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THE RISE OF THE RHETORICAL PRESIDENCY*

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The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency

One of the most revealing periods of President Carter's tenure in office—and perhaps of the modern presidency itself—occurred during the summer of 1979. Falling to a new low in the public's approval ratings and facing criticism from all quarters for his leadership, the President dramatically cancelled a scheduled televised speech on energy and gathered his advisors together for a so-called domestic summit. Discussions moved beyond energy and economics to a reappraisal of the nature of presidential leadership and to an analysis of what, for want of a better term, can only be called the state of the national consciousness. Having served already more than half of his term, the President came to the conclusion that he had been mistaken in his understanding of the presidential office; he had, as he told David Broder, fallen into the trap of being "head of the government" rather than "leader of the people." As for the state of the national consciousness, the President concluded that the nation was experiencing a crisis of spirit or "malaise" that went deeper and was more ominous than the economic challenges at hand. Yet difficult as this problem of malaise was, the President believed it could be tackled—and by the very same means that would correct his own failures of leadership. By engaging in a rhetorical campaign to "wake up" the American people, the President hoped both to save his presidency and begin the long process of national moral revival. As a Washington Post front page headline proclaimed on the day preceding his newly scheduled national address: CARTER SEEKING ORATORY TO MOVE AN ENTIRE NATION.[1]

Looking back today at these unusual events, one must surely be surprised that all of this self-analysis and deep introspection was so quickly forgotten. True, the July 15th speech was no classic of American oratory; but it did receive an extraordinary amount of attention at the time and was commonly thought to mark a "turning point" in the Carter presidency, at least as measured by the President's own intentions. Yet just three months afterwards, no one in the administration was mentioning the crisis of malaise, and the President, after the Iranian hostage crisis, returned to the White House and began deliberately acting "presidential," which is to say more like "the head of the government" than the "leader of the people."

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Were these events merely a peculiar "story" of the Carter presidency? Perhaps. On the other hand, it might be argued that they are revealing in an exaggerated form of a major institutional development in this century—the rise of the rhetorical presidency—and of some of the problems inherent in that development.

Popular or mass rhetoric, which Presidents once employed only rarely, now serves as one of their principal tools in attempting to govern the nation. What ever doubts Americans may now entertain about the limitations of presidential leadership, they do not consider it unfitting or inappropriate for presidents to attempt to "move" the public by programmatic speeches that exhort and set forth grand and ennobling views.

It was not always so. Prior to this century, popular leadership through rhetoric was suspect. Presidents rarely spoke directly to the people, preferring communications between the branches of the government. Washington seldom delivered more than one major speech per year of his administration, and that one—the Annual Address—was almost mandated by the Constitution and was addressed to Congress. Jefferson even ceased delivering the address in person, a precedent that continued until Woodrow Wilson's appearance before Congress in 1913. The spirit of these early presidents' examples was followed throughout the nineteenth century. The relatively few popular speeches that were made differed in character from today's addresses. Most were patriotic orations, some raised Constitutional issues, and several spoke to the conduct of war. Very few were domestic "policy speeches" of the sort so common today, and attempts to move the nation by means of an exalted picture of a perfect ideal were almost unknown. Indeed, in the conspicuous case where a president did "go to the people" in a "modern" sense—Andrew Johnson's speaking tour in the summer before the 1866 Congressional elections—the campaign not only failed, but was considered highly irregular.[2] It was not until well into the present century that presidential speeches addressed to the people became commonplace and presidents began to think that they were not effective leaders unless they constantly exhorted the public.[3]

Today, a president has an assembly-line of speechwriters efficiently producing words that enable him to say something on every conceivable occasion. Unless a president is deliberately "hiding" in the White House, a week scarcely goes by without at least one major news story devoted to coverage of a radio or TV speech, an address to Congress, a speech to a convention, a press conference, a news release, or some other presidential utterance. But more important even than the quantity of popular rhetoric is the fact that presidential speech and action increasingly reflect the opinion that speaking *is* governing. Speeches are written to become the events to which people react no less than "real" events themselves.

The use of rhetoric by some of our recent presidents is revealing of this development. During his campaign and throughout the first few months of his presidency, President Kennedy spoke continually of the existence of a national crisis and of the need for sacrifice and commitment, only to find it difficult at times to explain just what the crisis was and where the sacrifice and commitment were actually needed. Today, seen in perspective, much of Kennedy's talk about our "hour of national peril" has a nice ring but a hollow sound, as if it were fashioned to meet the imperatives of a certain rhetorical style and not those of the concrete situation he faced.[4] It seems to reflect the view expressed by a former Kennedy White House aide: "It will be less important in years to come for presidents to work out programs and serve as administrators than it will be for presidents through the means of television to serve as educational and psychic leaders."[5]

President Johnson followed with a steady stream of oratory that swelled popular expectations of governmental capacity to a level that even his apologists now concede far exceeded what government could possibly achieve. What Harry Macpherson, one of Johnson's chief aides and

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speechwriters, said of the goals of the Johnson administration characterizes perfectly the tone of its rhetoric:

> People were [seen to be] suffering from a sense of alienation from one another, of anomie, of powerlessness. This affected the well-to-do as much as it did the poor. Middle-class women, bored and friendless in the suburban afternoons; fathers, working at "meaningless" jobs, or slumped before the television set; sons and daughters desperate for "relevance"—all were in need of community beauty, and purpose, all were guilty because so many others were deprived while they, rich beyond their ancestors' dreams, were depressed. What would change all this was a creative public effort. . . .[6]

President Nixon sensed people's reaction to the feverish pitch of the mid-sixties and countered with an anti-rhetoric rhetoric that soberly promised to "lower our voices":

> In these difficult years, America has suffered from a fever of words; from inflated rhetoric that promises more than it can deliver; . . . from bombastic rhetoric that postures instead of persuading.[7]

But this calm and mature pose, typical of Nixon's political superego, could not contain his own desire to strike back at his detractors, and together with Vice-President Agnew, Nixon launched his own rhetorical counteroffensive. If they enjoyed, up to a point at least, a great deal of success with their oratory, it was because much of it had the self-contained purpose of calling into question the rhetoric of their liberal opponents. With Agnew in particular, the privilege of holding public office was less important for what it could allow him to do than for what it could allow him to say.

President Carter, the outsider who came to Washington promising to bring a simple honesty and decency to government, began his term speaking in a voice lowered to a point where many felt that it had become inaudible. By mid-term, falling in the polls and urged on by his media advisor, Gerald Rafshoon, the President began to look for more opportunities to display rhetorical forcefulness. And by the time of his July oratorical campaign he emerged with an assertive tone and vigorous body movement, his theme being the decline and revitalization of America:

> [We face] a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of unity of purpose for our nation. . . . The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and political fabric of America. . . . [What] we must do is to regenerate our sense of unity, joining hands with each other in a sense of commitment to a national purpose. . . . We must bring together the different elements in America—producers, consumers, labor, business— bring us all together from the battlefield of selfishness to a table of common purpose.[8]

In the face of no tangible crisis on the order of a war or domestic upheaval, Carter was seeking nevertheless to define a subtler crisis and, linking it to the pragmatic issues of energy politics, to lead a domestic cultural revival. As one of his aides claimed, "I think we have seen both the rebirth of the American spirit that he talks about and the rebirth of the Carter presidency as well."[9]

Much of this rhetoric is undoubtedly, as many say today, "mere rhetoric." The excess of speech has perhaps fed a cynicism about it that is the very opposite of the boundless faith in rhetoric that has been so far portrayed. Yet, despite this cynicism, it seems increasingly the case that for many who comment on and form opinions about the presidency, word rivals deed as the measure of presidential performance. The standard set for presidents has in large degree become an artifact of their own inflated rhetoric and one to which they frequently fall victim.[10] While part of this difficulty can be blamed on the ineptness of certain presidents' rhetorical strategies, it is also the case that presidents operate in a context that gives them much less discretion over their rhet-

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oric than one might think. The problem is thus not one simply of individual rhetorics, but is rather an institutional dilemma for the modern presidency.

Beginning with the campaign, the candidates are obliged to demonstrate their leadership capacity through an ever growing number of rhetorical performances, with the potential impact of their words on future problems of governing often being the least of their concerns. The pressure to "say something" continues after the president has begun to govern. Presidents not only face the demand to explain what they have done and intend to do, but they also have come under increasing pressure to speak out on perceived crises and to minister to the moods and emotions of the populace. In the end, it may be the office of the presidency that is weakened by this form of leadership, puffed up by false expectations that bear little relationship to the practical tasks of governing and undermined by the resulting cynicism.[11]

How did the rhetorical presidency come into existence? What are its strengths and weaknesses? Can presidents escape its burdens, and to what extent should they try to do so? These are some of the important questions that need addressing.

I

The rise of the rhetorical presidency has been primarily the result of three factors: 1) a modern doctrine of presidential leadership, 2) the modern mass media, and 3) the modern presidential campaign. Of these three, doctrine is probably the most important.

As strange as it may seem to us today, the Framers of our Constitution looked with great suspicion on popular rhetoric. Their fear was that mass oratory, whether crudely demagogic or highly inspirational, would undermine the rational and enlightened self-interest of the citizenry which their system was designed to foster and on which it was thought to depend for its stability. The Framers' well-known mistrust of "pure" democracy by an assembly—and by extension, of the kind of representative government that looked only to public opinion as its guide—was not based, as is generally supposed, on a simple doubt about the people's capacity to govern, but on a more complex case concerning the evils that would result from the interplay between the public and popular orators.

In democracies, they reasoned, political success and fame are won by those orators who most skillfully give expression to transient, often inchoate, public opinion.[12] Governing by this means, if indeed it can be called governing, leads to constant instability as leaders compete with each other to tap the latest mood passing through the public. The paradox of government by mood is that it fosters neither democratic accountability nor statesmanly efficiency. Freed from the necessity to consult public opinion, understood as "the cool and deliberate sense of the community," popular orators would be so chained to public opinion, understood as "mood," that discretion and flexibility essential to statesmanship would be undermined.[13]

The Founders were not so impractical as to think that popular rhetoric could be entirely avoided in a republican system. But the government they designed was intended to minimize reliance on popular oratory and to establish institutions which could operate effectively without the immediate support of transient opinion. All of the powers of governing were to be given, not directly to the people, but to their representatives. These representatives would find themselves in a tri-partite government in which the various tasks of governing would be clearly discernable and assigned, and in which they would be forced to deal with knowledgeable and determined men not easily impressed by facile oratory. As part of their solution, the Founders were counting on the large size of the nation, which at the time erected a communication barrier that would mute the impact of national popular rhetoric, whether written or oral. Beyond this, the Founders instituted a presidential selection system that was designed to preclude active campaigning by the candidates. As for the presidency itself, the Founders discouraged any idea that the President should serve as a leader

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of the people who would stir mass opinion by rhetoric; their conception was rather that of a constitutional officer who would rely for his authority on the formal powers granted by the Constitution and on the informal authority that would flow from the office's strategic position.

These limitations on popular rhetoric did not mean, however, that presidents were expected to govern in silence. Ceremonial occasions presented a proper forum for reminding the public of the nation's basic principles; and communications to Congress, explicitly provided for by the Constitution, offered a mechanism by which the people also could be informed on matters of policy. Yet this intra-branch rhetoric, though public, was not meant to be popular. Addressed in the first instance to a body of informed representatives, it would possess a reasoned and deliberative character; and insofar as some in the public would read these speeches and state papers, they would implicitly be called on to raise their understanding to the level of characteristic of deliberative speech.

Nineteenth century politics in America did not, of course, follow exactly the Founders' model of an essentially nonrhetorical regime. Campaigns quickly changed from their intended place as quiet affairs into spirited events replete with fanfare and highly charged popular rhetoric, though it is important to observe that the rhetoric was produced not by the candidates but by surrogates arranged for by the parties. Moreover, certain president—most notably Jackson and Lincoln—used their communications with Congress and some of their speeches and proclamations to address the people more or less directly. Yet the amount of nineteenth century presidential rhetoric that even loosely could be called popular is very little indeed, and the presidency remained, with some slight alterations, a Constitutional office rather than the seat of popular leadership.[14]

The Inaugural and the Annual Address (now called the State of the Union) were the principal speeches of a President given wide dissemination. The character of the Inaugural Address illustrates the general character of presidential popular speech during the period. Given on a formal occasion, it tended to follow a pattern which was set by Jefferson's First Inaugural Address in which he delivered an exposition of the principles of the union and its republican character. Although Jefferson's speech might in one sense be considered a partisan document, in fact he sought to be conciliatory towards his opponents. More important still, he presented his case not as an attempt to win support for the particular policies of a party but rather as an effort to instruct the people in, and fortify their attachment to, true republican political principles. The form of inaugural address perfected by Jefferson proved a lasting model throughout the century. Although subsequent addresses did not often match the eloquence or understanding of Jefferson's—Lincoln's Second Inaugural, of course, being the most conspicuous exception—they consistently attempted to show how the actions of the new administrations would conform to Constitutional and republican principles.

Against this tradition Woodrow Wilson gave the Inaugural Address (and presidential speech generally) a new theme. Instead of showing how the policies of the incoming administration reflected the principles of our form of government, Wilson sought to articulate the unspoken desires of the people by holding out a vision of their fulfillment. Presidential speech, in Wilson's view, should articulate what is "in our hearts" and not necessarily what is in our Constitution.[15]

Theodore Roosevelt had presaged this change by his remarkable ability to capture the nation's attention through his understanding of the character of the new mass press and through his artful manipulation of the national press corps.[16] It was Wilson, however, who brought popular speech to the forefront of American politics by his dramatic appearances before Congress—breaking more than a century's precedent of presidential nonattendance—and by his famous speaking tour on behalf of the League of Nations. Most importantly, Wilson articulated the doctrinal foundation of the rhetorical presidency and thereby provided an alternative

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theoretical model to that of the Founders. In Wilson's view, the greatest power in modern democratic regimes lay potentially with the popular leader who could sway or—to use his word—"interpret" the wishes of the people. After some indecision Wilson finally concluded that the presidency was the institution best suited to assume this role: "There is but one national voice in the country and that is the voice of the President." And it is the "voice" that is most important for governing: "It is natural that orators should be the leaders of a self-governing people. . . ."[17]

The Wilsonian concept of the rhetorical presidency consists of two interfused elements. First, the President should employ oratory to create an active public opinion that, if necessary, will pressure the Congress into accepting his program: "He [the President] has no means of compelling Congress except through public opinion."[18] In advancing policy, deliberative, intrabranch rhetoric thus becomes secondary to popular rhetoric, and the President "speaks" to Congress not directly but through his popular addresses. Second, in order to reach and move the public, the character of the rhetoric must tap the public's feelings and articulate its wishes. Rhetoric does not instill old and established principles as much as it seeks to infuse a sense of vision into the President's particular legislative program.

> A nation is led by a man who . . . speaks, not the rumors of the street, but a new principle for a new age; a man in whose ears the voices of the nation do not sound like the accidental and discordant notes that come from the voice of a mob, but concurrent and concordant like the united voices of a chorus, whose many meanings, spoken by melodious tongues, unite in his understanding in a single meaning and reveal to him a single vision, so that he can speak what no man else knows, the common meaning of the common voice.[19]

Much the same idea, though stripped of some of its eloquence, was expressed by President Carter in his Convention acceptance speech when he promised to be a President "who is not isolated from the people, but who feels your pain and shares your dreams and takes his strength and his wisdom and his courage from you."[20] Presidents have not always found it easy to bring these two elements—policy and mood—together. Carter's "malaise" address of July 1979 again illustrates the point. The first half of the speech portrayed a national malaise of sweeping and profound proportions; the second half incongruously implied that we could secure our redemption by conserving energy and taxing the oil companies.

The Wilsonian concept of presidential leadership was echoed in FDR's claim that the presidency is "pre-eminently a place of moral leadership" and subsequently canonized in the scholarly literature by Clinton Rossiter's characterization of the presidency as the nation's "trumpet."[21] To be sure, not all presidents since Wilson have embraced this grandiloquent conception of their role, but as a doctrine the rhetorical presidency has become the predominant model. What these metaphorical terms like "voice of the nation," "moral leader" and "trumpet" all suggest is a form of presidential speech that soars above the realm of calm and deliberate discussion of reasons of state or appeals to enlightened self-interest. Rather, the picture of leadership that emerges under the influence of this doctrine is one that constantly exhorts in the name of a common purpose and a spirit of idealism.

If the doctrine of the rhetorical presidency leaves us today with the occasional feeling that it is hollow or outworn, it is not because of a decline in its influence but because of the inevitable consequences of its ascendancy. Presidents such as Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy found in the doctrine a novelty which they could exploit to win attention—if not always success—for their program. Exercised against the prevailing expectation of moral leadership, however, presidents may find that the doctrine is sometimes more of a burden than an opportunity. Presidents can speak and exhort, but will anyone genuinely heed what they say?

The events leading up to President Car-

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ter's address of July 1979 are instructive. Late in June of that year the President received a memo from his chief domestic policy advisor, Stuart Eizenstat, recommending what has become by now the standard use of the rhetorical presidency:

> Every day you need to be dealing with—and publicly be seen as dealing with—the major energy problems now facing us. . . . You have a variety of speeches scheduled after your return. . . . Each of those occasions should be used to talk about energy. . . . The windfall tax campaign was successful because of your repeated discussion of it during a short time. With strong steps we can mobilize the nation around a real crisis and with a clear enemy.[22]

But on the day before his originally scheduled TV address, the President decided to cancel it because, in columnist David Broder's words, "He believed that neither the country nor the Congress would heed or respond to another energy speech—the fifth of his term—from him."[23] If a nationally televised presidential address, itself once a dramatic event, must be cancelled as a way of recapturing a sense of drama, one wonders what expedient presidents will turn to next.

II

The second factor that accounts for the rise of the rhetorical presidency is the modern mass media. The media did not create the rhetorical presidency—doctrine did—but it facilitated its development and has given to it some of its special characteristics. The mass media, meaning here primarily radio and television, must be understood first from the perspective of its technical capacities. It has given the President the means by which to communicate directly and instantaneously with a large national audience, thus tearing down the communications barrier on which the Founders had relied to insulate representative institutions from direct contact with the populace. Besides increasing the size of the President's audience, the mass media has changed the mode by which he communicates with the public, replacing the written with the spoken word delivered in a dramatic visible performance. The written word formerly provided a partial screen or check against the most simplistic argumentations, as it allowed more control of the text by the reader and limited the audience to those with the most interest in politics.

One might reply, of course, that presidents today produce more written documents than ever before and that all of their speeches are recorded and transcribed. But this matters little as few in the public ever bother to peruse, let alone read, the President's words. Significant messages are delivered today in speeches, and presidents understand that it is the visible performance, not the tangible text, that creates the public impression. Under the constant demand for new information that characterizes audiences of the media age, what is not seen or heard today does not exist. Presidents accordingly feel the pressure to speak more and to engage in what Eizenstat called "campaigns" to keep their message before the public. Words come to have an ephemeral quality to them, and the more the President speaks the less value can be put on any one speech he delivers. One of the great ironies of the modern presidency is that as the President relies more on rhetoric to govern, he finds it more difficult to deliver a truly important speech, one that will stand by itself and continue to shape events.

The influence of the mass media on presidential rhetoric is not limited to its technical capacities. The mass media has also created a new power center in American politics in the form of television news. If the technical aspect of the media has given the President an advantage or an opportunity, the existence of television news often serves as a rival or an impediment. Journalists are filters in the communication process, deciding what portions of the President's non-televised speeches they will show and how their arguments will be interpreted. When presidents speak in public today, their most important audience is not the one they are personally addressing, but rather the public as it is reached through the brief cuts aired on the news. Speeches

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accordingly tend to be written so that any segment can be taken to stand by itself—as a self-contained lead. Argument gives way to aphorism.

The direct impact of the news' interpretation of the President's words is perhaps less important for presidential rhetoric than the indirect influence that derives from the character of news itself. Television news not only carries the messages of governing officials to the people; it also selects the issues that are presented to the government for "action" of some sort. "Real" expressions of mass opinion, which in the past were sporadic, are replaced by the news' continuous "sophisticated" analyses that serve as a surrogate audience, speaking to the government and supposedly representing to it what the people are saying and thinking. Driven by its own inner dynamic to find and sustain exciting issues and to present them in dramatic terms, news creates—or gives the impression of creating—national moods and currents of opinion which appear to call for some form of action by the government and especially by the President.

The media and the modern presidency feed on each other. The media has found in the presidency a focal point on which to concentrate its peculiarly simplistic and dramatic interpretation of events; and the presidency has found a vehicle in the media that allows it to win public attention and with that attention the reality, but more often the pretense, of enhanced power.[24] What this two-sided relationship signifies is a change in the rhetorical context in which the President now operates, the implications of which extend beyond the question of how much power the President has to the issue of how he attempts to govern. Constitutional government, which was established in contradistinction to government by assembly, now has become a kind of government by assembly, with TV "speaking" to the President and the President responding to the demands and moods that it creates. The new government by assembly—operating without a genuine assembling of the people—makes it increasingly difficult for presidents to present an appearance of stability and to allow time for policies to mature and for events to respond to their measures. Instead, the President is under more pressure to act—or to appear to act—to respond to the moods generated by the news.

Partly as a result of these pressures from the media for more and more presidential speech, a major new staff capacity has been added to the White House to enable the President to produce the large number of speeches and messages that he speaks or writes. While not a major cause of the rhetorical presidency, like any staff capacity its existence becomes a reason for its continual use. Once known as "ghosts" and hidden in the presidential closet, rhetoric-makers today have come out into the full light of day and are openly employed under the title of speechwriters.[25] We have perhaps passed beyond the point of naïveté where we shudder at exposés which reveal that the personal convictions of the President are written by someone else, but it is worth noting the paradox that at a time when presidents are judged more by their rhetoric, they play less of a role in its actual formulation. If, as Francis Bacon once wrote, only writing makes a man exact, the incoherence of much presidential policymaking may owe something to the fact that presidents do so little of their own writing and sometimes schedule more speeches than they can possibly supervise closely.[26] Certain rapid shifts that occurred during 1978 in President Carter's pronounced foreign policy, which Senator Kennedy attempted to make into an important campaign issue, are attributable to different viewpoints of the authors of his speeches, which the President either did not want or did not have the time to integrate.[27] An institutionalized speechwriting staff may bring to presidential speeches interests of its own that conflict with presidential policy or, to the extent that the staff becomes divorced from the President's chief political advisors, it may be incapable of resisting pressure from others for the inclusion of remarks in speeches at the expense of presidential coherence. Finally the speechwriting task has come more and more to be influenced by pollsters and admen whose

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understanding of rhetoric derives from the premises of modern advertising and its offshoot, political consulting. Such influence is even more visible in the modern presidential campaign.

III

The modern presidential campaign is the third factor that accounts for the rise of the rhetorical presidency. The roots of the modern campaign go back to Wilson and the Progressives and to many of the same ideas that helped to create the rhetorical presidency. Prior to 1912, the parties were largely responsible for conducting the campaigns, and the candidates, with few exceptions, restricted their communications to letters of acceptance of the nomination. Wilson was the first victorious presidential candidate to have engaged in a full-scale speaking tour during the campaign. In his view, it was essential that the candidates replace the parties as the main rhetorical instruments of the campaign. This change would serve not only to downgrade the influence of traditional parties but also to prepare the people for the new kind of presidency that he hoped to establish. Indeed, with Wilson the distinction between campaigning and governing is blurred, as both involve the same essential function of persuading through popular oratory.

Although Wilson himself did not campaign extensively in the pre-convention period, he supported the idea of a pre-convention campaign and pushed for nomination by national primaries. His ideal of a truly open presidential nomination campaign in which all candidates must take the "outside" route was not fully realized, however, until after the reforms that followed the 1968 election. Over the past two campaigns and in this one, we have seen the development of one of the most peculiarly irresponsible rhetorical processes ever devised. For a period of two years before the 1980 conventions, the various contenders had little else to offer except their rhetoric. Undisciplined by the responsibility of matching word to deed, they sought to create events out of their speeches, all the while operating under the constant media-created pressure to say something new. As their goal was to win power, and as that goal, especially in the pre-convention period, was remote, candidates could easily afford to disregard the impact of their speech on the demands of governing and instead craft their rhetoric with a view merely to persuading.

Scholars of the electoral process, interested in such issues as accountability and democratic voting theory, have sought to determine just how much of the candidates' rhetoric goes into spelling out stands on issues as compared to other kinds of appeals, *e.g.* character or vaguely formed interpretation of events. If there is an operative normative theory to some of these inquiries, it is based on the premise that it would be desirable for the voters to know the candidate's stand on the full range of issues and to make up their minds on the basis of a rational calculation of their position as it compares to those of the candidates.[28] However, if one does not focus exclusively in campaigns but tries to see campaigns as part of the total process of governing, there is cause for wondering whether what is ideal from the standpoint of democratic voting theory is very helpful for promoting effective governing: too many specific commitments might, if taken seriously, undermine a necessary degree of discretion, or, if blatantly ignored, add to public cynicism. It is the empirical findings of such research that are, perhaps, of most interest, and here one discovers two contrasting tendencies.

Benjamin Page has shown that candidates devote very little time in their speeches to spelling out anything like concrete policy stands; instead most of their effort goes into general interpretations of past records and highly ambiguous statements about future goals.[29] On the other hand, Jeff Fischel has found that the number of specific promises that candidates make over the course of a campaign has been increasing dramatically since 1952.[30] This paradox is easily explicable if one bears in mind that while candidates may discuss very little of substance in their speeches, they speak (and write) much more than they ever did in the past

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and thus accumulate more pledges. This research suggests, then, that we have the worst of both worlds—vague and uninstructive speeches on the one hand and more and more specific promises on the other. In this result one finds the perfect marriage of media and special interest politics.

It may also be that the distinctions scholars make in regard to "issue stands" and "image making" are increasingly irrelevant. For the candidates and their political consultants the campaign is often seen as a whole, with the most sophisticated campaigns today being run on the premise that the candidates must tap and express a popular mood. Issues and images are both fit into this general theme. As Jimmy Carter remarked in 1976, "Insofar as my political campaign has been successful, it is because I have learned from our people and have accurately reflected their concerns, their frustrations and their desires."[31] Reflecting but not necessarily educating the people's moods has in some instances been the order of the day. The old case against the political consultants and admen—that they build up an image of the candidate's person—largely underestimates their impact. Today, they are definitely in the "business" of dealing with "issues" no less than images, and both frequently are subordinated to mood.

Actually, the efforts that candidates do make in some of their speeches to address the issues are often passed over and ignored in the media. Although it may take the public a long time to learn the candidates' basic themes—and many never learn them—the reporters covering the campaign often tire of repetitive stories and resist putting comments from formal speeches on the air. As Thomas Patterson has shown, the press, and especially television news coverage, looks for the "new" in the campaigns, and thus tends to cover those comments of candidates that are made in impromptu sessions. Indeed, journalists attempt to stimulate "campaign issues"—e.g., off the cuff responses to charges or to contemporary news events—rather than to cover what the candidates seek to communicate in their own rhetoric.[32] This form of news coverage may well help us learn something about the candidates' "character" or ability to think in public, but it hardly does very much to encourage among the people a respect for the formal rhetorical mode. That speeches might, if heard, be a helpful way of judging candidates, however, is suggested by the importance of the one main campaign speech that the public can view in its entirety—the campaign acceptance speech.

The presidential campaign is important for the kinds of inflated expectations it raises, but it is even more important for the effects it has on the process of governing. So formative has the campaign become of our tastes for oratory and of our conception of leadership that presidential speech and governing have come more and more to imitate the model of the campaign. In a dramatic reversal, campaigns set the tone for governing rather than governing for campaigns. This trend, which is becoming more embedded in public expectations, is furthered by another dynamic that works on the President and his staff. Both may think of the campaign as their finest hour, to the extent that its techniques become internalized in their conception of governing. As pollster Pat Caddell advised Carter at the beginning of his term, "governing with public approval requires a continuing political campaign."[33] And in a memo that led up to the Camp David speech, Caddell suggested that "Carter should return to the style that had marked his campaign for the presidency, at least in its early stages: to address the nation's mood and to touch on the 'intangible' problems in our society."[34] Some of the President's political advisors, Vice President Mondale among them, opposed the whole idea of a campaign while holding office. But the political consultants stood together and won the day. As Gerald Rafshoon told Elizabeth Drew, "It was important for the President to be 'relevant,' which meant showing people he understood what was bothering them."[35]

The growing intrusion of the mentality of the campaign consultants into the governing process recalls the ancient philosophical battle between the original

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founders of the art of rhetoric—the sophists—and the political scientists. When rhetoric was first discovered as a teachable art in Ancient Greece, its masters emphasized its purely persuasive powers; and because rhetoric claimed to be able to instruct politicians on how to win power, it quickly began to pass itself off as the most important kind of political education. As Carnes Lord has stated, ". . . by encouraging the supposition that the exercise of political responsibility requires little substantive knowledge beyond rhetorical expertise itself, rhetoric as taught by the sophists tended to make men oblivious of the very need for a science of politics." The threat that the art of rhetoric so defined posed to political science, yet the evident necessity of politicians to use rhetoric, led Aristotle to write a rhetoric of his own. It was designed to recast the nature of the discipline so as to emphasize, within the realm of the potentially persuasive, the role of rational argumentation and to encourage politicians "to view rhetoric not as an instrument of personal aggrandizement in the sophistic manner, but rather as an instrument of responsible or prudent statesmanship."[36] This view, which came to constitute the rhetorical tradition of the West through its central place in a liberal arts education, exerted a powerful influence on our founding. Many of the Framers, as Gordon Wood has pointed out, were schooled in this tradition of rhetoric, and one of our presidents, John Quincy Adams, wrote a treatise on rhetoric that reflected many of its premises.[37] Clearly, however, under the impact of the modern campaign, this tradition has lost ground to a modern-day version of the sophistic tradition. Under the tutelage of political consultants and pollsters, the understanding of rhetoric as mere persuasion has come to be almost second nature to many of our politicians. The devolution of governing into campaigning is thus even more ominous than it first appeared, for it represents not just a change in the purpose of speeches but a decay in the standard of speech itself.

IV

President Carter's formulation of July, 1979, that a President should be "the leader of the people" rather than "the head of the government," was a perfect expression of his support for the doctrine of the rhetorical presidency. Acting explicitly on this doctrine, the President pledged to spend more time with the people and launched a campaign of speeches, largely inspirational in tone, that were designed to mobilize a popular constituency which supposedly would translate into higher opinion ratings and more power in Washington. The evident failure of this campaign, however, should perhaps have given the President pause about the effectiveness of his newly discovered conception of his office. For all the momentary attention lavished on the President's words, they did not succeed—nor come close to succeeding—in creating "a rebirth of the American spirit." Nor is this surprising.

As the very name implies, the rhetorical presidency is based on words, not power. When connected in a practical way with the exercise of power, speech can be effective, but when used merely to generate public support it is apt to fail. However much attention and enthusiasm a President can momentarily garner, there is little assurance that the Congress will accede. As Henry Fairlie once observed, "There is in fact very little that the people can do to assist a President while he is in office; brought together at a general election, they are dispersed between elections; brought together in the evening by a television address, they are dispersed the next day."[38] Although a President may sometimes find that he can make the greatest public impression by attacking Congress for failing to pass his preferred programs, or by attributing such failures to archaic procedures or undue influence and power of special interests, such appeals are not likely to win friends in that body which still retains ultimate authority over legislation. Moreover, to the extent that Presidents *can* pressure Congress through popular appeals, such a strategy, like crying "wolf," is likely to work less well the more often it is used.

The inflated expectations engendered by the rhetorical presidency have by now

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become a matter of serious concern among those who study the presidency. In response to this problem, a growing number of scholars have begun to argue that Presidents should remove themselves from much of the day-to-day management of government and reserve themselves for crisis management.[39] If this argument means only that Presidents should not immerse themselves in details or spread themselves too thinly, no one could quarrel with it. But if it means that the President should abandon the articulation of a broad legislative program or avoid general management of the bureaucracy at a time when the bureaucracy is becoming more and more unmanageable, then the argument is misguided. If the President does not give coherence to policy or enforce discipline on the executive branch, who will? Certainly not Congress. The President remains our only national officer who, as Jefferson once said, "commands a view of the whole ground."[40] A retrenched presidency that cedes much of its authority to others and merely reacts to crisis is hardly the answer to our difficulties. Nor is it the only possible response to the doctrine of the rhetorical presidency. Advocates of the retrenched presidency contend that to reduce the expectations on the office, its authority must be diminished. But the high expectations for the office are not the result of its authority, but rather of the inflated conception of presidential leadership that governs our thinking. It is the publicly proclaimed pretensions of presidential power, not the power itself, that is the source of the problem.

The roots of the rhetorical presidency stretch so deeply into our political structure and national consciousness that talk of change may seem futile; and yet, the evident failures of the current doctrine, together with the growing scholarly debate about the crisis of the presidency, suggest that the moment has arrived for a discussion of alternatives. It should not be forgotten that the foundations of the rhetorical presidency were deliberately laid by Woodrow Wilson and that other presidents might establish new doctrines. If a sensible reform of the institution is ever possible, the key will be found in reversing the order of President Carter's formulation of July 1979—that is, in restoring the President to his natural place as the head of government, and subordinating his awkward role of an itinerant leader of the people. But how could such change take place, and what would the contours of the office look like?

First, since the modern campaign is the source of so many of the problems of the presidency, it is evident that no reform of the office can hope to succeed without a change in the selection process. The operative theoretical principle that must govern this change is that the selection process should be thought of not as an end in itself, but as a means of promoting, or at least not undermining, the character of the presidential office. Construed in practical terms this principle translates into a call for electoral reform that would reduce the duration of the campaign, especially in the pre-convention period. The elimination or dramatic reduction in the number of presidential primaries and the return of the power of selection to the parties would be helpful. This change would not eliminate the campaign, but it would reduce its public phase to a shorter period and thus focus public attention on the speechmaking that takes place after the nomination. Indeed, as Thomas Patterson has recently shown, the longer campaigns of recent years have *not* increased the level of public knowledge of the candidates' stands; and the psychology of mass attention may well be such that, after a certain point, there is an inverse relationship between information and learning.[41] Rhetorical performances may lose their drama as they become simply another in a long and expected series.

Second, Presidents should reduce the number of their speeches. As they speak less, there is at least the chance that their words will carry more weight; and if their words carry more weight, then perhaps more thought will be given to speech that can sensibly direct action. What applies to speeches applies equally to press conferences. Press conferences without cameras would probably allow for a more detailed

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exchange of information between the President and the press corps and avoid the pressures on the President (and the journalists) to make each news conference dramatic and newsworthy.[42] Written messages might replace many presently oral performances, and personal television appearances would be reserved for truly important issues of public concern.

Third, it is obvious that a reduction in the quantity of rhetoric itself is not enough; its character must also change. To avoid inspirational rhetoric does not mean that the President must abandon firm principles, practical ideals or even a political poetry that connects this generation with the moorings of our political system. Indeed, such a rhetoric is perfectly consistent with the dignity of a head of state and the character of our political order. In respect to policy, however, Presidents must recapture the capacity to address the nation's enlightened self-interest no less than its sense of idealism and the related capacity to approach Congress directly rather than through the people.

The gravest problem of the rhetorical presidency, however, goes deeper than any issue confined to presidential practice. It extends to the basic questions of how our nation can be governed. No one would deny that Presidents need to hold up America's basic principles and on occasion mobilize the public to meet genuine challenges. Indeed, in a liberal system of government that frees men's acquisitive instincts and allows them to devote their energies to individual material improvement, there is room on occasion for Presidents to lift up the public's vision to something beyond the clash of interests. But under the influence of the rhetorical presidency, we have seen an ever-increasing reliance on inspirational rhetoric to deal with the normal problems of politics. If there is a place for such rhetoric, it is necessary also to be aware of its danger and of the corresponding need to keep it within limits. By itself, rhetoric does not possess the power to make citizens devote themselves selflessly to the common weal, particularly where the basic principles of society protect and encourage men's independent and private activities. The Founders of our country created a complex representative government designed to foster a knowledgeable concern for the common good in the concrete circumstances of political life that would be difficult, if not impossible, to elicit directly from a people led by orators. What the continued use of inspirational rhetoric fosters is not a simple credibility problem, but a deep tension between the publicly articulated understanding of the nature of our politics and the actual springs that move the system. No wonder, then, that some politicians, deceived by their own rhetoric, find it difficult to come to terms with the job of governing a nation of complex multiple interests. Far from reinforcing our country's principles and protecting its institutions, the rhetorical presidency leads us to neglect our principles for our hopes and to ignore the benefits and needs of our institutions for a fleeting sense of oneness with our leaders.

Notes

1. *The Washington Post*, July 14, 15, and 16, 1979.
2. For a discussion of Johnson's "swing around the circle," see Albert Castel, *The Presidency of Andrew Johnson* (Lawrence: Regents Press, 1979).
3. Joseph Kallenbach, *The American Chief Executive* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 333–340.
4. *Public Papers of the Presidents, John F. Kennedy 1961* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1961), p. 19; see also Henry Fairlie, *The Kennedy Promise: The Politics of Expectation* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1973).
5. Cited in Thomas E. Cronin, *The State of the Presidency* (Boston: Little Brown, 1975), p. 72. The identification of the aide is not revealed.
6. Harry MacPherson, *A Political Education* (Boston: Little Brown, 1972), p. 301–2.
7. *The Public Papers of the Presidents, Richard Nixon 1969*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1969), p. 2.
8. President Carter, Speeches of July 15, 1979, (National Television Address) and July 16, 1979, (Detroit, Michigan). *Presidential Documents, Annual Index*, 1979, p. 1237 and 1248.
9. *The Washington Post*, July 17, 1979, p. A14.
10. See for example, Theodore Lowi, *The End of Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 1969), pp. 182–83.
11. In discussing matters which "force" Presidents to make decisions by specified dates, Richard Neustadt concludes: "It is hardly to be wondered at that during Truman's years such matters became focal points for policy develop-

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ment, especially in the domestic sphere." See Richard Neustadt, "Presidency and Legislation: Planning the President's Program" *American Political Science Review*. Dec. 1955, p. 1021. It is also interesting to note here that in reference to John Kennedy's decision to implement the moon shot program, Theodore Sorensen has implied that the decision was largely made "because we felt we were in need of some display of action." See Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy Library oral history.

12. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: New American Library, 1962), p. 360 (#58).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 384 (#63).
14. See Marvin R. Weisbord, Campaigning for President (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1964, pp. 1-55; Arthur Schlesinger, "Introduction" to Schlesinger and Israel, eds., *The State of the Union Messages of the President*, (New York: Chelsea House, 1966).
15. Woodrow Wilson, *Papers*, ed. Arthur S. Link, (Princeton University Press, 1978) vol. 27, p. 150.
16. Elmer Cronwell Jr., *Presidential Leadership and Public Opinion*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), pp. 1-30.
17. Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908), p. 67; Woodrow Wilson, Congressional Government (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1885), p. 209.
18. Wilson, *Constitutional Government*, p. 65.
19. Wilson, *Link* ed. Papers, Vol. 19, p. 42.
20. *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 1976, pp. 852-53.
21. Kallenbach, p. 253; and Clinton Rossiter, *The American Presidency*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960), p. 34.
22. *The Washington Post*, July 10, 1979.
23. *The Washington Post*, July 14, 1979, p. A1.
24. See Michael J. Robinson, "Television and American Politics, 1956-1976," *The Public Interest*, (Summer, 1972), pp. 3-39.
25. For a review of the transformation of speechwriters from secret aides to openly identified advisors, see Marie Hochmuth Nichols; *Rhetoric and Criticism*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1903), pp. 35-48.
26. Francis Bacon, *A Selection of His Works*, ed. Sidney Warhaft, (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1965), p. 42.
27. James Fallows, Personal Interview, March 10, 1979. Also see James Fallows, "The Passionless Presidency" and "The Passionless Presidency, Part II," *Atlantic*, May & June, 1979.
28. Benjamin I. Page, *Choices and Echoes in Presidential Elections* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 10-61.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 152-192.
30. Jeffrey Fischel, "From Campaign Promise to Presidential Performance," A paper prepared for a Colloquium at the Woodrow Wilson Center, June 20, 1979.
31. *The Campaign of 1976 Jimmy Carter*, (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1976), vol. 2: p. 274.
32. See Thomas Patterson, *The Mass Media Election*. (New York: Praeger, 1980).
33. Patrick H. Caddell, "Initial Working Paper on Political Strategy," Mimeo. Dec. 10, 1976.
34. Elizabeth Drew, "Phase: In Search of a Definition" *The New Yorker Magazine*, Aug. 27, 1979, p. 49-73.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
36. Carnes Lord, "On Aristotle's Rhetoric" A conference paper delivered at the White Burkett Miller Center, July 1979.
37. John Quincy Adams, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* (Cambridge, Mass., 1810).
38. Cited in Cronin, p. 73.
39. See David Broder's column, "Making the Presidency Man-sized," *Washington Post*, Dec. 5, 1979, p. A27. Broder summarizes the consensus of a conference on the Presidency held at the White Burkett Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia.
40. Richardson, p. 3.
41. Patterson, pp. 67-75 and 173-181.
42. See Cornwell, op. cit., for the history of the press conference. In a series of forums on the press conference sponsored by the White Burkett Miller Center, most of the reporters present who have covered the president were of the opinion that, while television conferences were helpful on occasion, they often were superficial and did not allow for a genuine and in-depth exchange with the President. Most felt that greater use of the "reporters around the desk" format would improve the reading public's knowledge of the president.

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