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### ***The Unprecedented President: Donald Trump and the Media in Historical Perspective***

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Since the start of the twentieth century, when the White House first became “a full-time propaganda machine,” the president’s relationship with the media has been in a state of constant flux.<sup>1</sup> The underlying cause has been the media’s technological evolution, from its newspaper and magazine roots to the radio and television era, and finally to the modern landscape of cable broadcasting and the internet. With the addition of each new media form, presidents have faced fresh challenges related to coordination, speed, and packaging. But the more innovative among them—William McKinley in the newspaper age, Franklin D. Roosevelt in the radio era, and John F. Kennedy with the advent of television—managed to devise new ways of dealing with the altered landscape, which their successors then copied.

Regardless of whether they were dealing with newspapers, radio, television, or the Internet, past presidents have rarely enjoyed a smooth relationship with the media. The underlying dynamic of their jobs is simply too different. Presidents are obsessed with secrecy when making policy, while reporters love a leak. Presidents, to be sure, need to burnish their image and sell their policies, but journalists are not always deferential and many have seen their task as puncturing over-inflated egos or exposing flawed government programs. Presidents have at their disposal not just the power of the bully-pulpit, but also PR specialists and highly-trained lawyers to cajole and threaten reporters and editors. Few in the media have relished being drawn into too cozy a relationship with the White House, while almost all have reacted with fury at attempts to bully them, their First Amendment instincts at the fore. Small wonder that most presidents have only enjoyed a brief

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<sup>1</sup> Roderick P. Hart, “Why Do They Talk That Way? A Research Agenda for the Presidency,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32:4 (2002), 694.

honeymoon period at the start of their tenure, after which their relations with the media have invariably descended into tense conflict, if not open warfare.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps, then, Donald J. Trump is simply following a well-worn path. Perhaps his constant tweeting is simply a sign that modern presidential leadership is finally coming to terms with social media, just as earlier chief executives had to find a way of dealing with radio and television. Perhaps his vicious attacks on certain sections of the media for being inherently biased or disseminating ‘fake news’ are merely aping the actions of earlier presidents, some of whom deployed not just hostile rhetoric but also legal intimidation against their media enemies.

Yet it would be a profound mistake to view Trump so charitably. Past presidents, whether Republican or Democrat, whether dealing with print, radio, television, or the Internet, have all recognized the costs, as well as the benefits, associated with interacting with the media. Despite the sporadic efforts to intimidate or coerce, they have treated it with a large degree of caution, carefully contemplating the timing, context, and volume of their media appearances. Trump is quite different. His use of the media has been too incontinent, too undisciplined, too unprepared, too untruthful to fit into any pattern of previous behaviour. In this area, he is proving himself to be an unprecedented president, albeit in ways, one hopes, that will not endure beyond his time in office.

I

After the advent of the ‘rhetorical presidency’ at the turn of the twentieth century, the relationship between the White House and the media has gone through four main stages, driven, on one side, by changes in the nature of the media and, on the other, by innovative presidents who have found successful ways of exploiting the new changes that their successors have then copied.

The first system emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century, at a time when the print media was undergoing profound transformation. The emergence of massive new revenue streams from advertising allowed newspapers to break their overt links with political parties, which in turn enabled them to adopt a loftier, more objective tone. Improvements in the mechanics of production, from speedier wireless transmission of distant stories to the rotogravure press that permitted the publication of photographs, made newspapers much more attractive to a big audience. By 1914, there were no less than 2,457 dailies and over 16,000 weeklies across the United States, with the former selling around 15 million copies to about 20 percent of the population each day.<sup>3</sup>

William McKinley was the first president to fashion a durable method of dealing with this flourishing industry. As well as centralizing the release of official information from the White House, McKinley carefully

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<sup>2</sup> Jarol B. Manheim, “The Honeymoon’s Over: The News Conference and the Development of Presidential Style,” *The Journal of Politics* 41:1 (1979): 55-74.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin J. O’Keefe, *A Thousand Deadlines: The New York City Press and American Neutrality, 1914-1917* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), 1-3; Gerald Badelsty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 4-5, 8; Richard L. Kaplan, *Politics and the American Press: The Rise of Objectivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1-16.

worked out the timing and wording of announcements, establishing precedents that Theodore Roosevelt, with the creation of press bureaus, and William Taft and Woodrow Wilson, with the first formal press conferences, would develop.<sup>4</sup> But it took the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 for the full potential of presidential press conferences to be realized. Roosevelt dispensed with the old convention of formal written questions, which had made many of his predecessors' press conferences dull and predictable. Instead, he adopted a more relaxed, freewheeling style, predicated on ensuring that members of the Washington press pack were "welcomed as gentlemen, not suspected as spies."<sup>5</sup> Journalists, for their part, recognized the obvious news value of these conferences. Not only was each meeting shrewdly scheduled to cater for newspaper deadlines, but Roosevelt invariably went out of his way to explain complex issues and policies in simple, straightforward language that made great copy.<sup>6</sup>

More importantly, Roosevelt also exploited the new medium of radio, which, by the end of the 1930s, seven out of ten Americans rated as their "preferred news source."<sup>7</sup> Now, for the first time, the president had the ability to appeal directly to the whole nation. Roosevelt was neither the first nor last president to relish outflanking newspaper reporters, editors, and owners, who, he believed, were instinctively biased against him. "Give them all the facts," he once said to an aide, "and I would rather much trust the judgment of 130,000,000 Americans than I would that of any artificially selected few."<sup>8</sup> As he began delivering his fireside chats, Roosevelt soon became a master of the medium. By common consent, he had the perfect radio voice. Speaking in slow, measured tones, averaging about one hundred words a minute, he carefully explained to the public how he planned to confront the massive problems of the age, from the banking crisis to the strategic dilemmas involved in defeating the Axis.<sup>9</sup> And the public, in turn, flocked to their sets in huge numbers to listen to him. By the start of the 1940s there were about 60 million radio receivers throughout the country, and on occasion Roosevelt was able to reach into more than 70 percent of American homes.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Ponder, *Managing the Press: Origins of the Media Presidency, 1897-1933* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1998), 3, 8-10, 35-47, 58-59, 80-81.

<sup>5</sup> Graham J. White, *FDR and the Press* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Richard W. Steele, *Propaganda in an Open Society: The Roosevelt Administration and the Media, 1933-41* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), 8-13, 112; Betty Houchin Winfield, *FDR and the News Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 29-30; White, *FDR and the Press*, 10-15.

<sup>7</sup> David H. Hosley, *As Good as Any: Foreign Correspondence on American Radio, 1930-1940* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984), 59.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel I. Rosenman, *Working with Roosevelt* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), 511

<sup>9</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 559-560; Winfield, *FDR and the Media*, 105; Halford R. Ryan, *Franklin D. Roosevelt's Rhetorical Presidency* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 19-24.

<sup>10</sup> Steven Casey, *Cautious Crusade: Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion, and the War against Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 34-35.

Television began to supersede radio during the 1950s. Harry Truman had to confront a massive boom in the sale of TV sets in the spring of 1951, as Americans flocked to buy a device that would allow them to watch General Douglas MacArthur's public challenge to his Korean War policy. A year later, Richard Nixon showed how television could be used for electioneering, when, as Dwight Eisenhower's running mate, he delivered the "Checkers" speech to deny allegations of benefiting from a secret fund.<sup>11</sup> Famously, though, it was the emergence of John F. Kennedy, after winning the televised debates with Nixon in the 1960 campaign, that saw the true birth of the television-age presidency. The live broadcasting of press conferences was Kennedy's critical contribution, a gamble that his aides decided to take because it gave the president "free" air time and played to his charismatic strengths. In agreeing to take the plunge, Kennedy himself thought in terms similar to those of Roosevelt, convinced that TV gave him a chance to appeal over the heads of the print media. "I always said," he told his friend Ben Bradlee, the *Newsweek* reporter, "that when we don't have to go through you bastards [the print media], we can really get our story over to the American people."<sup>12</sup>

## II

Since the birth of the TV-age presidency, the media landscape has altered out of all recognition. The 1960s were the heyday of broadcasting, when a few main networks carried thirty-minute nightly news programs that, by today's standards, look like models of bland neutrality. Back then, the print media still flourished, driven by norms of "objective journalism" and a clear distinction between politics and other aspects of American life. Subsequent decades have seen a number of profound changes. While more than 70 percent of Americans still list TV as their principal news source, the arrival of cable television brought the shift from broadcasting to narrowcasting, with CNN leading the way before channels like Fox and MSNBC began airing shows night and day with a strong political bias.<sup>13</sup> In an increasingly crowded media market, media bosses also decided that celebrity sells. By the start of the twenty-first century, serious reporters began complaining openly about the blurring of "lines between news and entertainment." Even 9/11 failed to halt the trend. According to one survey, by the spring of 2002 the volume of "hard" news on network television had dwindled from 80 to 52 percent in the past six months, while "lifestyle stories made up almost 20 percent of all output."<sup>14</sup> By this time, too, the internet was changing how news was consumed. Indeed, not only did the web provide ways of getting news for free, thereby placing strong financial pressure on traditional media forms, but it also further fragmented the number of news providers, as anyone with a computer could publish

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<sup>11</sup> Steven Casey, *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion 1950-1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 312, 331-332.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Hoover, "An Early Use of Television as a Political Tool: The 1961 News Conferences of President John F. Kennedy and the Republican Opposition," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 16:1 (1988), 42.

<sup>13</sup> Austin Ranney, "Broadcasting, Narrowcasting, and Politics," in Anthony King, ed., *The New American Political System* (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 1990), ch. 6; Stephen J. Farnsworth, *Presidential Communication and Character: White House News Management from Clinton and Cable to Trump and Twitter* (New York: Routledge, 2018), ch. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 42-43; "AP Says It Wants to Know Everything About Britney Spears," *New York Times*, 14 January 2008; Steven Casey, *When Soldiers Fall: How Americans have Confronted Combat Casualties, from World War I to Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 216-217.

a blog. Then came the advent of social media. The use of online networking sites quadrupled between 2005 and 2009, while Twitter alone had an estimated 200 million users by 2010 and its number of daily users quadrupled over the next two years.<sup>15</sup>

Politicians were not slow to recognize these changes. The George W. Bush White House created the Office of Media Affairs, which dealt with the “speciality press” and managed the official website. Bush also benefited from the brazen partisanship of Fox News, which not only called his controversial 2000 victory early, but also provided him with clear support four years later.<sup>16</sup> For his part, Barack Obama responded to the growth of social media by using a variety of platforms to “mobilize the public in support of Administration objectives.”<sup>17</sup> It took the emergence of Trump, however, to demonstrate just how much the media landscape had altered.

Indeed, no politician has seemed to both embody and exploit the new era to the same degree as Trump. He is, after all, a celebrity president in the age of a celebrity-obsessed media. He is a divider, not a unifier, who is instinctively attracted to the brash bias propagated by Fox News. He is also an insurgent populist, who openly embraces a number of right-wing opinion websites, asking aides for “print-outs of Breitbart clips” and even publicly praising the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones of Infowars.<sup>18</sup> Above all, Trump has deployed Twitter as his central method of communication, using it to bypass and bash traditional forms of media. “This is my megaphone,” Bob Woodward has recorded him saying. “This is who I am. This is how I communicate. It’s the reason I got elected. It’s the reason I’m successful.” When in 2017 Twitter doubled the number of characters it allowed in a tweet, Trump’s response was characteristically boastful. “It’s a good thing,” he told an aide, “but it’s a bit of a shame because I was the Ernest Hemingway of 140 characters.”<sup>19</sup>

### III

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<sup>15</sup> Jason Gainous and Kevin M. Wagner, *Tweeting to Power: The Social Media Revolution in American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-5.

<sup>16</sup> Martha Joynt Kumar, “The Contemporary Presidency: Communications Operations in the White House of President George W. Bush: Making News on His Terms,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33:2 (2003), 380; Farnsworth, *Presidential Communication*, ch. 3.

<sup>17</sup> James Everett Katz, Michael Barris, and Anshul Jain, “Introduction and Overview,” in James Everett Katz, Michael Barris, and Anshul Jain, eds., *The First Social Media President: Barack Obama and the Politics of Digital Engagement* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 7-8.

<sup>18</sup> Asawin Suebsaeng, “Trump and Breitbart Fall in Love Again,” *Daily Beast*, 14 September 2018; William Finnegan, “Donald Trump and the ‘Amazing’ Jones,” *New Yorker*, 23 June 2016; Andrew Blake, “Infowars’ Alex Jones Claims He’s Advising Trump on Internet Censorship,” *Washington Times*, 29 August 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 206-207.

While the notion that Trump's prose can be compared to Hemingway's is fanciful, he does share one trait with the Nobel laureate: a highly belligerent posture toward his perceived enemies in the media, which, at its most extreme, comes with the menace of actual physical violence.<sup>20</sup>

Trump certainly retains an unhealthy obsession with the old media. At one level, he appears to receive much of his information about issues not from official intelligence briefings but from friendly media outlets, especially *Fox and Friends*. On another level, he also unloads much of his Twitter spite on critical TV channels or newspapers, whose stories he labels as 'fake news.' "The failing *New York Times*" has become a staple of his daily abuse. When he is particularly angry, he has even labeled the press "the enemy of the people."<sup>21</sup>

Any effort to be charitable to Trump would have to point to the other presidents who have been similarly obsessed. For one thing, Trump has not been the first president to frame policy discussions around media coverage. When administration officials write memoranda that they know historians will unearth at some stage in the future, they rarely allude to domestic factors as reasons for acting, but tape-recorded conversations that were meant to remain secret portray a very different reality.<sup>22</sup> These tapes show presidents framing some of the most momentous decisions in American history, from relations with Japan in late 1940 to the situation in Vietnam in 1964, around stories that have appeared in that day's press.<sup>23</sup>

Nor has Trump been the first president to believe that much of the media is inherently biased against him. Democrats like Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman repeatedly claimed that the print media was controlled by a small number of Republican-leaning owners who were "deliberately irresponsible" in their efforts to twist the news for partisan effect.<sup>24</sup> Nixon, by contrast, was convinced that the mainstream media was dominated by members of a liberal elite who loved to kick him around. Publicly, Nixon accused the *New York Times* of engaging in "the lowest kind of gutter politics that a great newspaper could engage in."<sup>25</sup> Behind closed doors he ordered wire taps of suspected leakers and IRS audits of media opponents; on one occasion, his aides even

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<sup>20</sup> On one occasion, Hemingway punched a critic who had published a piece on him entitled "Bull in the Afternoon;" see Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (London: Penguin, 1969), 482-483.

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Easley, "CNN War with Trump Gets Personal," *The Hill*, 28 June 2017; David Remnick, "Trump and the Enemies of the People," *New Yorker*, 15 August 2008; Matt Gertz, "Conservatives' War on the Press has Gotten Dangerous—And It's Only Going to Get Worse," *Salon*, 18 September 2018.

<sup>22</sup> This is a point made by Thomas A. Schwartz, "'Henry, . . . Winning an Election Is Terribly Important,' Partisan Politics in the History of US Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 33:2 (2009): 173-178.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Franklin D. Roosevelt, conversation with Cordell Hull, 1 October 1940, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/secret-white-house-tapes/telephone-conversation-cordell-hull>; Lyndon B. Johnson, conversation with McGeorge Bundy, 2 March 1964, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/secret-white-house-tapes/conversation-mcgeorge-bundy-march-2-1964>.

<sup>24</sup> Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs: Years of Trial and Hope, 1946-1952* (New York: Signet, 1965), 205-206, 470.

<sup>25</sup> James C. Goodale, *Fighting for the Press: The Inside Story of the Pentagon Papers and Other Battles* (New York: CUNY Journalism Press, 2013), 9.

considered murdering Jack Anderson, after the columnist had exposed some of the White House's darkest secrets.<sup>26</sup>

In fact, American history has been littered with examples of presidents going way beyond simply badmouthing the media. Abraham Lincoln instructed his generals to “arrest individuals, and suppress assemblies, or newspapers, when they may be working *palpable* injury to the Military.”<sup>27</sup> Woodrow Wilson pushed for a censorship statute that would carry prison sentences for any reporters who published proscribed information, and when Congress voted the measure down, his administration still used a section of the Espionage Act to stop certain newspapers from being sent through the mail.<sup>28</sup> The Roosevelt administration convened a grand jury in 1942, in an attempt to use the Espionage Act against the *Chicago Tribune*.<sup>29</sup> The Nixon White House likewise tried to use the same law to prevent the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* from publishing the Pentagon Papers in 1971. And both George W. Bush and Barack Obama also referred to the Espionage Act when trying to prevent leaks about top-secret programs.<sup>30</sup>

Yet there was one obvious difference between these earlier efforts to use the law against the media and Trump's recent bullying. When Lincoln, Wilson, and Roosevelt moved against the media, the nation was engaged in a formally declared war in which its existence—or, at the very least, thousands of its troops—were in intense peril. Lincoln, as Richard Carwardine argues, “was generally tolerant of the opposition press” and only supported his generals suppressing titles for reasons of military, not partisan, gain.<sup>31</sup> Wilson's efforts to control the press were often mired in controversy, but few reporters doubted the need for censorship restrictions preventing the publication of troop-ship sailing times, knowing that German U-boats would cause carnage if they knew when the American Expeditionary Force would be heading across the Atlantic. The Roosevelt administration's efforts to prosecute the *Chicago Tribune* in 1942 quickly collapsed, but no one could doubt the magnitude of the security breach—the newspaper's story claimed that the U.S. navy had advance knowledge of the Japanese fleet before the Battle of Midway—and the government's decision to halt

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<sup>26</sup> Mark Feldstein, *Poisoning the Press: Richard Nixon, Jack Anderson, and the Rise of Washington's Scandal Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), 278-289.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 258.

<sup>28</sup> Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 42: 68, 313, 386-387; James R. Mock, *Censorship—1917* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 49-53; “Senators Riddle Espionage Bill,” “Wilson Demands Press Censorship,” “President Calls Conferees, Urges Press Censorship,” *New York Times*, 19 and 23 April and 24 May 1917.

<sup>29</sup> Dina Goren, “Communication Intelligence and the Freedom of the Press: The Chicago Tribune's Battle of Midway Dispatch and the Breaking of the Japanese Naval Code,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 16:4 (1981): 663-690.

<sup>30</sup> Goodale, *Fighting for the Press*, 199-206.

<sup>31</sup> Carwardine, *Lincoln*, 258.

legal proceedings stemmed in part from a fear that a trial might draw further attention to the incident and therefore alert the enemy to the fact that its codes had been broken.<sup>32</sup>

More recent attempts to suppress the press have rested on flimsier national-security grounds, although Nixon, Bush, and Obama all argued that the Cold War and the war on terror, or the conflicts in Vietnam and Iraq, necessitated their aggressive attempts to silence the media.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, Trump's call for the Justice Department to investigate the author of an anonymous op-ed in the *New York Times* "because I really believe it's national security" lacks any basis at all.<sup>34</sup> Nor has Trump done much to follow through on this threat. Indeed, unlike earlier presidents, he, thankfully, lacks the interest, the will, or the skill to use executive-branch officials and lawyers against the media in any sustained way. Not for him the intense internal debates with the Justice Department, or the combing through the Espionage Act and past precedent for likely ways to place limits on the First Amendment. Just casual threats thrown out to his supporters in rallies and tweets.

Yet this much more casual form of waging war on the media contains acute dangers of its own. Close observers have become increasingly worried that Trump's constant drumbeat of abuse on Twitter, together with his descriptions of journalists as "dishonest," "corrupt," and "sick," might well have highly dangerous consequences. One reporter talked to half a dozen law enforcement and security leaders in the fall of 2017, who told him that "the targeting of journalists has steadily intensified in the Trump era, from organized campaigns of personal harassment to bomb threats and vows of assault, rape, and mass shootings."<sup>35</sup> In a private meeting, the publisher of the *New York Times* warned Trump that his "inflammatory language is contributing to a rise in threats against journalists and will lead to violence," but, predictably, he got nowhere. "Spent much time talking about the vast amounts of Fake News being put out by the media," Trump tweeted afterwards, "& how that Fake News has morphed into phrase, 'Enemy of the People.' Sad!"<sup>36</sup>

#### IV

In many other ways, too, Trump's relationship with the media has been unprecedented. Despite the periodic attempts to control or coerce news organizations during times of war, previous presidents have generally been aware of three main pitfalls in dealing with the press, each of which escapes the current incumbent.

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<sup>32</sup> Clay Blair, *Silent Victory: The US Submarine War against Japan* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1975), 259. The most thorough account of this episode doubts that the *Tribune* story did in fact cause the Japanese to tighten the security around their codes; see John Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded: The Secret History of American Intelligence and the Japanese Navy* (New York: Random House, 1995), 342-346.

<sup>33</sup> Goodale, *Fighting for the Press*, 195-209.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Landler and Katie Benner, "Trump Wants Attorney General to Investigate Source of Anonymous Times Op-Ed," *New York Times*, 7 September 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Mark Follman, "Trump's 'Enemy of the People' Rhetoric Is Endangering Journalists' Lives," *Mother Jones*, 13 September 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Mark Landler, "New York Times Publisher and Trump Clash Over President's Threats Against Journalism," *New York Times*, 29 July 2018.

The first of these dangers is overexposure—the idea that the public inevitably tires of their leaders repeatedly lecturing them—which means that presidents have limited their media appearances. Roosevelt, for instance, was so filled with “dread that my talks should be so frequent as to lose their effectiveness” that he established the practice—subsequently followed by most of his postwar successors—of delivering, on average, only four major speeches a year.<sup>37</sup> Trump’s own national addresses have been equally sparse, but his tweeting has placed him constantly in the public eye. He issued more than 900 of them in his first six months in office—which averaged out to more than six a day—and many of these were picked up by the 24-hour news cycles on cable television, ensuring that the president was invariably the main, if not only, topic of media conversation.

A second reason why past presidents shied away from being constantly in the media spotlight stems from the knowledge that any public utterance has to take in to account multiple audiences. Presidents often use a scripted statement to announce a major policy, which means consulting other key players within the administration. When it came to foreign policy, for example, Truman’s speechwriting team would work alongside State Department officials to produce a first draft; once this had been completed, other members of the cabinet would be given a chance to offer their thoughts.<sup>38</sup> Subsequent presidents have used a similar model, acutely aware that foreign-policy speeches have to be particularly attuned to the reaction of the international audience, both allied and enemy—indeed, some of the most famous, from Kennedy’s announcement of the quarantine during the Cuban Missile Crisis, to Johnson’s “peace offensives” during the Vietnam War, and Reagan’s softening position toward the Soviet Union in 1984 have been aimed in this direction.<sup>39</sup> And then, of course, there is the need to sell the president and his ideas to the American people, using set-piece speeches to drum up domestic support and place pressure on Congress to pass desired policies.<sup>40</sup>

Because of the possibility of upsetting one or more of these audiences, presidents have naturally been reluctant to go through the exhausting speech-writing process too frequently, but such appearances have at least been a safer option than unscripted interactions with the media. Some of the biggest presidential gaffes have come at such moments—Truman saying the atomic bomb was “under active consideration” in the immediate aftermath of China’s massive intervention in the Korean War or Nixon calling antiwar protesters “bums” just days before national guard units shot four student protesters dead at Kent State.<sup>41</sup> Small wonder that past

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<sup>37</sup> Elliott Roosevelt, ed., *FDR: His Personal Letters* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1950), 1298; Paul Brace and Barbara Hinckley, “Presidential Activities from Truman Through Reagan: Timing and Impact,” *Journal of Politics* 55:2 (1993): 386-87.

<sup>38</sup> Francis H. Heller, ed., *The Truman White House: The Administration of the Presidency, 1945-1953* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1980), 151.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Dror Yuravlivker, “‘Peace without Conquest’: Lyndon Johnson’s Speech of April 7, 1965,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36:3 (2006): 457-481; Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

<sup>40</sup> Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1997).

<sup>41</sup> Casey, *Selling the Korean War*, 131-134; “Nixon Denounces ‘Bums’ on Campus,” *New York Times*, 2 May 1970; Richard Reeves, *President Nixon: Alone in the White House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 209-213.

presidents have treated unscripted media appearances with great care, if not by limiting their number then at least by preparing assiduously beforehand. Rare has been the president who has not thumbed diligently through briefing papers and prepared answers, while also subjecting himself to what Reagan's press secretary dubbed hours of "tedious" dress rehearsals, "standing there and answering [practice] questions."<sup>42</sup>

Trump, again, has broken away from this mold. He rarely bothers to prepare for any sort of meeting, believing, as one close aide has revealed, "that improvising was his strength" and "doing too much advance preparation would diminish his skills in improvising."<sup>43</sup> It is hardly surprising, therefore, that his press conferences have contained more than their fair share of eye-raising, even hair-raising, moments, which have shocked the media, outraged opponents, and demoralized his advisers, from his refusal to condemn neo-Nazis to his acceptance of Putin's denials of election meddling. His tweets have been even more undisciplined. Whereas previous presidents have agonized over language that is appropriate to dealing with multiple audiences, Trump's tweets seem designed to appeal to his base, while offending everyone else, from his senior advisers to America's closest allies. Take this October 2017 aperçu on North Korea: "I told Rex Tillerson, our wonderful Secretary of State, that he is wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man. Save your energy Rex, we'll know what has to be done!"<sup>44</sup> Small wonder that Tillerson was soon desperate to resign, a decision made even easier by Trump's ominous threat to North Korea in early 2018. Whereas a Kennedy or a Reagan carefully couched their language so as not to provoke the Soviet Union during the most dangerous moments of the Cold War, Trump resorted to the most uncouth of boasts. "Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime," he announced in early 2018, "please inform him that I too have a Nuclear button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!"<sup>45</sup>

Nor have international adversaries been Trump's only target. His retweeting of video posts by a far-right Islamophobic group, Britain First, in November 2017 managed to achieve the unlikely feat of uniting a highly fractious House of Commons against him. Typical was the MP who wondered aloud whether the American president was "racist, incompetent, or unthinking—or all three."<sup>46</sup> Trump did offer an apology of sorts for this particular tweet, but his sincerity was immediately questioned, for the simple reason that he has earned the reputation of being an incorrigible liar. Of course, all presidents get caught in telling what Winston Churchill once dubbed a terminological inexactitude, but the scale and the motives of Trump's falsehoods do not compare with anything that has come before.

Sometimes, past presidents have knowingly lied, especially when caught up in a major scandal, as when Nixon insisted he had never participated in the Watergate cover-up, Reagan denied the U.S. had played a role in

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<sup>42</sup> Larry Speakes, *Speaking Out: Inside the Reagan White House* (New York: Scribner's, 1988), 234-235.

<sup>43</sup> Woodward, *Fear*, 231.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>46</sup> Benjamin Kentish, "Donald Trump Retweets of Far-right Group Britain First's Islamophobic Posts Raised in Parliament," *The Independent*, 29 November 2017; Stephen Castle, "Trump's Tweets Manage a Rare Feat: Uniting Britain, in Outrage," *New York Times*, 30 November 2017.

shipping arms to Iran, and Clinton stated “I did not have sexual relations with that woman.”<sup>47</sup> More often, presidents have pushed the facts to the breaking point in order to sell a particular policy, deploying arguments that Dean Acheson dubbed “clearer than truth.”<sup>48</sup> This has happened at some of the most critical moments in American history, such as when Roosevelt called the attack on the USS *Greer* in September 1941 an act of Nazi “piracy,” despite knowing that the German U-boat had neither fired first nor been aware that its target was a neutral American ship,<sup>49</sup> or when Johnson used the Tonkin Gulf incident to launch airstrikes against North Vietnam and pass a congressional resolution, even though the initial information he received about the incident was murky at best.<sup>50</sup>

Above all, there have been the frequent occasions when presidents have not meant to mislead, but have rather been left in an embarrassing position because of an inability to predict the future. A case can be made that both Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush actually believed they were winning their wars in Vietnam and Iraq; their constant claims of progress were therefore more a case of wishful thinking than of deliberate misrepresentation. Bush even believed that Iraq had stockpiled weapons of mass destruction—it certainly made no sense to use this claim as the central reason for war, knowing that Saddam Hussein’s overthrow would allow weapons inspectors to scour the Iraq in search of them, and the ultimate public admission that the administration had got it disastrously wrong proved enormously embarrassing.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, his father probably thought he would be able to fulfill the promise he made in 1988—“read my lips, no new taxes”—aware that a failure to do so would become politically toxic.<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, whatever the causes of these controversial statements, their consequences have been profound, often depleting the president’s political capital and making it much more difficult for him to lead thereafter. The credibility gap that emerged during the Vietnam War was particularly corrosive, because it embraced so much of America’s involvement in that conflict, from the early days, when Kennedy and Johnson had tried to conceal the extent of American involvement, to the emerging stalemate, which jarred with the constant

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<sup>47</sup> Stanley I. Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 337-338, 347, 453; Theodore Draper, *A Very Thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affairs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991), 482-483; Ken Gormley, *The Death of American Virtue: Clinton vs. Starr* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), 417-418.

<sup>48</sup> Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), 374-375; Nancy E. Bernhard, “Clearer Than Truth: Public Affairs Television and the State Department’s Domestic Information Campaigns,” *Diplomatic History* 21:4 (1997): 561-563.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 287-289.

<sup>50</sup> Johnson soon had doubts about what happened, but the most thorough and judicious account of this incident argues “that he had no such doubts on August 4 [1964], when he ordered retaliatory strikes against North Vietnam. See Edwin E. Moise, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 210.

<sup>51</sup> Susan A. Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 243; Bob Woodward, *State of Denial* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 278.

<sup>52</sup> Mark J. Rozell, *The Press and the Bush Presidency* (Westport: Praeger, 1996), 15.

official claims of massive enemy “body counts.”<sup>53</sup> When this credibility gap became a chasm after Nixon’s repeated lies during Watergate, the result was the emergence of what Richard M. Pious dubbed “wolfpack journalism,” as reporters treated all politicians with suspicion, seeking to expose what they considered the half-truths and un-truths that they uttered.<sup>54</sup> Jimmy Carter tried to respond to this new environment by promising never to tell a lie, but he soon became convinced that his administration was so full of Deep Throat wannabes that it was difficult to formulate policy.<sup>55</sup> Ronald Reagan attempted to deal with the “gotcha” mood of the press by severely curtailing the number of press conferences, but he was ultimately caught out by a lie that magnified the Iran-Contra scandal. Reagan was only able to rescue this particular situation by doing what Nixon was never able to do—admit his mistake with a priceless one-liner. “A few months ago,” he conceded in March 1987, “I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that’s true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not.”<sup>56</sup>

By the time Trump assumed office, the Clinton scandal and the Iraq War deception had further deepened distrust in presidential utterances, but Trump has still managed to plunge this process to a whole new level. According to one analysis, he made no less than 3,001 “false or misleading claims” during his first 466 days in office, which averaged out at almost 6.5 a day.<sup>57</sup>

Untruths on this scale are not simply motivated by self-preservation or efforts to put the best gloss on policies, although his constant attack on the so-called ‘witch hunt’ of the Mueller investigation do clearly derive from an effort to discredit an existential threat to his presidency. Instead, this persistent lying stems from key elements of Trump’s personality. There is his ostentatious boastfulness, which makes it impossible for him to admit that anything he does is inferior to the achievement of hated predecessors, especially Obama, from the numbers attending his inauguration to the size of his IQ. There is also his innate self-confidence that he knows best, that the views he has acquired over decades are more germane than the facts that experts can produce on issues like global warming, trade or immigration. To the extent that his deceit has a political purpose, it is to delegitimize any bad news, from the marginal (a Hollywood actor attacking his policies) to the momentous (thousands dying in Puerto Rico), by dismissing it as fake, safe in the knowledge that, on one side, his base will accept his own word and, on the other, the mainstream media will have to treat his statements seriously, leading with them even as they are seeking to refute what he says. In this manner, Trump is aping the actions not of any previous president, but Senator Joseph McCarthy, who, for more than

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<sup>53</sup> Walter Lippmann, “The Credibility Gap-I, *Washington Post*, April 21, 1967; Kathleen J. Turner, *Lyndon Johnson’s Dual War: Vietnam and the Press* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 176-77.

<sup>54</sup> Richard M. Pious, *The American Presidency* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 417.

<sup>55</sup> Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 59, 130.

<sup>56</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy,” 4 March 1987, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33938>.

<sup>57</sup> Glenn Kessler, Meg Kelly, Salvador Rizzo, and Michelle Ye Hee Lee, “Trump Has Made 3,001 False or Misleading Claims as President,” *Washington Post*, 1 May 2018.

three years during the 1950s, got the press to magnify his fraudulent claims that there were between 57 and 205 card-carrying Communists in government.<sup>58</sup>

V

Will it work? Will Trump create a new system that not only paves the way for presidents to exploit new forms of social media, but also makes his darker assault on the mainstream media an accepted part of the political process?

The advent of 24/7 cable news, with its partisan bent, along with the ability to tweet any time of the day or night, has certainly created opportunities for presidents to be constantly in the public eye. Yet the extent to which future White House occupants will want to copy Trump's constant barrage of unfiltered, undisciplined, and unchecked utterances remains highly questionable. In the past, a number of presidents have persisted with the innovations of their illustrious predecessors even when they have been deeply uncomfortable with them. This was particularly true of accidental presidents who suddenly assumed office because of death or resignation—the likes of Harry Truman, whose press conferences were unkindly likened to “amateur night” in comparison to FDR’s “opening night of the Ziegfeld Follies,”<sup>59</sup> or Gerald Ford, who after some unfortunate TV appearances was “portrayed as a ‘bumbler,’ an intellectual lightweight lacking a leadership vision.”<sup>60</sup> Both Truman and Ford persisted in trying to use radio, television, and free-wheeling press conferences, even though they were so ill-at-ease in these environment, for the simple reason that these tools were widely perceived to be so effective at enhancing presidential power that they had become embedded, by convention, into the job description of the presidency.

It is hard to imagine Trump's successors feeling obliged to copy his idiosyncratic approach to social media. The costs are simply too high, in terms of the chaos created, the audiences offended, and the simple fact that, at some stage, the American people are likely to grow tired of the whole spectacle. “The public psychology,” Roosevelt once observed, “cannot, because of human weakness, be attuned for long periods of time to a constant repetition of the highest note in the scale.”<sup>61</sup> Although Trump has an uncanny ability to strike the lowest notes, Roosevelt's point still holds. Trump's base might like his challenge to the existing political order, welcome his attacks on ‘fake news,’ and believe even his most egregious lies, but the political game is normally won by politicians who reach beyond their diehard supporters to moderates in the middle. And Trump's anaemic approval ratings demonstrate that these moderates have not been attracted by what they have seen and heard so far.

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<sup>58</sup> Edwin R. Bayley, *Joe McCarthy and the Press* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981).

<sup>59</sup> Franklin D. Mitchell, *Harry S. Truman and the News Media: Contentious Relations, Belated Respect* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 84; Steven Casey, “Rhetoric and Style of Truman's Leadership,” in Daniel S. Margolies, ed., *A Companion to Harry S. Truman* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 29.

<sup>60</sup> Mark J. Rozell, *The Press and the Ford Presidency* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 3, 123.

<sup>61</sup> Roosevelt, ed., *FDR: His Personal Letters*, 466-467, 1298-1300.

The balancing institutions in the polity are also likely to have a say. Yes, the Republican majorities in Congress have so far largely gone along with Trump's attack on the mainstream media, as well as his assault on the truth, but even the most partisan politicians tend to bend in the prevailing political wind, which, if the polls are true, look deeply troubling for Trump. Yes, the media is becoming increasingly fragmented, but mainstream organs continue to doggedly report the turmoil, with correspondents highlighting the growing opposition within the administration to the president's ignorant impulsiveness, while fact checkers expose every new act of brazen dishonesty. Yes, the Justice Department and the Mueller inquiry might have become the subject of some of the most vicious onslaughts from the president's Twitter account, but Trump has not yet been able to halt the momentum of a legal investigation in which facts are evidence and lies are perjury.

When past administrations have run afoul of one or more of these countervailing institutions, it has not ended well for them. In particular, no president has sought to emulate Nixon's war on the media during Watergate, which not only resulted in excesses that helped to bring him down but also created the "wolfpack journalism" that did much to halt the rise of the "imperial presidency." Since Trump's own war has, in so many ways, been even more vicious and fact-free than Nixon's, his fall ought to be even harder. That would be the best way to ensure that his presidency does indeed remain an unprecedented aberration.

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