

## **Presidential Politics: The Movie**

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In an age of spectacle politics, presidencies are staged and presented to the public in cinematic terms, using media spectacle to sell the policies, person, and image of the president to vast and diverse publics. The media are complicit, reducing politics to image, spectacle, and story in forms ranging from daily news to synoptic or topical documentaries to fictional films that narrativize especially dramatic events or entire presidential dynasties. Consequently, publics come to see presidencies and politics of the day as narrative and spectacle in an era when entertainment and information inexorably merge, and politics and everyday life are modeled on media forms, with entertainment becoming a dominant mode of media culture and a potent and seductive factor in shaping everyday life.

Consequently, one can depict the relationship between media and politics from the Kennedy administration to Bush II in terms of the narrative and cinematic spectacle that framed the respective presidency. From this perspective, successful presidencies presented good movies that succeeded in being effective and entertaining in selling a presidency to the public, while failed presidencies can be characterized as bad movies that fashioned a negative public image that bombed with the public and left behind disparaging or indifferent images of the presidency.

In the contemporary era, politics is thus becoming a mode of spectacle where the codes of media culture determine the form, style, and look of presidential politics, and thus party politics in turn becomes more cinematic and spectacular, in the sense of Guy Debord's concept of spectacle. Consequently, American presidential politics of the past several decades can be perceived as media spectacles, in which media politics becomes a major constituent of presidential elections, governance, and political success or failure.

Consequently, I will examine how presidential politics, the movie, produced a set of the collective images, spectacles, and narratives of the Kennedy through Bush administrations. These presidencies in turn generated series of presidential narratives, some good, some bad, and some indifferent. Certain presidencies themselves engendered major Hollywood political films, which help construct public images of the presidency and of recent history. The ongoing circulation and revision of representations and narratives of media-focused presidents and their specific histories help continue to nurture cinematic politics and media spectacle as a basic component of political strategy and governance.<sup>1</sup>

### **JFK, the Movie**

Let us then start with John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the most photogenic president in the TV era who arguably was the first to effectively use the institution of television to communicate. Documentary footage of JFK's press conferences show the young

President's ability to totally manipulate the press that roared at his jokes, chuckled and smiled at his sly wit, and generally were played as pawns on the set of presidential media events. Documentary footage of Kennedy also showed his handlers as extremely adept at constructing images of private and public life that were exceptionally successful in producing positive images of the Kennedy family and presidency. But the Kennedy administration was also able to brilliantly generate media spectacle, ranging from the inauguration speech and parade, to the famous Berlin speech, to frequent presidential trips and media events, such as the tragic final last visit to Dallas.

Moreover, the Kennedy administration itself was of sufficient epic stature and drama to generate countless movies and TV miniseries. The Kennedy presidency can thus be seen as a movie that has created a legend and key spot in American political history that dramatized the need to dominate the media and project effective spectacle to win elections and to successfully govern. The Kennedy legend would henceforth provide the model and template for aspiring candidates and successful presidents, although, as we shall see, subsequent presidencies produced wildly varied media spectacles and narratives.

Cultivation of the Kennedy mystique from his first campaigns through his short presidency was not an accident. JFK's father, Joe Kennedy, was a film producer, as well as an ambassador, financier, and bootlegger. The Kennedys were always highly conscious of the cinematic quality of political campaigns, of the look and image of politicians, hence the Kennedy boys were aware of the camera and the need to generate appealing images from the beginning of Kennedy's career as a politician. D.A. Pennebaker did a revealing documentary Primary (1960) on Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey in the Wisconsin primaries in the 1960s campaign where you see JFK brilliantly playing to the camera and crowd in every scene.

In the 1960s presidential debates with Richard Nixon, Kennedy was extremely cool and effective, a good TV performer and personality, as opposed to the overly "hot" Richard Nixon who tended to polarize and alienate. Kennedy, by contrast, was witty and articulate, but not too emotional or ideological. He was, as Marshall McLuhan suggested, a "corporate" man that one could be comfortable with and secure. He was tough and assertive, often taking stronger anticommunist positions than the renown Cold Warrior Nixon, but reasonable and reassuring, and not too aggressive.

On the whole, Kennedy thus effectively used the media to sell himself to the public and once elected became one of the most effective manipulators of television and political spectacle in the contemporary era. Indeed, Camelot, a dominant metaphor for the Kennedy administration, itself referred to a media spectacle in the form of a play and then movie about King Arthur's court that were then popular. Indeed, the Kennedy administration can be seen as a cinematic stage and spectacle from the pageantry of the inauguration through the high drama of the Bay of Pigs and Cuban Missile Crisis, with the spectacle of the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam in the background. Countless TV movies and miniseries were made of the Kennedy presidency, whose large family

created a canvas for spectacles ranging from domestic martial drama to the epics of political dynasty.

In retrospect, the Cuban Missile crisis was the big movie of the pre-assassination Kennedy administration, itself mythologized in Robert Kennedy's memoir and the film 13 Days (2000). The Cuban Missile crisis presented the drama of the young Ivy League Kennedy boys and their cohorts against the rightwing generals and hawks who wanted to launch a nuclear strike against the Soviet Union to resolve the missile crisis. The film 13 Days used the same code as Aaron Sorkin's A Few Good Men (1992) in which tough and courageous young liberals exhibit restraint, rationality, and sanity in dealing with crisis and a dangerous enemy, as opposed to the patriarchal and atavistic militarism of the older conservative generation.

The Kennedy presidency, of course, had a tragic ending: the JFK assassination, spawning entire genres of conspiracy theories and political conspiracy films, ranging from Emile de Antonio's documentary Rush to Judgment (1968) to fictionalized views in early 1970s conspiracy films like Executive Action (1970) and The Parallax View (1974) to Oliver Stone's epic JFK (1991). These assassination films mythologized Kennedy as the noble victim of a corrupt conservative establishment, helping to mold a positive Kennedy image and to assure his inclusion of the pantheon of the great American presidents.

### **LBJ and Nixon — Bad Movies**

With the Kennedy administration, the scene of American politics is set for the cinematic Presidency, but Lyndon Baines Johnson comes in and bungles up the set. While Johnson was a highly effective politician, one of the great Senate Majority leaders of all time, he was a bad actor, a poor media presence, and not at all cinematic. Moreover, Johnson cannot get his storyline together and across and so must renounce the presidency and not run again.

In some ways, the LBJ story is a tragedy, in which poor rural Texas boy makes good, rises to the top and becomes the most powerful person in the world. Johnson the southerner was also able to put together and push through civil rights legislation that Kennedy the northern liberal would have had trouble getting through a largely conservative and southern dominated Congress. Moreover, LBJ's war on poverty and Great Society was a noble program that could have been a worthy successor to FDR's New Deal and won Johnson renown in the pantheon of Great American presidents.

But, alas, LBJ's Great Society was undone by Vietnam, U.S. society could not afford both guns and butter and so health and welfare were sacrificed so that the military-industrial complex could try out its new weapons and counter-insurgency policies. But Vietnam technowar met a National Liberation Movement and Ho Chi Minh's peasants were able to use guerilla tactics to defeat U.S. military technology that was not appropriate for warfare in the jungles of a largely premodern society. As part of relentless globalization, the Vietnam war was able to bring the consumer society to Southeast Asia,

but was not able to block the formation of a modern Vietnamese nation state. And so Vietnam, the movie, was a national tragedy and thus politicians associated with promoting it were destined for media damnation.

Moreover, LBJ was singularly unsuccessful in selling Vietnam to the public. Exceptionally maladroit at using television, Johnson came across on the screen as boorish, overbearing, and unpersuasive. Unable to connect with the television and film generation that was opposed to the war, the oversized and often crude Texan also was not able to connect with cosmopolitan liberals. Although he did his best to court the press, Johnson just wasn't able to get through with the media and was forced to ride off into the central Texan sunset where he quickly faded from the public stage and left behind a presidency bereft of cinematic homage. Later, release of his audiotapes would reveal that Johnson was as unpolished and vulgar as reputed, and his media afterlife continues to suffer from lack of cinematic spectacle and poor public image.

Johnson was succeeded by Richard M. Nixon (1968-1973), another cinematically deficient president, who, as it turned out, ended up creating the paradigm of president as villain, the man you love to hate, the very symbol of political corruption and chicanery. In fact, Nixon was a hard-working and competent politician who tried to present himself as Horatio Alger, the great middle American success story, but ended up as the butt of liberal jokes and exemplar of a failed presidency. Nixon did manage to master TV after pundits faulted a five o'clock shadow, sweat, and a poor television image in his 1960 presidential debate with Kennedy who barely beat the experienced former Congressman and Senator from California and Vice-President to highly popular Dwight Eisenhower. Joe McGinnis' The Selling of the Presidency documented Nixon's adept use of media events, television advertising, and political spectacle to promote his campaign. Nixon clearly had a good sense of media politics and spectacle, as footage of his campaigns, conventions, and presidential events documented in Emile de Antonio's "white comedy" Millhaus (1972) make clear. Moreover, Nixon's political biography Six Crises (1962) show that Nixon himself was clever at constructing political narratives to present himself to the American public, as a man who constantly overcame hardship and crisis to triumph over adversity.

Yet on the whole the Nixon administration during his first term from 1968-1972 was not particularly good at constructing a cinematic or political narrative that would sell Nixon, who was highly secretive, paranoid, conspiratorial, and widely distrusted and disliked. The "president's men" were also not particularly attractive or appealing and Nixon entered the 1972 election with a media deficit. But in the '72 campaign, Nixon and his media team were able to successfully present Democratic candidate Gene McGovern as a bad spectacle, as a '60s nightmare, evoking the specters of abortion, acid, and amnesty. Nixon also concocted the apparition of a "silent majority," whom he represented, simulating a fake populism, and won handily over McGovern who was associated in the public imagination with leftwing liberalism and the anti-war movement.

The Nixon presidency never had an engaging and compelling film script or narrative to project. Nixon was never popular, he had no great themes or appealing

political dramas, and he was not successful narratively at any time in projecting a presidential story or spectacle that could win over a large public (although he always had his supporters and even true believers). Moreover, it was Nixon's fate to suffer Watergate, a truly great film and spectacle, which undid him, unleashing a TV and journalistic media frenzy, later memorialized in the film All the President's Men (1976).

In this popular political morality play, Washington Post journalists were celebrated as saviors of democracy, while the Nixon administration was portrayed as completely corrupt and conspiratorial, a popular image that remained until this day. Although Oliver Stone made an epic drama that came close to presenting Nixon as a tragic victim in 1995, and while a 1998 film Dick used Nixon to present a political comedy, the political spectacle of Watergate coded Nixon as the villain of American presidents. In this mode, Robert Altman filmed a one-man play Secret Honor (1984), which portrayed Nixon unraveling during his last days as president, and as a pathetic drunk and near psychotic. Hence, to this day, Nixon is seen by many as a corrupt and failed president who was the only president of modern times forced to resign and not serve out his term. Nixon's two successors were also arguably done in by the media and their inability to construct positive presidential narratives and spectacles.

### **Ford and Carter – Indifferent Presidencies and Poor Spectacle**

Richard Nixon's Vice-President Gerald Ford assumed the presidency in 1974 after the disgraced president's resignation and thus had the bad press of the Nixon pardon to begin with and soon presented the spectacle of a washout not up to the office. Chevy Chase on the popular TV-show Saturday Night Live!, presented Ford as a stumbling bumbler, and TV footage of montage of slipping and falling presented a fatally bad image of Ford. The midwestern Congressman lacked charisma and in a 1976 presidential debate with Jimmy Carter seemed not to know that Poland suffered under a communist-imposed dictatorship.

Thus, the Ford presidency was an extremely short one and provided no memorable moments or stories for Hollywood or even TV movies, with the exception of a docudrama of his wife Betty Ford's successful battle with breast cancer. The Ford administration was highly boring, and it seems that if you are unworthy of a Hollywood film, you are unworthy of the presidency in era of cinematic politics and media spectacle. Yet Ford's predecessor Jimmy Carter also suffered the failure to produce a successful presidential movie and media spectacle.

Jimmy Carter, the Governor of Georgia with the big smile and twinkling eyes, beat the bumbling Ford in the 1976 election. The "man from Plains" started off with the patina of good populist Frank Capra movies like Mr. Smith Comes to Washington or Mr. Deeds Comes to Town, coding Carter as the good small town guy coming to Washington to clean up the mess. In his January 1977 inauguration walk, Carter and his wife Rosalynn strode down the street hand-in-hand, the Washington outsiders, people of the people who would bring a new era to Washington presidential politics.

Unfortunately for Carter, his good old boys weren't so clean after all and the early days of his presidency projected more of a Fritz Lang movie of corruption than an unlifting Frank Capra film. For Carter's close friend Bert Lance, his brother Billy, and advisor Hamilton Jordan, all successively got bad press and were attacked for corruption or crime of various sorts. Carter, in fact, was never popular with the press who began to present him as a Hee-Haw hick, and this country movie didn't sell well for presidential image and narrative with Washington and New York media sophisticates.

Nor did Carter's moralism play well with the media or broad segments of the public. However, decent and competent Carter appears in retrospect, and he looks good to some of us in comparison with what came later, his administration just did not produce a good political narrative or spectacle. Moreover, Carter was done in by the dramatic display of the Iran hostage crisis that helped undo his presidency. The popular TV late-night talk show Nightline featured a logo with dramatic music, "America Held Hostage" Day 37! As the days went by, and the American hostages remained captives of Iranian students and radicals, Carter was portrayed as ineffectual and incompetent.

Furthermore, if you are a conspiracy buff, and U.S. politics and cinematic culture nurtures such perspectives, Carter was ultimately done in by another film, a behind the scenes spy thriller, which never floated to mainstream media perception. In this largely untold and unknown story, the Reagan-Bush team was negotiating with the Iranians to keep the U.S. diplomats hostage until after the election in return for payment in arms and murky diplomatic promises. There was indeed precedent for such (treasonous) behind the scenes sculduggery. There were reports in several later history books that in 1968, when poor old Hubert Horatio Humphrey (HHH) was engaged in a close presidential race with Richard Nixon, the deceitful and villainous Henry Kissinger, in cahoots with a Vietnam Tiger Lady, blocked LBJ's peace negotiations with the Vietnamese. HHH barely lost the election, and the Vietnam war went on, eventually leading to the first major U.S. military defeat. Although several books were later to document Kissinger's perfidy, and a string of other political crimes, the villainous Kissinger was able to survive and thrive as a corporate deal-maker and political mucker, and so far no muckraking film has taken him down.

Cut to 1980 and another covert spy thriller: The Reagan-Bush team is worried about an "October Surprise," the release of Iranian hostages, that would give Carter a boost in popularity, overcome his biggest negatives, and win him the presidency. Consequently, the Reagan-Bush team opened up "back door" diplomatic relations and negotiated with the Iranians to continue to hold the American diplomats hostage until after election. Several Iranians and arms dealers involved in the exchange confirmed the story, as did several foreign intelligence services that had high level Reagan team officials, including former CIA director and Vice-President candidate George H. W. Bush, meeting with Iranians. Moreover, the U.S. hostages were released on the day of Reagan's inauguration, U.S. arms started showing up in Iran, an Israeli plane crashed in Turkey carrying U.S. arms, and the later events of the Iran/Contra affair situate a great crime -- and so far unmade Oliver Stone film -- at the origins of the Reagan presidency.

## **Ronald Reagan, the Acting President**

In any case, Carter lost in 1980 to Reagan, and so the U.S. had its first acting president and professional actor qua president, former movie star and California governor Ronald Reagan. Not surprisingly, in an era of media saturation, Reagan was a highly effective president, despite lacking in political experience. Reflection on the Reagan presidency suggests that Hollywood is the New Aristocracy, both in terms of cash and life-style, but also network of connections and glamorous public image, so it is not accidental that Hollywood would produce a president. The Reagan presidency also combined the aura of celebrity and political leader, requiring that future successful presidents also be celebrities.

The Reagan Administration was one of the most successful media presidencies and set of political spectacles in history. Michael Rogin already wrote the book Ronald Reagan the Movie (1982) that documents the intersection of Reagan's film and political career. Reagan, contrary to some popular misrepresentations, was a top-line A and not B movie actor. His presidency was scripted to act out and play his presidential role. Reagan rehearsed his lines everyday and generally gave a good performance. Every move was scripted and his media handlers had camera on hand to provide the image, photo opportunity, and political line of the day that they wanted to convey to the media.

Reagan was also a celebrity, a superstar of media culture, an American icon and perhaps the first intersection of celebrity and politics in an era in which celebrities were increasingly not just role models but political forces who ran for office, or were active politically. Like Reagan, entertainers George Murphy, Sonny Bono, Shirley Temple, Jesse Ventura, and others attained political office. A wide array of media celebrities campaigned for causes and candidates, including Jane Fonda, Robert Redford, Warren Beatty, Barbra Streisand, Rob Reiner and others on the left, contrasted to Bruce Willis, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and a few other Republicans on the right.

For two administrations, the Reagan team carried out a spectacle politics with coordinated daily political events and big media spectacles: rallies, special events, and speeches with flags, crowds, and a photogenic background. After a slow start, the new Reagan administration was given a big boost by the spectacle of the attempted assassination in 1981. The event created intense drama, but also sympathy for a man who reacted to his tragedy with humor and fortitude, and Reagan was on a media roll that would continue for years.

The Reagan administration also had a good plot-line and narrative for his presidency: deregulation and the triumph of market capitalism and defeat of communism in the Cold War. Ultimately, the Reaganites claimed victory on both of these themes, and Reagan continues to this day to score high in presidential ratings and get good media coverage. Of course, there were significant and sometimes unperceived costs to his presidency: in his two terms, Reagan doubled the national debt, and redistributed wealth upwards from poor to rich, greatly increasing the divide between haves and have not. His military build-up was costly and wasteful, his deregulation politics created the S&L

scandal, that cost taxpayers over half a trillion dollars, and in retrospect the Clinton years were far more prosperous than the Reagan years which in fact were an economic disaster for many.

The Reagan presidency was partly done in by the consequences of the October Surprise, the Iran-Contra Affair, and his overly aggressive foreign policy and military policy, which are narratively linked. Iran-Contra was itself, a great political spectacle, which could have made great movies, but was perhaps too complex and has never been presented in popular narrative form. Reagan's Star Wars missile defense program was broadly ridiculed, denounced by scientists and eventually scrapped by the Clinton administration, although it is being resurrected by Bush II and especially Donald Rumsfeld, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, a retread of the failed Ford administration. Rumsfeld was popularly referred to as "Dr. Strangelove" before September 11 because of his strange faith in a missile shield and unconventional ideas on the military, although he is now a major media star in the Terror War of the present era.

Finally, the Reagan image has benefited in retrospect from sympathy from his suffering Alzheimer's disease. While images of Reagan falling asleep while visiting the Pope, nodding off at a major arms negotiations meetings, or failing to distinguish between reality and some of his movie roles, created a culture of Reagan ridicule and accusations of senility, the tragedy of his disease makes it mean and unsympathetic to attack his mental failings.

Hence, although one could indeed argue that the Reagan administration was an unmitigated disaster, it was not presented in this way by the media or any films or television programs and was thus not perceived negatively on the whole by broad sectors of the public, either then nor now. In fact, generally speaking, certain political or economic scandals and failures do not make for good movies or coherent narratives, as these events, like the S&L scandal, or Iran-Contra are too complex to capture in an easily consumable film. There are, arguably, great films to be made of Reagan era scandals but since many of the major participants are now in the Bush II administration and the population is hysterized by Terror War, it is highly unlikely that there will be a cultural and political reconstruction and rethinking of the Reagan era in the near future. Thus Reagan's acting presidency is still one of the most successful presidential narratives of recent history.

### **Bush I, Great Campaign, Mixed Images, Failed Presidency**

In 1988, George H.W. Bush ran one of the great media campaigns of all time, as I described in my 1990 book Television and the Crisis of Democracy. Trailing Democratic Party candidate Michael Dukakis by 10-15 points after the late summer Democratic convention in 1988, Bush ended up handily winning, after an excellent TV campaign. The Bush I team presented positive images in their daily photo ops and pictures, that showed Bush surrounded by flags, on stage with the police or military, and in scenes of presidential power, as he drew on his Vice-President image, and projected images of an experienced, energetic, and hard-working public servant. In his TV ads, there were

copious pictures of his family, with Bush ladling out soup in one ad, a giving father ready to serve and provide.

Of course, Bush I also ran a highly effective negative campaign and his Willie Horton TV ads are now icons of dubious negative advertising. The Horton ads, which portrayed images of prisoners of color revolving out of open prison doors, evoked the story of a black convict whom Dukakis had released in a prison furlough program, and who then had brutally beaten a Maryland couple and raped the woman. The ad insinuated that Dukakis was a liberal soft on crime, but played on racial fears. The ad was totally unfair as many states, such as Texas, had similar furlough programs, and Dukakis's Republican predecessor had initiated the program. Another completely mendacious Bush team negative ad portrayed a polluted Boston Harbor, as if Governor Dukakis was weak on the environment. In fact, it was the failure of the Reagan-Bush administration to release mandated funds to clean up Boston Harbor and other environmental sites that was responsible for the pollution.

Bush's campaign was run by Lee Atwater and George W. Bush, both fierce attack dogs running a down and dirty campaign that was one of the most negative in recent history. Roger Ailes was another top campaign official, now president of Fox TV news, where he continues his ideological service for the rightwing of the Republican party. Bush's 1988 opponent, Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, was highly qualified, but just could not produce strong enough positive images and sell his candidacy to the public. At times, Dukakis appeared as a doofus, as when he was photographed driving a tank, an image that Republicans used in attack ads. Using a McCarthyite tactic, Bush denounced Dukakis as a "card-carrying liberal in the ACLU," but Dukakis himself wouldn't admit he was a liberal until the end of the campaign. He also appeared too cold and detached in debates when he was bushwhacked with a question concerning how he'd respond to his wife's rape, an incredible question that showed the tabloid nature of the media mafia who performed in presidential debates.

And, crucially, although Bush played hardball politics against Dukakis, the Democrat just didn't go after Bush: Dukakis had any number of great scandals he could play against Bush, but the Democrats wimped out, refusing to go after Bush and the October Surprise, or his roles in the Iran-Contra affair, the S&L crisis, or other scandals of the Reagan era. The Democrats played softball in a hardball era, engaging in earlier form of civil and gentlemanly politics in a smashmouth era when Republicans excelled in dirty tracks, slime and slander, and doing everything possible to present their opponents in a negative light.

And so Dukakis lost and Bush won after a highly effective media campaign. Moreover, Bush got off to a strong start as president with a great dramatic TV-movie opener, the Panama Invasion and arrest of Noriega that created a wave of patriotism, macho assertiveness, and high ratings for the CIA-president. But by 1990, the economy was tanking, taxes were going up, and Bush's popularity was heading south. Bush had pledged "Read my lips, no new taxes" and had then raised taxes, so he was losing his conservative base and looking bad in the media. Footage of his pledge not to raise taxes

was repeated over and over, while economic bad news was relentless, creating an image of Bush as failed economic manager and hypocritical politician (both true).

Consequently, another great movie was needed to boost Bush I's popularity and save his presidency: the Persian Gulf TV war, a cinematic spectacle of the highest order. I am not suggesting that Bush's war movie of 1991 was merely an effort to sell the Bush presidency, as there were also geopolitical interests involved, oil interests that have defined Bush family politics for decades, and a desire of the military to fight and win a war to redeem their defeat in Vietnam and to increase their military budget. Major political events are always overdetermined and require multicausal analysis. Yet, as I recount in my 1992 book The Persian Gulf TV War, Bush I's Iraq adventure was one of the great media spectacles and propaganda events in history. By the return of U.S. troops from the Gulf after kicking Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, Bush's popularity was soaring at 90% and it looked like he'd be a shoo-in for a second term.

Bush failed to follow-up on the defeat of Iraq's military and overthrow Saddam Hussein, established by Bush's propagandists as another Hitler, thus he could not claim complete triumph in the Gulf war. Moreover, images of suppressed uprisings in southern and northern Iraq, with heartbreaking images of Kurdish refugees contrasted with Bush playing golf on vacation, created a bad aftermath and with the economy faltering again during the latter part of Bush's presidency, he was vulnerable to a challenge.

Bush's opponent in 1992 was a brash young Arkansas Governor named Bill Clinton who was relatively unknown on the national scene. Yet he ran an excellent media campaign, like Bush's 1988 effort, one of the best in modern U.S. political history. Clinton was self-consciously a Kennedyesque figure, a younger generation politico, who cultivated the JFK look, called attention to the lineage endlessly, playing repeatedly campaign video of young Bill Clinton shaking hands with Jack Kennedy in the White House.

Clinton was also entertaining as a campaigner, using every major TV genre to cultivate votes, many for the first time. Clinton played his sax on *Arsenio*; did teary and soulful melodrama and soap opera with Hillary on 60 Minutes, as he admitted he'd had affairs, that their marriage had suffered problems, but that they'd worked hard to solve the problems and strengthen the marriage, a narrative-line many in the audience could buy and identify with. Clinton bantered about underpants and boxers on MTV; he had a serious conversation about marriage with Donahue and was the first presidential candidate to appear on these talk show venues --now a campaign necessity after Clinton's successful manipulation of popular TV genres.

Clinton also did well in debates, and had a good spectacle moment when an African American woman in the audience asked if any of the well-off candidates understood the distress of those in the underclasses. Bush was cliched and perfunctory in his answer, but Clinton strode down the stage to eye-ball the woman (and the TV audience) saying that he felt their pain, he cared, and he'd work hard to improve the

economy for everyone. During the same debate Bush looked bored and detached, glancing at his watch at one point, as if he just couldn't wait until this ordeal was over.

On the whole, Bush I ran a surprisingly bad campaign in 1992. He appeared detached from everyday reality when he went into a supermarket and appeared amazed at a scanner in the check-out area, obviously a chore that Bush had never performed. He seemed unhappy with having to sell himself to a fickle public, and his campaign never caught fire. His political manager Lee Atwater had died of cancer, his son George W. was preoccupied with personal affairs and not yet ready for prime-time, there was friction between the Bushes and long-time friend James Baker who was running the campaign, and Bush never really connected with the public.

Of course, Clinton also had issues on his side, with his team endlessly telling the public, "It's the economy stupid!" and indeed the economy was in a slump during Bush's reign. Bush doubled the national deficit while raising taxes, seemed to have no economic plan or policy other than giving big corporations whatever favors they wanted, and lost favor with the public. There was also the irritant of Ross Perot, with his nerdy charts demonstrating the economic woes under Bush and stealing votes from the center and right alike from Bush with his twangy-Texas pseudo populism.

But in a media era, it was also clear that Bush just didn't have the image or political skills to work the media, was a poor president, and ran a losing campaign. While U.S. politics are not all spectacle and image, it certainly helps and Bill and Hillary Clinton projected more youthful, attractive, and energetic images than the Bushes. Saturday Night Live! made jokes about Barbara Bush as George's grandmother, and the Bushes had poor body language, always looking awkward with each other and disconnected. The more youthful and attractive Clintons made a far more appealing couple, and then provided the thrills of weekly tabloid soap opera entertainment and family melodrama, continuing to the present.

## **The Clinton Years**

The two Clinton terms were probably the most contested and melodramatic spectacle of any presidency in history, with endless conflict, scandal, crisis, and their miraculous overcoming by the "comeback kid" Bill Clinton. It's almost as if Clinton needed scandal and crisis to function, requiring challenges to perform and connect with a public that ignored everyday politics but loved political battles, scandal, and spectacle. Consequently, as president, like Reagan, and unlike Bush I, Clinton gave good spectacle: sex scandals, soap opera, melodrama, impeachment, war with the right, and ultimately the spectacle of survival under constant adversity.

The Clinton years were highly entertaining and unfolded during a period of unparalleled expansion of media culture and a high-tech revolution that produced the internet, cyberculture, and a new culture of celebrity. In this situation, the president had the potential to become First Celebrity, top dog in the hall of fame sweepstakes. Kennedy had achieved positive celebrity status, as had Reagan, whereas more mundane politicians

like Johnson, Ford, Carter, and Bush I failed in the celebrity popularity race and were not able to get re-elected.

There was, however, a price to be paid for attaining a celebrity presidency. Never before had the media delved into the personal lives of a presidential couple to the extent of the media trials of Bill and Hillary Clinton. The Whitewater scandal unfolded during the first year of the Clinton presidency and there was unending media focus on every detail of the Clinton's economic, political, and ultimately sex and family life. No longer was the president free from the taint of scandal and tabloid journalism. The blending of information and entertainment in media culture during the Clinton years, the fierce competition for audiences, the rise of the Internet and cyberculture, all made for a volatile media mix and feeding-frenzy that exploited the topic or scandal of the day for maximizing audiences and profits.

In the 1996 election, Bill Clinton faced off against aging Republican Bob Dole. The election itself was purely contrived with staged town hall meetings, scripted and managed conventions, sound-byte "messages" tested by polling and focus groups, and constant attempts to sell the candidates as if they were commodities. Clinton won easily, in part because the economy was relatively strong, in part because Dole was a poor candidate, and partly because Clinton was a good politician, in tune with many sectors of the electorate.

Clinton was seemingly able to empathize with audiences. He had highly developed social and political skills, and was, more than Reagan the old mummer, a great communicator — at least to those who were open to communication. Precisely because of his easy-going personality, morality, and pragmatic politics, conservatives deeply loathed Clinton and were furious when he won two presidencies and overcame scandal after scandal. The Internet burned with anti-Clinton screeds and there was a cottage industry of books that demonized the Clintons and cumulatively sold millions.

Indeed, the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal was broken on the Internet when Matt Drudge published an outline of a story that the Washington Post and Newsweek seemed reluctant to push, concerning rumors of a sexual relationship between Clinton and a young White House intern. Eventually, the story broke and Bill and Monica were the hot item of the season. There were endless replays of the footage of the perky intern with a beret hugging Clinton at a White House reception, or greeting him at another event in revealing cleavage. When Clinton insisted that he "never had sex with that woman," this image came back to haunt him and encouraged conservatives that they could destroy Clinton. His opponents attempted to use a videotape in which Clinton denied the sexual relation to charge him with lying under oath and undertaking impeachment proceedings that came close to succeeding.

Conservatives were outraged, however, that every time a new scandal broke in the Lewinsky affair, Clinton's popularity went up. When Clinton's prosecutors, led by the puritanical and ultraconservative Ken Starr, released the video of Clinton lying under oath, they figured his popularity would collapse, but, no, it went up. Likewise, when

Clinton's prosecutors released the Starr report that detailed his sexual adventures with Lewinsky and others, once again Clinton's approval rating climbed in public polls. In the Congressional impeachment proceedings and Senate trial, once again Clinton's ratings improved as his conservative attackers attempted to discredit and destroy him.

Clinton was fortunate that he had such offensive rightwing foes and benefited from political sympathy from liberals and Democrats that did not want to see an election victory overturned and to allow the Republicans to get their way. But broad sectors of the centrist and apolitical public sympathized with Clinton, in some extent because of the obnoxiousness of his prosecutors, in part because of empathy and identification with the spectacle of the president under attack. It seems that many in the audience had experienced similar predicaments and could empathize with Clinton and his his pain.

Despite the scandals, Clinton became a celebrity and cultural icon, however tarnished, and his popularity soared in part because his years were an entertaining spectacle and in part because of the unprecedented growth of the U.S. and global economy. It appeared by the end of the Clinton years that in an age of media spectacle good looks and a pleasing personality had become important markers of a successful presidency, especially abundant hair, a nice smile, and a good body-image. The most popular presidents of the post-JFK years had abundant hair and a pleasing smile and engaging personality (i.e. JFK, Reagan, and Clinton). LBJ and Ladybird Johnson came off as Texan Gothic types; Nixon appeared to be untrustworthy and shifty, someone you'd hesitate to buy a used car from; Ford came off as bumbling, unappealing, and incompetent; Carter was presented by the media as too moralistic and ineffective, as he tried to micromanage every issue and situation; Dole was perceived as unpleasant and mean; and Bush I was perceived at too patrician and disengaged, not really caring about ordinary people.

The presidential culture of personality and swing toward media politics reflects in some ways shifts in the economy and culture from the post-World War II to the contemporary era, sometimes theorized as a shift to postmodern culture and society. Sociologists have argued that U.S. culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century moved from a culture of individualism with inner-directed people searching for authentic meaning and shaping their own life, to an other-directed culture of conformity in which people are guided by the media and other social authorities. Further, as the economy and society moves from emphasis on production to consumption, media culture is defined by image, look and spectacle, requiring presidents to have a pleasing personality and to sell themselves to voters. Hence, the importance of public relations, media handlers, polls and focus groups, and media spectacle to promote candidates and policies.

To connect with audiences, politicians also have to look like just plain folks, one of the people, as well as to appear nice and attractive. Note also how recent politicians have been committed to working out and gym culture (i.e. Clinton, Gore, and Bush II), while earlier golfing was (and still is) de rigeur. All of these trends of the media president who strives to make a good impression and manage his image to promote the candidate and their policies are evident in the ascension to power of George W. Bush.

## **Bush II, Grand Theft 2000, and Terror War**

During Campaign 2000, the Republicans had a fourth-rate presidential candidate, the least qualified of my lifetime, but they constructed a first-rate script: Bush II was a different kind of Republican, a compassionate conservative, a uniter, not a divider, who could get Democrats and Republicans together to “get things done. Of course, none of these claims were true, but they created a positive image and the media generally went along with them. The mainstream media for the most part overlooked that Bush’s Texas record as governor was not compassionate conservatism, but hardright pandering to corporate interests who funded his campaign, and tax breaks for the wealthy that bankrupted the state which had enjoyed a surplus under Democratic governors. Bush had bullied or cajoled select Democrats in Texas to go along with his rightwing corporate agenda, and was not really a consensus-builder or bipartisan.

Moreover, by and large the mainstream media neglected a life-time of scandal which marked George W. Bush’s life and was well-documented in the Internet and a series of books, but largely stayed off the media radar during Election 2000. It was, in fact, astonishing that after eight years of scandal-mongering and mudslinging during the Clinton years, none of the rich history of Bush family scandal or George W. Bush’s personal failings were focused on. Nor did the softball Democrats under Al Gore go after Bush’s record, or personal and family history, a courtesy for which they were repaid with hardball smashmouth politics during the Battle for the White House after the deadlocked 2000 election.

The war for the White House was indeed one of the greatest political dramas and spectacles in U.S. history, as I recount in my book Grand Theft 2000. While the purloining of the presidency is arguably one of the major scandals of U.S. political history, the story has not been told by the mainstream media, although you can find big chunks of the story on the Internet and in a series of books, including my own.

Bush’s first months in office were marked by hardright conservatism with bold payoffs to the key corporations who had supported his campaign in the form of deregulation, changing governmental rules, and tax give-aways. After the Democrats seized control of the domestic agenda in late May 2001, with the defection of Republican Senator Jim Jeffords, Bush’s hardright and utterly corrupt agenda seemed side-tracked. But the September 11 terrorist attacks strengthened his hand and enabled his cronies to carry through even more radical hardright assaults on civil liberties and the free and open society, as well as to attempt more federal theft through the mechanism of an economic “stimulus” package. Such stimulus, as proposed by the Bush administration, would constitute even greater corporate giveaways and tax breaks to the rich and his biggest contributors.<sup>2</sup>

The September 11 terror attacks, succeeding anthrax hysteria, and war fever following the Bush administration military intervention in Afghanistan created a situation of unparalleled media support for the Bush presidency and elevated Bush into a major

celebrity, almost immune from criticism. As I write in early 2002, a USA Today poll rates Bush as the most admired person in the United States and he enjoys the highest approval ratings in modern times.

Yet the media can destroy what they build up, and a coming Bushgate could reverse the fortunes of the Bush dynasty with a series of crime dramas, political corruption and conspiracy narratives, and family melodramas that would rival any comparative saga in American literature or history. I would indeed recommend to a future Theodore Dreiser or Oliver Stone a trilogy of books or films starting with Prescott, that detail the stunning story of Bush family patriarch Prescott Bush who was, in effect, Adolph Hitler's financial agent. Prescott helped manage through the Union National Bank several major Nazi businesses that ran in the U.S. and globally, including Hapag-Lloyd Shipping Lines and Thyssen United Steel Works. The Union Banking Corporation was seized by the U.S. government in 1942 under the Trading with the Enemy Act, and Prescott Bush was listed as a top board of director, the Bush's held onto the bank through the war and sold out in the 1950s, attaining their family fortune through an institution that had help finance National Socialism. But somehow the scandal never came out during Prescott's senate campaigns and he died a respected family patriarch.

This epic history of ruling class scoundrels would also present the story of Herbert Walker, Prescott Bush's close business associate and father of his wife Dorthey Walker. George Herbert Walker Bush and George Walker Bush were named after the man who who helped run businesses for Stalin's Russia, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany. The secretive wheeler dealer is perhaps best known for his golf spectacle the Walker Cup and the construction of Madison Square Garden, while his son Herbert Walker junior ("Uncle Herbie") was one of the owners of the New York Mets, a sports spectacle that helped get George W. Bush interested in baseball. The Walker-Bush alliance is one of the shadiest and most scandalous in U.S. economic and political history and uncovering this story will be one of the great spectacles of the new millennium.

The second part of the trilogy would tell the remarkable saga of George (Herbert Walker Bush), detailing an astonishing life of intrigue in economic and political scandals, including a stint as CIA Director which involved interesting but largely unknown relations with scoundrels like Saddam Hussein and Manuel Noriega. George would also have engaging spy thrillers like the October Surprise, the Iran/contra scandal, and support of Islamic fundamentalist groups in Afghanistan era that later helped form the Al Qaeda network and Taliban. This monumental epic would include Reagan-era scandals like the S&L crisis and the tremendous increase in the global drug business when George was given drug-czar responsibilities during the Reagan years. It would include some curious business relations with the Bin Laden family, strange relations with Rev. Moon and some other sinister figures on the right, and could delve into the affairs of the Carlyle Fund. The latter constitutes one of the biggest holders of military stocks at a time when the Bin Laden family and Bush-Baker cliques were major investors and managers of the fund, while their sons George Junior and Osama Bin Laden were protagonists in the Terror War that is so far the defining spectacle of the new millennium, and a source of great profit for the Bush-Baker and Bin Laden cliques.

The Bush family saga could also present the remarkable business careers of George H. W. Bush's three sons, looking into the Silverado S&L scandal and the involvement of Neil Bush; it could examine how Jeb Bush was involved in businesses with rightwing Cuban crooks who scammed HUD and Medicare for millions, and made a fortune for Jeb who became governor of Florida and one of the architects of theft of the White House in Election 2000. And it would require an entire separate study of how W. made his fortune and then succeeded in state and presidential politics. This story, found in a series of books and Internet sources, but generally left out of mainstream media, would tell the remarkable tale of how George W. Bush made his fortune, obtained the presidency through Grand Theft 2000, and fronted the Terror War that saved his failing presidency and enriched his family, friends, and wealthiest supporters.

The W. story would recount how after years of frat boy ribaldry at Yale, Bush got his father to pull strings so he would not have to go to Vietnam and then got into the Texas National Guard Air Reserves. During his lost years in the 1970s, W. reportedly went AWOL for a year from military duty, was a heavy alcohol and drug abuser, and a nair-do-well failure who finally decided to put together an oil company when he was already well into his 30s. Investors reportedly included the Bin Laden family and other unsavory types. His initial company Arbusto went bust and was eventually taken over by Harken Energy Corporation, with family friends again jumping in to bail Junior out. Harken soon after received a lucrative Bahain oil contract in part as a result of Bush family connections, and the Harken stock went up. But as a member of the Board of Directors, Junior knew that declining profits figures for the previous quarter, about to be released, would depress the value of the stock, so George W. unloaded his stock, in what some see as an illegal insider trading dump. Moreover, young Bush failed to register his questionable sale with the SEC, although later a paper was produced indicating that he had eventually registered the sale, some eight months after he dumped his stock (it helped that his father was President when Junior should have been investigated for his questionable business dealings).

With the money made from his Harken disinvestiture, Junior invested in the Texas Rangers baseball team and was made General Manager when some other Texas good old boys put up the money. Using a public bond issue that he pushed upon voters to finance construction of a new Rangers stadium, the stock value of the baseball team went up. Once again, Bush sold out for a hefty profit and then ran as Governor of Texas, despite no political experience and a shaky business history. His two terms in office wrecked the state economy as it went from surplus to deficit thanks to a tax bill that gave favors to the wealthiest, and sweetheart deals and deregulation bonanzas to his biggest campaign contributors. Governor Bush helped make Texas the site of the most toxic environmental pollution and outrageous corporate skullduggery in the country. Bush provided questionable favors to a nursing home corporations that faced state investigation and strong support for the wheelin' and dealin' Enron Company, one of the biggest financial contributors to Bush's campaigns and a corporation that underwent the biggest collapse of any U.S. company in history, under highly questionable circumstances.

The Bush spectacle is therefore far from over and it will be highly instructive to see how the family history continues to be constructed and perceived in the media and by the general public. It will also be interesting to see if the Internet spectacle replaces television and Hollywood spectacle as the major conveyer of news, information, entertainment, and politics as the millennium proceeds, providing multiple sources of information and entertainment that will be impossible for the Bush clique to control. Or will Terror War provide a spectacle that will enable the Bush administration to close the open society and create a military and police state? How will the Bush clique manage a U.S. and global economy in crisis, in which as of the end of 2001 more than 1,800,000 jobs have been lost since Bush stole the presidency and a healthy surplus was replaced by spiraling deficit? Will U.S. democracy and the global economy survive the Bush spectacle, or is a new form of military-police state and an Orwellian nightmare the coming spectacle of the New Millennium? Whatever the answers to these questions, it is clear that the forthcoming narratives of the Bush presidency will be among the most interesting and fateful in U.S. history.

### **Concluding Comments**

The American presidency, from John F. Kennedy to Bush II, has produced a series of political narratives, some of which were successful and other unsuccessful. In the Age of Media Spectacle, politics is mediated more and more by the forms of spectacle culture and in particular look, image, style, and presentation, but also narrative. What sort of stories a presidential administration generates determines success from failure, and a positive from an ambiguous or negative legacy.

The centrality of media spectacle and political narrative to contemporary politics means that making sense of the current era requires the tools of a critical social theory and cultural studies in order to analyze the images, discourses, events, and narratives of presidential politics. Of course, politics is more than merely narrative, there are real events with real interests and consequences, and often behind the scenes maneuvering that are not part of the public record. Yet publics see presidencies and administrations in terms of narrative and spectacle, so that theorizing the cinematic and narrative nature of contemporary politics can help us understand, critique and transform our political system.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, I draw on a series of books that I have published, including (with Michael Ryan) Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1988; Television and the Crisis of Democracy. Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1990; The Persian Gulf TV War. Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1992; (co-edited with Dan Streible) Film, Art and Politics: An Emile de Antonio Reader Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000; Grand Theft 2000. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001; and (with Steven Best) The Postmodern Adventure. Science Technology, and Cultural Studies at the Third Millennium. New York and London: Guilford and Routledge, 2001.

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<sup>2</sup> For the astonishing story of the Bush gang election theft, see Kellner 2001 which also cites documents grounding the thumbnail sketch of Bush's life presented above. All of these stories are well-documented in websites like [www.bushwatch.com](http://www.bushwatch.com), as well as a series of books that I draw upon in Kellner 2001, but the mainstream media prefer to neglect the more unsavory aspects of the life and times of George W. Bush, in favor of puff pieces on the rascal.