitude as something that must be avoided, the public is led to divergent policies depending on how we understand the spill and its causes. Little wonder that the sociologists Harvey Molotch and Marilyn Lester, studying the news coverage of the Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969, concluded, "One dimension of power can be construed as the ability to have one's account become the perceived reality of others. Put slightly differently, a crucial dimension of power is the ability to create public events. And since access to media is a crucial ingre-

dient in creating and sustaining the realities of publics, a study of such access is simultaneously a study of power relationships."³³

Thus, merely calling attention to an issue does not ensure that one's preferred alternative will be pursued, let alone enacted.³⁴ But again, the savvy use of publicity can elevate a particular policy response. As Phyllis Kaniss has noted in her case study of local news coverage of a proposed convention center in Philadelphia, proponents were able to link the new proposal as a solution to an old, recurring problem—the economic decline of the city—by announcing their plan in a press conference that ensured a single-source story. By packaging the story in such a way that its economic benefits were unchallenged and seemed undeniable (when, in fact, such benefits were quite unclear and problematic), proponents were able to diffuse potential opposition and divert attention away from other alternatives.³⁵ Even strategic politicians, such as backbench legislators, who cannot automatically command the spotlight can also craft policy proposals in anticipation of recurring news items, of impending deadlines, or of breaking stories that can be anticipated if not predicted (e.g., airline crashes), so that when the topic thereby becomes newsworthy, the alternative can obtain publicity as a readily available response.³⁶

Not least consequentially for officials, calling attention to one's preferred issues and policy options also calls attention to oneself. The House press secretaries I interviewed and surveyed in 1984 made few distinctions between using the news media to build a national constituency for an issue and to become a nationally recognized spokesperson on that issue.³⁷ By being covered as "in a position to know," a reputation can grow that will enhance one's stature, which can be reinvested in further news opportunities, and so on.³⁸ Those who are more frequently in the news are no less vulnerable to mass-mediated reputation building. Neustadt may have been right in 1960 when he said that Washingtonians assessed a president's "professional reputation" by keeping mental tally sheets of examples of the will and skill with which he pursued power, but he neglected to add that these examples were, by and large, filtered through the news media which apply their own standards of power and weakness, of success and failure.³⁹

Persuasion

Having set the agenda and established oneself as a key participant may well be just the beginning. Bargaining is itself far from dead and gone. But even when political actors can specify particular individuals to be bargained with or otherwise persuaded (sometimes by means of mass-mediated reputations), the news media do not become irrelevant, because

news influences the context in which governmental officials bargain and decide.

Coverage can influence or even create a public mood that may or may not be favorable to a certain issue or policy proposal, giving a sense of favorability, even inevitability, to some sort of resolution of the newly publicized problem. This may happen by mobilizing public opinion on a newsworthy issue, given that pollsters often do not ask questions on a topic (the responses to which then become the subject of yet further stories) until it has reached a critical mass of news attention.⁴⁰ At other times, the public mood represented in the news may override the more accurate soundings through polls. In 1989, for instance, the media focused on angry elderly citizens confronting their representatives on the catastrophic health care act. The public mood reported in the news pushed members of Congress to quickly repeal the act which had been passed by huge margins the year before—even though polls showed the public at large (including the elderly) favoring its retention.⁴¹

The news can also publicize particular facts that must be taken into account in the bargaining. The most famous instance is the leak. Information made public may make its way to high officials quicker within an agency or a department and force a decision.⁴² But, more generally, success in sending forth a factual definition of a situation, whether by leaks or not, may enhance one's chances of policy success. A recent example has been the continuing political controversy over a particular late-term method of abortion, known technically as "intact dilation and extraction," but better known under the moniker used by the pro-life movement of "partial-birth abortion." Although the 104th Congress passed a bill in 1996 outlawing this method, President Clinton's veto was sustained, in part because of assurances from physicians and pro-choice activists that this was an uncommon procedure used primarily to protect the health of the mother. In early 1997, however, not only did one prominent abortion provider indicate that he had underestimated the number of such abortions, but physicians increasingly noted that there were a number of alternatives to that procedure—both giving renewed momentum to the legislation.⁴³ At the very least, political officials must make sure that the facts the news proffers are congruent with the information and policy recommendations they are privately providing.⁴⁴

In a classic case of what organizational theorists call the "absorption of uncertainty," what starts out in the news as tentative hunches and extemporaneous phrases can become seemingly unquestionable fact upon being repeated from one news story to the next. An intriguing example occurred during the preparation for the 1990 International Conference

on AIDS in San Francisco, which was facing a boycott over the federal policy restricting entry into the country of those infected with HIV, the virus associated with AIDS. One of the conference organizers, responding to journalistic questions about the impact of the boycott, was quoted as saying, "We expected twelve thousand registrants, but we may lose three thousand unless the travel policy is changed." This number gained the status of a taken-for-granted fact as it became published and aired many times over—and thereby put pressure on the Bush administration's commitment to the policy.

The conference's program director, Robert Wachter, wrote in his memoir of the conference that he found this both "amusing, and a bit disconcerting." He recalled that

we had absolutely no idea how many people might participate in the boycott, but guessed it would be more than a thousand and less than five thousand. We settled on the number three thousand as a compromise: high enough (we hoped) to scare the Administration and Congress into fearing that the boycott would capture world attention, while not so high as to panic University of California administrators (whose continued support and funding were critical) into thinking that the meeting was in grave danger of collapsing. Despite the number's genesis from thin air, the press embraced it without challenge. And after enough repetition in print, everyone forgot where they first heard it—fabrication transformed into fact.⁴⁵

Thus, as Linsky has noted, how the news initially frames an issue tends to be long-lived and to constrain later choices.⁴⁶ But although it is difficult to change that frame, it is far from impossible, and the advantages thereby gained may well make it worth the effort. Such frames may gain their force by sheer repetition, which may make previously unthinkable possibilities quite imaginable indeed.⁴⁷ Insofar as officials can influence the news media's framing so as to favor their preferences, they can boost their likely success in this particular contest and enhance their reputation for future battles.

THE PRESIDENTIAL PROTOTYPE

To see the uses of news in practice, I begin with sketching the benefits that newsmaking presents for modern presidents. This is, of course, the best-known story of governing with the news, so much so that it is almost a prototype for how to do it. Given the gap between the expectations placed on the office and the actual resources that presidents are able to control, it is no surprise that many scholars have begun to see the presi-

dency as a largely rhetorical office, exercising influence by means of speaking. Given that their abilities to reach people directly seems to be on the wane, presidents must devote ever more time to finding ways to get to an audience indirectly, through the resources of the news media.

This is a familiar story, and I hope not to belabor it. It sets up nicely, however, a series of expectations that we may use to judge other parts of the federal government that are commonly seen to be less preoccupied with publicity. In the next chapter, I will present the less familiar evidence: how federal officials in any branch are media-minded as part of doing their job of governance.

For presidents, certainly, such preoccupation with the media is a daily task. Here is a description of one White House:

All [the assistants to the president] interviewed agree the national media play a very significant role in the White House decision-making process. A few respondents reported that in White House meetings, on the whole, more time is spent discussing the media than any other institution, including Congress, and that all policies are developed and presented with the media reaction in mind. One respondent reported the media have "incredible power, far beyond what professors teach in college" . . . According to another respondent, "Those in the press are participants, not witnesses . . . A lot of every day is spent on anticipating how the press will cover [an event or policy], how they are going to evaluate it, and what kind of analysis they are going to give it" . . . According to another, "I have been amazed at how such a considerable amount of energy [in the White House] is spent on press relations . . ."⁴⁸

The readers would be excused if they were to assume that this description pertained to the epitome of stage-managed presidencies, that of Ronald Reagan, or perhaps of Bill Clinton at the ascendancy of his spinmeister of the day. But on the contrary, these interviews come from a sizable sample of assistants to President George Bush, commonly portrayed as having a more relaxed and open approach to the news media.⁴⁹ More important for our purposes, these interviews reveal a continuing preoccupation with the news media, not merely for how to sell initiatives previously agreed upon behind closed doors but also in the very process of identifying problems, setting agendas, and formulating policy responses. Indeed, if we were to examine the four central tasks of leadership identified by the sociologist Philip Selznick in his classic *Leadership in Administration*—in his words, defining the mission and role of the institution, building those into the institutional structure, defending the distinctive

values and identity of the institution, and ordering internal conflict⁵⁰—we can also see that newsmaking helps presidents in every sphere.

It was not always so. The history of the presidency has been an ever-growing trend toward a public office, as presidential activities have become increasingly geared toward communication and rhetoric.⁵¹ In the nineteenth century, presidents remained largely aloof from public attention and received little press coverage except in election years.⁵² This inattention to the occupant of the White House was due to several reinforcing tendencies. Presidents conceived of their office as executing the will of the legislature; the press understood congressional debate to be the principal newsworthy continuing story in Washington; and the White House failed to accommodate reporters with space of their own or to have regularly scheduled opportunities for presidents to meet journalists. In the late nineteenth century, all that began to change. The Progressive Era's shift in values from debate to disinterested decision making both weakened party government in Congress and strengthened the role of the president, at the same time that the rise of large-circulation newspapers and the concomitant pursuit of dramatic and colorful spectacle found the president to be an ideal protagonist for their stories.⁵³

Nowadays, the typical stories at the White House focus on the individuality of the president, usually seen in Hamiltonian terms of deciding, commanding, and ordering. The irony, of course, of this mass-mediated vision has been that expectations of the president far outstrip the direct powers of the office. As Richard Neustadt brilliantly posited over thirty years ago, every presidential power is less an opportunity for the president to exert his influence than a chance for other actors to get the president to do what *they* want—what Neustadt termed the president's role as clerk.⁵⁴ Maintaining presidential power is a Sisyphean task; each president's innovation finds political actors who benefit thereby, and the next president may not be able to gain as much by its use as did his predecessor. Moreover, each presidential term is characterized by similar dynamics of declining influence. As the next election approaches, actors willing to wait before they push their agendas grow restless; conflict grows within the executive; the news media pick up on these disputes as well as any disjunctures between policy promises and policy performances; and the president's popularity declines.⁵⁵

Activist presidents must grasp at whatever powers they can, and this includes the considerable interest of the news media in the person of the president. So, starting with William McKinley and especially Theodore Roosevelt, presidents finding themselves in the news spotlight have taken full advantage of it, not merely to boost their image but to accomplish

policy goals.⁵⁶ Lyndon Johnson's press secretary, Bill Moyers, invited Robert Kintner of NBC News to help coordinate the president's communication apparatus by noting, "The President is going to want your creative and sustained thinking about the overall problem of communicating with the American people. Some call it the problem of 'the President's image.' It goes beyond that to the ultimate question of how does the President shape the issues and interpret them to people—how, in fact, does he lead."⁵⁷ The central role of the news media in presidential leadership was clear to its aspirants even before Ronald Reagan, as Walter Mondale, then the vice president, revealed in 1980 when he proclaimed that if he had to choose between the power to get on the nightly news and the veto, he would keep the former and jettison the latter.

To be sure, given the potential dispersion and fragmentation within the executive branch, one reason that presidents gravitate toward public speeches and ceremonies is because these are among the few activities that can be entirely accomplished by their own efforts. Yet, while presidents since Truman have increased the number of person-hours devoted to speechmaking,⁵⁸ they are most interested in having their speeches reach a larger audience than those assembled to hear them in person. But this is difficult for presidents to manage. Their ability to speak directly to a large audience is limited in several ways—and may be shrinking further yet. Although presidents can ask for time from the major television networks during prime time, the networks can and increasingly do turn them down, as in mid-1992, when President Bush's request to televise his evening press conference was rejected by the three major broadcast networks. With the increased availability of other channels, a presidential prime-time address, even when it is carried on all the networks, reaches a smaller potential audience even before one takes into account the high drop-off endured by presidential addresses from the usual programming.⁵⁹ And presidents cannot go to the well too frequently, lest they diminish the impact of a nationally broadcast speech; instead, they are strategic speakers.⁶⁰ Finally, their ability to go directly to a national audience is limited by the increased tendency of the networks to give the opposition party equal time and journalists' "instant analysis" immediately after the speech—interpretations that help to shape the public response to its content.⁶¹

In short, to go public, presidents must go through the news media. To be sure, they often attempt an end run around the news outlets they consider more hostile: President Kennedy's decision to hold press conferences that were broadcast live was prompted, at least in part, by his perception of a Republican-controlled press; President Nixon's distrust of

the national news media pushed his press operations to reach out to local and presumably more easily impressed journalists; and, most recently, President Clinton's early preference for televised interview programs and electronic town meetings represented the distrust of what he deemed scandal-preoccupied reporters. But just as often presidents find themselves frustrated by this mediation. For instance, in late 1994, President Clinton mused, "Sometimes I think the president, when I look at it, is least able to communicate with the American people because of the fog that I have to go through to reach them."⁶²

Still, presidents face the news media with several advantages. What makes the White House attractive to journalists—its near guarantee of regular exposure in the news—also restricts their creativity. News from the White House is salable to editors and producers by the individual protagonist of the president. Not only do presidents carry particular political significance and particular political accountability, they are presumably the classic authoritative sources in a position to know. Given the tendency for the news media to craft stories around individuals rather than social forces, the president is the most familiar protagonist around. Whenever presidents act, that is a story; and when other stories occur without their agency, whether a bombing or a blizzard, a president's statement, even when it is banal, is an integral part of the news. Indeed, the problem for contemporary presidents may be the ability to absent themselves from the news in order to be distanced from public problems that might otherwise be laid at their doorstep.

Such forces direct the media toward the chief executive. Instead of having to seek out news opportunities, presidents have the news come to them. While this interest impels presidents to create newsworthy events, they, more than other sources, can dictate the terms of access, given their near-automatic news value. Consequently, reporters, dependent on presidents' cooperation, end up prisoners in the all but hermetically sealed press room, reluctant to roam far from their connection to fame and fortune in the news business. Instead of encouraging innovation and enterprise, the White House breeds concern among reporters about missing out on the story everyone else is chasing.

All of this makes news management easier, so the ultimate sanction of "freezing out" individual reporters is rarely used. Instead, presidents gear their media operations toward serving reporters in ways that will prove beneficial: anticipating reporters' questions in news conferences and preparing accordingly; designing prescheduled events that meet news values of drama, color, and terseness; and providing frequent access to the president albeit in constrained and directed ways. The monopoly over

good information and the ability to regulate access to the key newsmaker means that news opportunities can be meted out on a basis decided by the newsmaker himself—if that newsmaker is aware of the habits and routines of the press.

As Chapter 5 suggests, that may be a big "if." The demands of the news media must be taken into account in order to get the kind of boost that presidents seek from publicity. After all, presidents may launch a news item that will go in unpredictable directions thereafter, depending on whether other sources fall in line or offer criticism. With the press corps working in close contact, the ensuing pack mentality of the press, too, can work for or against the president; if something slips, reporters may move against the president with critical questioning, each risk aversely following the next toward the big story. Third, press secretaries and communication directors must spend much of their time building bridges and minimizing antagonism between the president and the press. Insofar as press secretaries are ambassadors from the president to the press *and* from the press to the president, this reduces the possibility of one-way manipulation. Finally, presidents must anticipate the news values of journalism to get in on their own terms. Not just anything presidents do is automatically newsworthy, and even the savviest public relations campaign to project certain qualities or certain programs can't be used for just anything. To take one example, the line of the day in the Reagan White House meant controlling the message, keeping it simple, and constantly repeating it; under such conditions, there's a limited amount that can be accomplished.

Nonetheless, these risks are apparently acceptable, given that the power to go public becomes particularly valuable when other avenues are foreclosed. Rhetoric scholar Roderick Hart has shown that presidents tend to give speeches on exactly those topics that are not the subject of legislative initiatives, and when they are in strategic trouble: when the opposition controls Congress, in the second half of the term, when legislative success and/or popularity is low, when economic conditions are bad, and so forth.⁶³ Presidential communication is thus strategic, but unlike presidents such as Woodrow Wilson or Franklin Roosevelt who went public only when behind-the-scenes maneuvers failed, contemporary presidents often *begin* their initiatives with public appeals.⁶⁴

In order to gain public attention on their own terms, presidents have consequently increased the size of the operations directly connected with the media—beginning with the White House Press Office headed by the press secretary and the White House Office of Communications instituted by President Nixon and resurrected in one form or another by all of his

successors—and enhanced the importance of newsmaking in decision making in the White House.

Although White House records are too vague to indicate who is and who is not working on media-related matters, the best evidence suggests an impressive increase in recent decades.⁶⁵ The legendary presidential press secretaries, FDR's Stephen Early and Eisenhower's James Hagerty, ran virtual one-person shops. White House press operations ballooned in the Nixon White House and have stayed at roughly the same level since. In a 1990 panel of former press secretaries, Pierre Salinger, Kennedy's press secretary, said that his staff numbered ten, two of whom were exclusively handling foreign reporters, while moderator John Chancellor noted a "sevenfold increase" between Salinger and Gerald Ford's press secretary, Ron Nessen, a little over fifteen years later.⁶⁶ After adding on speechwriters, directors of White House projects, schedulers, and the Office of Communications, it is clear that a sizable percentage—perhaps even a majority—of the White House staff is primarily involved with public relations activities.⁶⁷

Presidential press officers, of course, spend much of their day responding to the needs of reporters and acting as emissary from the president to the media and vice versa. Although presidents, of course, employ the press secretary, they may soon learn that it is in their interest not to be adversarial or unresponsive to the White House press corps. One reason, for instance, that President Clinton's news coverage improved in late 1994 was the shift from the apparent unwillingness (or ability) of Clinton's press secretary, Dee Dee Myers, to keep appointments, preschedule events, or otherwise anticipate the pressures on the news; by comparison, Myers's successor, Michael McCurry, worked diligently to coordinate both the schedules and the messages from the White House, to provide advance texts of speeches, and otherwise give off a sense of what McCurry called "a sense of customer service" to reporters.⁶⁸ Moreover, as the press office has grown, press secretaries must spend more of their time supervising a specialized bureaucracy rather than be ministers without portfolio, as press secretaries until the Nixon presidency often were.⁶⁹

It would be a mistake, however, to see the press secretary as either a cog in the hierarchy on one hand or a simple go-between or an official who reacts more than acts. Although the influence of the press secretary within the White House has varied greatly from one to the next, much of their credibility depends upon being perceived as a well-connected source, and presidents have an incentive to include them in decision making. Again, Clinton's first press secretary, Dee Dee Myers, was hampered by her initial exclusion from decision-making circles; as part of the White

House effort to focus their news efforts in mid-1994, Myers finally won the rank of assistant to the president and was included as part of the small group that had access to senior staff and foreign policy meetings. After Myers's resignation at the end of the year, Michael McCurry built on what she had won and also gained access to whatever meetings he wished to attend and had frequent interaction with the president. Indeed, McCurry practices what he calls "jetstreaming," assuming that, until he is told otherwise, he can sit in on any meeting.⁷⁰

It is true that few press secretaries play a role as an advisor on substantive policy, beyond its implications for communication, as part of their job. For instance, Nixon's press secretary, Ron Ziegler, commented in a 1990 forum that "the primary role of the press secretary is to be a spokesman and to reflect the president as accurately and as clearly as he can. Even though we do during the course of our work advise the president on the number of press conferences and his communications approach, that takes place in the course of our daily activities."⁷¹

But, even in such a limited role, by helping presidents to prepare for press conferences (anticipating questions and suggesting answers); by gathering intelligence for the president and the White House staff about reporters' perspectives, opinions, and responses; by searching for initiatives to present proactively to the press; and by advising on when, where, and how to go public, the press secretary helps to set the policy agenda, delineates available options and likely responses among a key constituency (the media), and participates in policy decisions.

Still, for press secretaries, short-term care and feeding tends to overwhelm long-term planning. Even Hagerty, that most powerful of press secretaries, wrote in his diary that Eisenhower "hoped I could get freer so that I could start fires rather than have to put them out all the time."⁷² Proactive media strategies have instead become lodged in the White House Office of Communications, and its activities have further cemented the bond between governing strategies and media strategies.⁷³ The Office of Communications was launched in the Nixon presidency and was soon institutionalized. Ford and Carter, the two presidents after Nixon, initially sought to avoid such an office so as to exude an image of openness rather than manipulation, only to find late in the term the benefits of an organization that could attempt end runs around the Washington media, such as to local and regional reporters who might be more easily impressed, as well as develop, coordinate, and standardize the policy agenda throughout the executive branch. In particular, by means of the "line of the day" pioneered by Charles Colson under Nixon, and perfected by Michael Deaver in Reagan's first term, newsmaking and public relations

have become an integral and crucial part of daily decision making in the White House.

The "line of the day" originated in Nixon's 1970 campaigns for Republican senatorial candidates. As part of the new public relations orientation that the president demanded, surrogate speakers on the campaign trail would all stress a particular point that, it was hoped, would be picked up by the news—particularly television, which was reluctant to present more than one White House story per day anyhow. As the 1972 presidential campaign neared, the line of the day was the subject of a daily meeting at 8:00 A.M. with the president's chief policy advisors, who examined new polls to assess appropriate potential actions. In communicating what White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman termed in a memo "the necessity for [Cabinet members] to recognize that their job is to sell the Administration, not themselves or their departments,"⁷⁴ the Office of Communications thereby not only maintained a united front for the purposes of the news but helped maintain internal control of the executive branch. By the time that Gerald R. Ford reinstated that office under Carter, the tasks included "help formulate themes, formulate speeches . . . and try to sell [the president's] programs, not only to the public but to the Congress."⁷⁵

But it was only under Ronald Reagan that the Office of Communications became a key part of a presidential governing strategy from the start. Journalist Mark Hertsgaard describes a typical start of the White House staff's day in Reagan's first term. The day began with a 7:30 meeting of the "troika" which supervised the White House (James Baker, Michael Deaver, Edwin Meese) where overnight developments, often in the news, were assessed, to be followed by an 8:00 meeting of the senior staff. An 8:15 meeting to determine the line of the day was chaired by Baker, with Communications Director David Gergen and chief spokesperson Larry Speakes in attendance. At an 8:30 communications meeting, Deaver presided to set forth the day's planned events. Reporters became involved in the 9:15 briefing, when Speakes would announce these events, indicate which ones they could cover, and the conditions thereof.⁷⁶ In other words, the distinction between policy making and publicity seeking in White House deliberations of what to do, if it ever existed, was blurred if not erased. The "line of the day," which originated as a means largely to control the mass-mediated image of the president for electoral purposes, has become a way to specify what the presidency is to *be* and to *do*, setting out goals and missions, and coordinating the pursuit thereof throughout the executive branch.⁷⁷

This is not to say that these efforts are always successful. On the

contrary, as the political scientist Samuel Kernell has shown in his nice contrast of Reagan's first three budgets, similar media tactics have different successes, depending upon contextual factors such as the state of the economy, the president's popularity, and the place in the term.⁷⁸ And if circumstances seem to overwhelm presidents, they may be left with the distasteful task which Neustadt in the Carter presidency termed "the sheer incongruity of playing the clerk on national television."⁷⁹

Nonetheless, mass-mediated strategies of governing may now be central to chief executives. Take state governors, who are favorite subjects of local news.⁸⁰ Although the evidence is spotty, there are tantalizing indications that state governors' public relations are their most time-consuming activity; indeed, one survey of governors in the 1970s showed a small but statistically significant relationship: the weaker the governors' formal powers in their state, the more aggressive were their press operations.⁸¹ Thus, like presidents, governors have found publicity in the news as a potential way to combat entrenched actors, such as in the state legislatures.⁸² Little wonder that one governor in the 1970s advised his successor as follows: "Decide early what two or three things you want to accomplish; develop a sound public information program to let people know; and devise and constantly revise methods for evaluating your own performance, using outside sources."⁸³

In short, the work of the news media is of particular interest to chief executives, whether at state or national levels, who are not only the usual beneficiaries of media attention but may be willing to use their place in the spotlight to counterbalance their weakening authority. Public relations are geared toward the news media, and newsmaking becomes of central importance, not merely in calculating how chief executives spend their time but in assessing how they make decisions and seek to make policy.

CONCLUSION: NEWSMAKERS IN GOVERNMENT

In the presidency, then, officials not only acknowledge the role of the media in governing but perpetuate its importance when professionals—usually ex-journalists—are brought in to serve as directors of communication and press secretaries; their presence and activity end up reinforcing the priority of making news within an organization.⁸⁴ Now, just as I do not argue that a media strategy is inevitably a key component of decision making, neither do I argue that the presence of press secretaries and public information officers invariably reveals a key role in policymaking.

Presidential press officers are largely concerned with facilitating the flow of information without worrying about its impact on policy.

Yet even if we understand the presidential press secretaries' role to be limited, they do not merely react to reporters but keep themselves up-to-date about what reporters want to know about the activities within their beat, and they advise political officials on short-term possible responses and long-term information policy. In short, such an awareness of newsworthiness influences decisions of others on what to push and what to do; and though many press officers are mere spokespersons and "flacks," they may have to be involved in policy decisions if they can provide reporters with useful information. These press officers may be in but not of the political institution, given that they exhibit different recruitment patterns and fill a "boundary role"⁸⁵ that builds bridges to another occupant of a boundary role, the reporter at the newsbeat. So, not only do the news media act as political institutions. Official roles for dealing with the media and consequently the news media's interactions with government have become institutionalized in their own right.

This pattern has, as we shall see in Chapter 7, held for other agencies within the executive and the two other branches of the federal government. All political institutions have personnel to deal with and often to guide news media coverage in an optimal direction. The trick here is that the very desire to exploit the news media in pursuit of one's own policy goals may only implicate the needs of news deeper into the process of governing. When we talk about "governing with the news," then, it may be that newsmaking helps political actors in the short run but pushes them toward particular issues, concerns, and events and away from others, to the point that news values become political values, not only within the news media but within government as well.

7

BEYOND THE WHITE HOUSE

The presidential prototype is more important for other federal officials in its portrayal of the benefits for governing of media-mindedness than in its presentation of a precise model to be imitated elsewhere in Washington. Good news for one institution, and sometimes for different players within one institution, may differ widely. Political institutions organize their newsbeats differently; government officials have varying needs for publicity; and understandings of typical continuing stories diverge between institutions. In other words, the negotiation of newsworthiness proceeds in different ways in different newsbeats, and the negotiated procedures shape and constrain the potential for political actors therein to exercise a media strategy as part of a governing strategy.

In short, the American news media enter into the governmental process of separated institutions sharing power. The American news media need government officials to help them accomplish their job, and American politicians are now apparently finding the media more central to getting done what they want to get done. At federal, state, and local levels, the news media are now an integral part of the work of the executive and legislative branches, and increasingly important to the job of the judiciary. Let us now turn to the perception of newsmaking from beyond the White House.

BUREAUCRACIES

Presidents are not the only ones, of course, in the executive branch who graft media strategies onto governing strategies, even if they are the most visible and the most frequently examined. Political appointees and civil servants in the executive bureaucracies practice media strategies, too. Most famous is the leak, but the executive branch is also permeated with assistant secretaries for public affairs in every department and public information officers in every agency, enabling each subunit to explicitly use