



THE LIMITS OF THE BULLY PULPIT



GEORGE C. EDWARDS III

*On Deaf Ears*



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To George and Julie Jordan

I can no other answer make but thanks,  
And thanks, and ever thanks.

— *Twelfth-Night*, Act III, Scene 3



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## *Preface*

Much to the surprise of many political observers, George W. Bush launched a massive public relations campaign on behalf of his priority initiatives soon after taking office. At the core of this effort was the most extensive domestic travel schedule of any new president in American history. Bush spoke in twenty-nine states by the end of May, often more than once. The president also used his Saturday radio addresses to exhort members of the public to communicate to Congress their support for his tax cut and education plans.

It is one thing to go public. It is something quite different to succeed in moving public opinion. Table P.1 shows responses to Gallup Poll questions on the president's tax cut proposal. The results show that public opinion did not change in response to the president's efforts.

In the fall of 2002, the president's agenda included a possible war with Iraq. The administration stepped up its rhetorical efforts, and the president addressed the nation, the United Nations, and a host of smaller audiences. In response, public opinion barely moved, as the results in Table P.2 show.

The president's lack of success in leading the public was not unusual for any president, and it poses an interesting conundrum. Modern presidents choose to engage in a permanent campaign for the public's support as their core strategy for governing. Yet presidents usually fail in their efforts to move the public to support them and their policies. If going public does not work,

Table P.1. Public Support for Bush Tax Cut

| Poll Date            | Favor | Oppose | No Opinion |
|----------------------|-------|--------|------------|
| February 9–11, 2001  | 56%   | 34%    | 10%        |
| February 19–21, 2001 | 53    | 30     | 17         |
| March 5–7, 2001      | 56    | 34     | 10         |
| April 20–22, 2001    | 56    | 35     | 9          |

*Note:* Gallup Poll, “Based on what you have read or heard, do you favor or oppose the federal income tax cuts George W. Bush has proposed?”

are presidents both wasting their time and losing the opportunity to pursue more profitable approaches to governing? The answers to these questions have broad implications for governing. My goal is to investigate the ability of presidents to move the public and thus the utility of the permanent campaign for governing.

Not long after becoming director of the Center for Presidential Studies, I turned to a group of talented scholars at Texas A&M and asked them to begin a Program in Presidential Rhetoric. The program, headed by Martin Medhurst, one of the leading experts in this burgeoning field, sponsors an annual national conference on some aspect of how presidents articulate their views. These conferences have been quite successful, and it was the first conference, in 1995, that gave birth to this book. Somewhat to my surprise, Professor Medhurst asked me to present a paper. Because rhetoric has never been my field of study, I was reluctant to accept the invitation. Marty was pleasantly persistent, however, and eventually I agreed. Not knowing where to begin, I asked for a list of the best work on presidential rhetoric. As I read through the literature, I noticed that it contained many assertions about the effect of rhetoric but virtually never offered proof, much less systematic evidence, on behalf of these causal inferences. In response to my reading, I focused my paper on the issue of evidence, pointing out that it was missing. Equally important, I raised questions about many of the specific inferences, which I was reasonably sure were incorrect. As one can imagine, I was a big hit with the auditorium full of dedicated scholars of rhetoric.

To be fair, scholars of presidential rhetoric are sophisticated and broadly knowledgeable analysts from whom I have learned a great deal. Many of them come from the tradition of literary criticism and are unaccustomed to marshaling systematic evidence on behalf of their conclusions. Yet the problem of unsupported and possibly faulty assertions about the effect of going public remains.

Table P.2. *Public Support for Invasion of Iraq*

| Poll Date             | Favor | Oppose | No Opinion |
|-----------------------|-------|--------|------------|
| February 19–21, 2001  | 52%   | 42%    | 6%         |
| November 26–27, 2001  | 74    | 20     | 6          |
| June 17–19, 2002      | 61    | 31     | 8          |
| August 19–21, 2002    | 53    | 41     | 6          |
| September 2–4, 2002   | 58    | 36     | 6          |
| September 5–8, 2002   | 58    | 36     | 6          |
| September 13–16, 2002 | 57    | 39     | 4          |
| September 20–22, 2002 | 57    | 38     | 5          |
| October 3–6, 2002     | 53    | 40     | 7          |
| October 14–17, 2002   | 56    | 37     | 7          |
| October 21–22, 2002   | 54    | 40     | 6          |
| November 8–10, 2002   | 59    | 35     | 6          |
| November 22–24, 2002  | 58    | 37     | 5          |
| December 9–10, 2002   | 55    | 39     | 6          |
| December 16–17, 2002  | 58    | 35     | 7          |
| December 19–22, 2002  | 53    | 38     | 9          |
| January 3–5, 2003     | 56    | 39     | 6          |
| January 10–12, 2003   | 56    | 38     | 6          |
| January 23–25, 2003   | 52    | 43     | 5          |

*Note:* Gallup Poll, “Would you favor or oppose sending American ground troops to the Persian Gulf in an attempt to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq?”

The problem is not limited to the field of rhetoric, however. There is now a substantial body of literature focused on how presidents pursue popular support and an equally robust body of literature on how the public evaluates the president. What is missing is an understanding of the linkage between what the president says and does and the public’s response. In the meantime, scholars and commentators routinely refer to the White House as a “bully pulpit” and assume that a skilled president can employ it to move the public and create political capital for himself. The fact that such efforts almost always fail seems to have no effect on the belief in the power of public leadership.

My next step was to seek financial support for the project. On the advice of Paul Light, I approached the Smith Richardson Foundation. I am pleased to recognize the critical support the foundation awarded me and wish to express my gratitude for its invaluable help. Program officer Mark Steinmeyer has been supportive at every step in the research process.

Yale University Press heard about the project, and John Covell asked to do a

separate evaluation of my proposal. I readily agreed, and soon I signed a contract. John's successor as editor, John Kulka, has been an equally enthusiastic and encouraging editor. I am grateful to both of them. I am also indebted to Charles O. Jones and Robert Shapiro, who read the entire manuscript and offered thoughtful suggestions for improvement. Many other scholars, including Robert Erikson, Bryan Jones, Martha Joynt Kumer, Michael MacKuen, and James Stimson, have shared their thoughts on various portions of the argument. They all have my thanks. The Roper Center of Public Opinion Research was an invaluable source of data.

Finally, and most importantly, I dedicate this book to George and Julie Jordan. It is difficult to express what the Jordans have come to mean to my wife Carmella and me. At first generous financial supporters of Texas A&M University, they have become patrons of my work and, most significantly, dear friends. Their support has made it possible for me to devote time to my research and writing, engage in institution building, and travel widely to share my ideas and benefit from the feedback of audiences around the world. All the while, the Jordans have asked for nothing more in return than how they could be even more helpful. I have been blessed and am deeply honored to have their names grace the dedication page.

PART I

*Moving the Public*



*The Permanent Campaign:  
Why Does the President Go Public?*

No president ever invested more in attempting to mold public opinion than Bill Clinton. His was a presidency based on a perpetual campaign to obtain the public's support<sup>1</sup>—a campaign fed by public opinion polls, focus groups, and public relations memos. The White House even polled voters on where it was best for the First Family to vacation. In 1995, the White House spent an unprecedented \$18 million in advertising on behalf of the president—a year *before* the presidential election.<sup>2</sup>

Public leadership dominated the policy-making process in the Clinton White House, serving as both the focus of the president's energies and the criterion by which it evaluated itself. In a typical year, Clinton spoke in public 550 times,<sup>3</sup> and he traveled around the country every fourth day.<sup>4</sup> Equally important, the administration repeatedly interpreted its setbacks, whether in elections or on such policies as health care reform, in terms of its failure to communicate<sup>5</sup> rather than in terms of the quality of its initiatives or its strategy for governing.

Although it may have been on the extreme end of the spectrum, the Clinton administration's focus on public leadership did not represent a sharp break with the past. Ronald Reagan took office oriented to using his communications skills to persuade the public and thus the Congress to do his bidding.<sup>6</sup> The Clinton White House was merely the latest stage in an evolution that can be traced back to Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.<sup>7</sup>

Presidents clearly believe that they need to lead the public, and they “go public” more than ever, depending on a steadily expanding White House public relations infrastructure to take their messages to the American people.<sup>8</sup> In 1976, pollster Patrick Caddell wrote a memo to President-elect Jimmy Carter titled, “Initial Working Paper on Political Strategy.” In it Caddell argued that “governing with public approval requires a *continuing* [italics added] political campaign.” He also suggested implementing a working group to begin planning the 1980 presidential campaign.<sup>9</sup>

*Leading the public is at the core of the modern presidency.* Even as they try to govern, presidents are involved in a permanent campaign. Both politics and policy revolve around presidents’ attempts to garner public support, both for themselves and for their policies. The division between campaigning and governing has become obscured. Indeed, governing often seems little more than an extension of the campaign that won the president his office in the first place. Both candidate and president travel widely for political purposes, appear frequently before organized constituencies, make extensive use of television, commission an endless stream of polls, and constantly brief the press. Summing up much of the modern presidency, journalist Sidney Blumenthal declared, “For the Reagan White House, every night is election night on television.”<sup>10</sup>

As Bill Clinton reflected on the results of the 1994 elections, he concluded that the principal cause of the Democrats’ stunning defeat was neither his presidency nor his policies. Instead, the main problem was communication. He had achieved a great deal, he felt, but the public neither recognized nor appreciated his accomplishments. He had failed to communicate them, and “the role of the President of the United States is message.”<sup>11</sup> “I got caught up in the parliamentary aspect of the presidency,” he said, “and missed the leadership, bully pulpit function which is so critical.”<sup>12</sup>

President Clinton’s remark reflects three fundamental and widely shared premises about presidential leadership. The first is that public support is a crucial political resource for the president. It is difficult for others who hold power to deny the legitimate demands of a president with popular support. A president who lacks the public’s support is likely to face frustration and perhaps humiliation at the hands of his opponents. As Clinton exclaimed after he was acquitted in his impeachment trial, “Thank god for public opinion.”<sup>13</sup>

The second premise manifested in Clinton’s comments is the view that the president must not only earn public support with his performance in office, but also must actively take his case to the people. Moreover, he must do it not only at reelection time but all the time. Richard Nixon was perhaps the first president to adopt the view of the need for a permanent campaign, remarking to domestic adviser John Ehrlichman that “Great ideas that are conceived and

not sold are like babies that are stillborn.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, Nixon institutionalized units devoted to public relations in the White House.

More recent presidents have taken Nixon’s increased emphasis on public relations a step further. Clinton adviser Dick Morris explained the basis of their thinking: “Once upon a time, elections settled things for the term of office. Now, they are mere punctuation marks in an ongoing search for public support and a functioning majority. Each day is election day in modern America. . . . A politician needs a permanent campaign to keep a permanent majority.”<sup>15</sup> Another Clinton communications adviser, Sidney Blumenthal, agreed: “Under the permanent campaign, governing is turned into a perpetual campaign. . . . What was once a forced march for votes becomes unceasing forays for public approval.”<sup>16</sup>

The president’s third premise, that through the permanent campaign the White House *can* successfully persuade or even mobilize the public, is the primary focus of this book. Commentators on the presidency in both the press and the academy often assume that the White House can move public opinion if the president has the skill and will to effectively exploit the “bully pulpit.” In Blumenthal’s words, in the permanent campaign “the citizenry is viewed as a mass of fluid voters who can be appeased by appearances, occasional drama, and clever rhetoric.”<sup>17</sup> Even those who lament the “plebiscitary presidency” may base their analyses on the premise of the president having established a direct and persuasive relationship with the public.<sup>18</sup>

Equally important, those in the White House share the premise of the potential of presidential leadership of the public. David Gergen, an experienced White House communications adviser, favorably cites Winston Churchill’s assertion that “of all the talents bestowed upon men, none is so precious as the gift of oratory. He who enjoys it wields a power more durable than that of a great king. He is an independent force in the world.”<sup>19</sup> He goes on to add that Ronald Reagan turned television “into a powerful weapon to achieve his legislative goals.”<sup>20</sup> Sidney Blumenthal agreed, declaring that Reagan had “stunning success in shaping public opinion,” which in turn was central to transforming his ideas into law.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, in interviews in the 1990s, Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro found among both White House and congressional staff widespread confidence in the president’s ability to lead the public. Evidently President Clinton shared this view, as his aides reported that he exhibited an “unbelievable arrogance” regarding his ability to change public opinion and felt he could “create new political capital all the time” through going public—a hubris echoed by his aides.<sup>22</sup>

The assurance with which presidents, scholars, and journalists accept the

assumption of the potential of presidential public leadership belies our lack of understanding of that leadership. As I discuss in the following chapter, we actually know very little about the effect of the president's persuasive efforts because we have focused on the stimulus rather than the response in examining presidential public leadership.

For example, there is a substantial and rapidly increasing body of literature focusing on presidential rhetoric.<sup>23</sup> Underlying most of this research is the premise that the president can employ rhetoric to move the public. An individual president may be ineffective and fail to move opinion, but the potential is there. The authors of these fine works concentrate on analyzing *what* the president said. In the process, they make numerous inferences regarding the effect of the president's rhetoric on public opinion. However, scholars of presidential rhetoric virtually never provide evidence for their inferences about the president's effect.<sup>24</sup>

Yet one of the crowning ironies of the contemporary presidency is that at the same time that presidents increasingly attempt to govern by campaigning — “going public” — public support for presidential policies is elusive, perhaps more than ever before. President Clinton was not alone in his frustration with communicating with the public. In the century since Theodore Roosevelt declared the White House a “bully pulpit,” presidents have often found the public unresponsive to issues at the top of the White House's agenda and unreceptive to requests to think about, much less act on, political matters. When asked about his “biggest disappointment as president,” George Bush replied, “I just wasn't a good enough communicator.”<sup>25</sup>

In his memoirs, Ronald Reagan — the “Great Communicator” — reflected on his efforts to ignite concern among the American people regarding the threat of communism in Central America and mobilize them behind his program of support for the Contras. “For eight years the press called me the ‘Great Communicator,’ he wrote. “Well, one of my greatest frustrations during those eight years was my inability to communicate to the American people and to Congress the seriousness of the threat we faced in Central America.”<sup>26</sup>

If the frustration that presidents often experience in their efforts to obtain the public's support were nothing more than an irritating cost of doing the job, then public leadership would be a topic of only passing interest to political scientists, historians, and journalists. Governing by campaigning is much more important than that, however. The way presidents attempt to govern, and their success in doing so, has profound consequences for politics and public policy.

If there is substantial potential for presidents to govern through leading the public, then it is reasonable to evaluate them on their success in public leader-

ship. If presidents do not succeed in obtaining the public's support, it is a failure of leadership for which they should be held accountable. However, if the premise of the potential of public leadership is false, then we may be evaluating presidents and presidential candidates on the wrong criteria.

If the conventional wisdom is wrong and presidents are not able to persuade, much less mobilize, the public, then presidents may be wasting their time and adopting governing styles that are prone to failure. For example, the massive Clinton health care reform plan of 1993–1994 was based on the underlying, and unquestioned, assumption within the White House that the president could sell his plan to the public and thus solidify congressional support. Because the administration believed it could move the public, Clinton and his aides felt they could focus on developing their preferred option in health care policy in 1993. In the process they discounted centrist opinion and underestimated how opponents could criticize their plan as big government. Moreover, even as the bill's fortunes soured, the White House refused to compromise. As Jacobs and Shapiro put it, "The White House's unquestioned faith that the president could rally Americans produced a rigid insistence on comprehensive reforms."<sup>27</sup>

In the end, Clinton was not able to obtain even a vote in either house of Congress on what was to have been his centerpiece legislation. Not long after, the Democrats lost majorities in both the House and the Senate for the first time in four decades. The administration's health care proposal was the prime example of the Republicans' charge that the Democrats were ideological extremists who had lost touch with the wishes of Americans. Summing up the health care reform debacle, Jacobs and Shapiro conclude that the "fundamental political mistake committed by Bill Clinton and his aides was in grossly overestimating the capacity of a president to 'win' public opinion and to use public support as leverage to overcome known political obstacles—from an ideologically divided Congress to hostile interest groups."<sup>28</sup>

This is not the lesson that Clinton learned, however. Indeed, the premise of the power of the presidential pulpit is so strong that each downturn in the bill's progress prompted new schemes for going public rather than a reconsideration of the fundamental framework of the bill or the basic strategy for obtaining its passage.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, the president concluded that health care reform failed because "I totally neglected how to get the public informed. . . . I have to get more involved in crafting my message—in getting across my core concerns."<sup>30</sup> In other words, his strategy was not inappropriate, only his implementation of it. The premise of the potential of presidential public leadership seems to be nonfalsifiable.

The Clinton White House was not alone in its myopia regarding the