

THE ENTERTAINMENT PRESIDENCY:
AMERICAN POLITICS IN
THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

The essential issue of this project is the relationship between the American people and their president. As technology changes, people adapt to new methods of communication which simultaneously allow them to connect with others and the wider world more easily and yet also separate themselves from others and the wider world more easily. The need for presidential candidates and sitting presidents to connect with citizens has led to the adoption of diverse media strategies that include traditional news initiatives with established journalists, face to face interaction with small groups of supporters, and visits to traditionally non-political entertainment-based venues. This dissertation research examines that last element of presidential-level communication: an embrace of entertainment forums for political purposes.

This project is a necessary contribution to the field because there has not been a thorough and exclusive examination of the embrace of the entertainment-based venue by presidential campaigns guided by the thoughts of veterans of presidential campaigns themselves. Some scholars and journalists have partially analyzed this phenomenon as part of a larger examination of presidential communication strategy, but this specific element has largely been uninspected and has become especially relevant in the context of the presidency of Barack Obama, a trailblazer in the use of entertainment-based venues for political purposes, and in the context of presidential campaigns and administrations going forward. The 2016 presidential primaries have only made the purpose of this project more urgent because of the rise of Donald Trump, perhaps the ultimate example of the fusing of politics and entertainment. To understand the phenomena driving presidential campaigns to embrace entertainment-based venues, I conducted interviews

with twenty-two veterans of presidential campaigns dating back to the 1980 election. Between them, these twenty-two political strategists have worked for five administrations – Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama – and a number of major campaigns in every election cycle since 1980, including the 2016 campaign. I also conducted two interviews with veterans of the most viewed entertainment platforms of the 1990s and 2000s: *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and *The Late Show with David Letterman*. These twenty-four interviews, including with one individual who worked for both a presidential campaign and a late night entertainment talk show, were conducted between March 2015 and February 2016 and included targeted questions and an oral history component.

Presidential candidates have increasingly needed to stress the lighter sides of their personalities to appeal to a voting public fascinated by the horserace media coverage of presidential politics but largely uninterested in the minutiae of day-to-day policymaking. Slowly, sitting presidents have attempted to do the same but have had to balance revelation with the responsibilities of holding the highest office in the land. This project evaluates the implications of the moves that presidential campaigns and presidential administrations have made to become more accessible and connected with the citizenry in a constantly changing media environment. Based on the data collected through the interview process, his project offers a new theoretical underpinning for this media strategy based on a synthesis of role theory, the postmodern presidency theory, and technological determinism that allows for the significant influence of individual personality in the decision-making process and predicts how future campaigns will operate in this regard as media technology and American political culture evolve.

To

Ali, Shelby, Ann, Amelia, Christine, Tess, Lindsey, Molly,

Val, Cathy, Sarah, Lauren, Ashley, Myriam, and Morgan

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In democracies or republics, politicians are supposed to serve the interests of citizens. The Founding Fathers of the United States of America believed that their version of a democratic republic could only function properly with a well-educated citizenry cognizant of the major policy debates occurring in the houses of government (Jefferson, 1789). After a failed attempt at government organization under the Articles of Confederation, the Founders devised a system of government at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 that featured three coequal branches of government: a legislature consisting of two houses that would craft law, a judiciary set up to interpret law, and an executive branch, headed by the president, designed to enforce law. Due to changes in the electoral process beginning in the 1820s, as well as advances in media technology that have allowed politicians to communicate more easily with constituents, the presidency has become the focus of American political life, and the communicative relationship between the president and the people he or she serves has become the dominant political discourse of our time.

During the 20th century there were increases in technological innovation and democratization that brought the general public closer and more involved with the individuals who wish to lead them. The commercialization of the film industry in the 1910s, radio in the early 1920s, and television in the late 1940s introduced the concept of broadcasting to politics, allowing presidents to speak directly to the entire citizenry. For the first time, citizens across the country heard their president all at once and later saw their president in moving images all at once. Concurrently, women and racial minorities

were granted the right to vote after long struggles and great resistance, and party presidential nominating processes moved away from the smoky backrooms of conventions and towards direct elections consisting of primaries and caucuses.

The expansion of television options beginning with the popularization of cable television in the 1980s and the commercialization of the internet in the 1990s have brought even more significant changes to the political media environment. The need for presidential candidates and sitting presidents to connect with citizens has become more urgent and has led to the adoption of diverse media strategies that include traditional news initiatives with established journalists, face to face interaction with small groups of supporters, and visits to traditionally non-political entertainment-based venues. This dissertation research examines that last element of presidential-level communication: an embrace of entertainment forums for political purposes.

Purpose and Aim

This project began in 2014 with a fierce urgency to tackle the phenomenon of presidential candidates and sitting presidents embracing entertainment-based venues, because Barack Obama became the first sitting president to aggressively target these venues. Two months after his inauguration in 2009, President Obama became the first president to visit a late night comedy talk show when he appeared on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. By the end of the next year, Obama had visited *The Late Show with David Letterman* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and visits to *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, and *Ellen* would soon follow. In 2012, Obama would become the first president to appear on a podcast when he talked with ESPN's Bill Simmons about sports and family. On the second to last day of 2015, President Obama was the

featured guest on the digital television show *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*, becoming not only the first president but the first non-comedian to do so. “He’s done some really good work as a monologist at those correspondents’ dinners,” said *Comedians in Cars* host Jerry Seinfeld. “That’s how he qualifies to be on the show” (Zak, 2015). Throughout his presidency, Barack Obama taped appearances in televised settings as varied as *MythBusters* (in 2011) and *Running Wild with Bear Grylls* (in 2015) and also expanded this approach to online non-political venues as well.

The essential issue of this project is the relationship between the American people and their most visible leader. As technology changes, people adapt to new methods of communication that simultaneously allow them to connect with others and the wider world more easily and yet also separate themselves from others and the wider world more easily. A president must attempt to communicate not only with the politically engaged but also with those who do not think about politics on a daily basis but nevertheless consider voting a right or an obligation. This project is a necessary contribution to the field because there has not been a thorough and exclusive examination of the embrace of the entertainment-based venue by presidential campaigns guided by the thoughts of veterans of presidential campaigns themselves. Some scholars and journalists have partially analyzed this phenomenon as part of a larger examination of presidential communication strategy, but this specific element has largely been uninspected and has become especially relevant in the context of the Obama presidency and in the context of presidential campaigns and administrations going forward. This project began with one important research question: In using entertainment-based venues as aggressively as he has, would President Obama eventually be judged by historians as a trendsetter or as an

outlier? Not every presidential innovation has become tradition, yet one trend from 2016 suggests that the Obama approach is here to stay: of the fifteen presidential candidates whose campaigns lasted through the Iowa caucuses, all but one (Dr. Ben Carson) appeared on a program hosted by a professional comedian during the 2016 cycle.

The 2016 election has only made the purpose of this project more urgent because of the successful campaign for the nomination of the Republican Party by Donald Trump, perhaps the ultimate fusion of politics and entertainment. “We’ve never had someone, at least in my lifetime, who was running for president before who for the seven or eight years before that had a top-ten rated national television show,” said Chris Christie, a competitor to Mr. Trump for the Republican nomination, adding, “You cannot discount the celebrity factor in all of this” (Balz et al., 2016). A public figure for over thirty years due to his success in the business world, Donald Trump became a national television phenomenon in the 2000s after starring in NBC’s *The Apprentice*. After considering presidential runs multiple times in the past and each time holding back, Trump finally committed to a presidential run in June 2015 and soon led consistently in the polls, winning a majority of the party’s primaries and caucuses in 2016 to clinch the nomination.

There are some echoes in history of celebrity candidates with little to no governing experience running for president, but none quite fit the example of Mr. Trump. In the 19th century, multiple generals were nominated for president, with some succeeding in securing the presidency. In 1872, *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley became the Democratic Party’s nominee for president. These nominations occurred when parties picked candidates at conventions, rather than letting citizens vote in primaries and

caucuses. In 1984 and 1988, African-American activist Reverend Jesse Jackson ran for president and won the South Carolina primaries each year but finished far behind the eventual winner. In 1992 and 1996, billionaire H. Ross Perot ran as an independent candidate; in 1992, Perot won nineteen percent of the popular vote. Perot had been previously known for his wealth and for his criticism of the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush over the issue of Vietnam War prisoners of war and missing in action soldiers, but he did not have the media presence and entertainment background of Trump at the time of his initial run. The closest analogue to Donald Trump would be Arnold Schwarzenegger, who leveraged his decades of success as a film star into two terms as governor of California; if Governor Schwarzenegger had been a natural-born American citizen, he might have seriously challenged for the presidency using his celebrity status. Notably, Arnold Schwarzenegger announced his initial run for governor not in a press conference attended by traditional journalists but in the highest rated entertainment-based talk show of 2003: *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*.

Donald Trump is only the most extreme example of the intersection between politics and entertainment that has increased dramatically since the commercialization of television in the late 1940s, the great expansion of television to include nationally available cable and satellite channels in the early 1980s, the commercialization of the internet in the 1990s, and the rise of social media platforms in the last decade. Presidential candidates have increasingly needed to stress the lighter sides of their personalities to appeal to a voting public fascinated by the horserace coverage of presidential politics but largely uninterested in the minutiae of day-to-day policymaking. Slowly, sitting presidents have attempted to do the same but have had to balance

revelation with the responsibilities of holding the highest office in the land. This project analyzes the moves that presidential campaigns and presidential administrations have made to become more accessible and connected with the citizenry in a constantly changing media environment. This project evaluates the implications of these moves, offers a new theoretical underpinning for this media strategy, and predicts how future campaigns will operate in this regard as media technology and American political culture evolve.

Scope and Method

This project provides a synthesis of multiple theories explaining why presidential contenders must aggressively market themselves in entertainment-based venues. Role theory, the postmodern presidency theory, and technological determinism each offer vital insights into presidential level communication but do not fully elucidate the complexities of presidential campaigns' thinking in this regard. Individual personalities have significant effects on how each major campaign adapts to a media environment that has undergone profound alterations in the 1990s and especially in the new millennium.

To understand the phenomena driving presidential campaigns to embrace entertainment-based venues, I conducted twenty-four interviews with twenty-two individuals who worked for presidential campaigns and two individuals who helped create content on the most viewed late night entertainment platforms of the 1990s and 2000s: *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and *The Late Show with David Letterman*. Between them, the twenty-two political strategists have worked for five administrations – Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama – and a number of major campaigns in every election cycle since 1980, including the 2016

campaign. These twenty-four interviews were conducted between March 2015 and February 2016 and included both targeted questions and an oral history component. Specific questions were asked in each interview about the phenomena being explored in this study; however, other questions asked were specifically relevant to the campaigns, administrations, and talk shows these individuals worked for.

Preview of Chapters

Chapter 2 provides a literature review defining the entertainment-based venue for the purpose of this project. This chapter also includes a historical overview of presidential campaign strategies from the first competitive American presidential campaign of 1796 to the rise of Ronald Reagan in the 1970s and debunks certain popular culture shared memories about the first presidential campaigns to use televised entertainment-based venues. Particular attention is paid the crucial 1960 campaign and the unlikely trendsetting figure of Richard Nixon.

Chapter 3 analyzes role theory, the postmodern presidency theory, and technological determinism to tease out important contributions each theory provides on presidential communication strategy before recommending a synthesis of these theories that includes the role of individual personality. This chapter also details the research questions that have driven this project.

Chapter 4 offers a comprehensive examination of the method I used for this project: interviews mixing targeted questions with an oral history component. Particular attention is paid to the nuances of this method and the appropriateness of using a qualitative research method for this project.

Chapter 5 examines the strategies of major presidential campaigns in the 1980s with data provided by members of the administration of Ronald Reagan and the campaigns of Edward Kennedy, Walter Mondale, Gary Hart, Dick Gephardt, and Michael Dukakis. This chapter evaluates important overlooked innovations in the use of the entertainment-based venue by the Reagan administration and a number of Democratic campaigns in 1984 and places them in a new historical context. This chapter also analyzes the important changes in the media environment that influenced the implosion of the Hart campaign in 1987 and examines the factors that led the Dukakis campaign to conduct a more traditional campaign. One caveat: although George H. W. Bush is a major figure during the 1980s, I have decided not to cover him until Chapter 6.

Chapter 6 examines the strategies of major presidential campaigns in the 1990s, with data provided by members of the administrations of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton and the campaign of Bob Dole. Bush is examined in Chapter 6 to provide a deliberate contrast with Clinton in how each administration viewed the entertainment-based outlet. This chapter also analyzes the factors that led Clinton to leverage the entertainment-based campaign in the 1992 campaign and the first two years of his administration but to scale back that approach for the majority of his presidency. This chapter also examines the use of *Larry King Live* by H. Ross Perot and analyzes the activities of Bob Dole in 1996, both during the campaign and immediately after the campaign, to illustrate the benefits and risks of using entertainment-based venues.

Chapter 7 scrutinizes the strategies of major presidential campaigns in 2000 and 2004, with data provided by members of the administration of George W. Bush and the campaigns of John McCain, Dan Quayle, Al Gore, John Kerry, and Howard Dean. This

chapter analyzes the major factors that affected the Bush administration's view of entertainment-based venues. This chapter also examines the innovations of the 2004 campaign from Democratic presidential candidates such as Howard Dean, John Edwards, and Al Sharpton before analyzing the Bush-Kerry general election from the perspective of the entertainment-based venue. Also, although the characters are introduced in Chapter 6, Chapter 7 discusses the significant differences in approach between David Letterman and Jay Leno. I include this in Chapter 7 because I argue that 2000 was the first election cycle in which the entertainment-based venue was fully embraced by candidates from both parties during a primary and general election cycle.

Chapter 8 examines the strategies of major presidential campaigns during the Obama era, with data provided by members of the administration of Barack Obama and the campaigns of Hillary Clinton, John McCain, and Mitt Romney. Chapter 8 scrutinizes the Obama administration's approach to the use of the entertainment-based venue and separates the administration into two distinct eras: the first era encompasses the administration placing Obama in new contexts for a sitting president to speak to general audiences, while the second era features the administration targeting niche audiences to promote specific policies. This chapter analyzes the impact of Obama's appearance on *Between Two Ferns* and connects it to the warm embrace of *Saturday Night Live* by major figures in the 2008 campaign. This chapter also investigates the reasons that led the McCain campaign and the Romney campaign to take very different approaches to the entertainment-based venue and suggests a new application of the presidential role.

Chapter 9 discusses the 2016 election cycle, with data provided by members of the Fred Thompson campaign of 2008, two 2016 campaigns, and two 2016 SuperPACs.

This chapter analyzes significant changes in digital content and the late night television scene since the 2012 election and connects the latter to the increasing prominence of the former. Chapter 9 also predicts how Hillary Clinton might use the entertainment-based venue as president and scrutinizes the factors behind the rise of Donald Trump, comparing and contrasting aspects of Mr. Trump's campaign to the 2008 presidential run of Fred Thompson.

Finally, Chapter 10 provides full answers to the research questions introduced in Chapter 4, offers a new theoretical framework, and details directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

DEFINING THE ENTERTAINMENT-BASED VENUE

Before detailing the existing theories that provide a partial framework for an overarching theory of presidential level figures using entertainment-based venues, it is important to define the entertainment-based venue since traditional news and entertainment have begun to blend together over the years. With the popularization of the twenty-four hour news cycle and cable channels that cater to that cycle, presidential candidates and sitting presidents can make numerous appearances on a daily basis in various media, including print, online, radio, and television. Consider this scenario: in a single day, a president can write an op-ed column in a national newspaper, deliver a preplanned speech on education policy from the White House, tape interviews with radio and television journalists from local markets and the Washington national press corps, host a championship sports team for a victory celebration broadcast on the White House website, give an impromptu speech reacting to a newsworthy crisis carried by multiple television channels, and tape an appearance on a late night comedic talk show that had previously scheduled a week-long run in Washington D.C. That last appearance, in our hypothetical example, is the type of broadcast outlet that this project is concerned with: a nationally-known politician's appearance in an entertainment-based venue.

Entertainment-Based Venues

Using a case study of media appearances by Ron Paul during his 2012 presidential campaign, Baym (2013) provided an appropriate starting point in defining the characteristics of an entertainment-based venue. In four conversations with the hosts of *Meet the Press* (David Gregory), *The Tonight Show* (Jay Leno), *Hannity* (Sean

Hannity), and *The Daily Show* (Jon Stewart), Paul was subjected to “interrogation,” “celebration,” “confrontation,” and “conversation,” respectively (2013, pp. 5-15). On this spectrum, *Meet the Press* is the closest to a traditional news program while *The Tonight Show* is the farthest. While *Hannity* is more politically focused than *The Tonight Show* and even *The Daily Show* (Jon Stewart often hosted non-political guests to interview and occasionally taped full episodes devoid of political content), *Hannity* provides a level of entertainment not seen on *Meet the Press* because the program’s structure is centered on a heroic host. A *Daily Show* spinoff, *The Colbert Report*, acted as a *Saturday Night Live* style parody of programs such as *Hannity* and *The O’Reilly Factor*. As the quintessential example of Washingtonian elite journalism often focused on political hypocrisy, *Meet the Press* “constrains potential lines of thinking and modes of understanding [...] with a discourse of interrogation [that] is fundamentally hostile and argumentative” (Baym 2013, p. 16). What the Leno and Stewart examples share is a lack of overt hostility to the guest evident in the tone of questioning by the Washington journalist on *Meet the Press*. The two entertainment-based programs did fundamentally differ from each other in tone and in substance: Stewart’s program provided a “critical spirit” absent from Leno’s (Baym, 2013, p. 16) that was “grounded in [Stewart’s] personal opinions [...] [though] unlike on *Hannity*, that work is based in good-natured respect” (Baym, 2013, p. 14). Leno, unlike Stewart, managed to represent the average American voter “claiming no epistemic authority” (Baym, 2013, p. 9). It should be noted that when *Hannity* features the host speaking to a political figure he agrees with, the program becomes even more celebratory than Leno’s *Tonight Show*, and in some cases, Stewart’s personal opinions have led some of his more notable interviews, such as John Kerry’s visit to the program

during the 2004 campaign and Elizabeth Warren's inaugural appearance in 2009, to display the celebratory tone of Leno's *Tonight Show*.

Overall, the televised entertainment-based talk show gives presidential candidates a valuable opportunity to present themselves in a more favorable light than traditional political programs, particularly to potential voters who do not closely follow the news and watch traditional political programs. The format helps expose disengaged voters to at least some modicum of political information (Baum, 2002; Baum, 2003) while maintaining an atmosphere that allows for the presidential candidate to make a favorable impression. In June 1960, *The Tonight Show* welcomed John Kennedy for an interview, and host Jack Paar prefaced his interview with the Democratic nominee for president by telling viewers that the conversation would occur in a "relaxed atmosphere" in which the candidate would not be as "on guard, not as tense, and perhaps not as political as [...] on other news-type shows" (Parkin, 2014). In the 1960 general election, both the Kennedy campaign and the campaign of Richard Nixon broke new ground for political visits on non-political talk shows by having the candidates appear on *Person to Person* and *The Tonight Show*. While Adlai Stevenson had appeared on Edward R. Murrow's version of *Person to Person*, he did so in February 1954, halfway between his two failed general election campaigns; Kennedy and Nixon were the first party nominees for president to appear in this softer kind of format. In both episodes, new host Charles Collingwood spoke to the candidates and their wives about general, sanitized aspects of their personal lives and briefly said hello to the candidates' young children (Collingwood, 1960a; Collingwood, 1960b). There were no questions about policy, though there were questions about the qualities each candidate thought a president should have and about their

motivations for running for the presidency (Collingwood, 1960a; Collingwood, 1960b). The focus on biography, family, and character reflected Murrow's and Collingwood's belief that the show's format should not change even for extraordinary guests; *See It Now* would remain the newsworthy program.

By contrast, *The Tonight Show* episodes focused on policy, at least on a general level; both candidates took questions from not only Paar but also from audience members, which allowed the candidates to show a sense of humor and talk about serious issues. Decades after the 1960 campaign, strategists for Bill Clinton's presidential campaign in 1992 stressed the necessity of appearing in these "forums for more personal and varied looks" at the candidates and their families and argued that "moments of passion, personal reflection, and humor do more for us than any six-second sound bite on the network news or for that matter any thirty-second television spot" (Grunwald & Greer, 1992). For programs that mostly deal with human interest stories and celebrity promotion, the booking of a nationally famous politician gives the program a temporary stature and newsworthiness. Because of this fact, the hosts of these shows do not wish to overly antagonize these politicians, and "the contrast between even the toughest of [entertainment-based] talk show interviews and typical traditional political interviews is stark" (Baum, 2005, p. 230).

The late night comedic talk show is not the only example of an entertainment-based venue that maintains a celebratory atmosphere. Sketch comedy programs such as *Saturday Night Live* allow a presidential candidate to make a positive impression on a non-political audience without answering questions about specific policies. Other than an episode from the first season of *Saturday Night Live* featuring a cameo by incumbent

president Gerald Ford, where the show's writers decided to pen an exceptionally vulgar episode designed to make Ford "cringe and squirm," (Troy, 2013, pp. 163-164), sketch comedy programs have largely treated political figures willing to appear on the programs rather modestly. The example of Sarah Palin and *Saturday Night Live* during the 2008 campaign proves instructive. For weeks the program viciously satirized Palin as a dimwitted joke with a devastatingly accurate impersonation by Tina Fey, but when Palin herself agreed to appear on the program in late September, the episode's script ensured that she came across as a "charming" and "funny" personality and got "the last word in every joke," particularly those directed at Fey and Fey's outspoken *30 Rock* costar, Alec Baldwin (Sklar, 2008; Stanley, 2008, p. C1). One exception to this celebratory mode is a sketch comedy program that acts as a parody of a late night comedic talk show, such as *Between Two Ferns* or *The Larry Sanders Show*, in which the host may act antagonistic towards the guest. However, the humor of this particular type of program, especially *Ferns*, is driven by that hostility and both parties understand beforehand what the program's purpose is.

Some entertainment-based venues do not focus on humor but instead focus on social and cultural issues but present them in a softer manner. These programs deserve examination even though they usually do not maintain a humorous element because they are talk shows that rarely, if ever, deal with politics unless a presidential candidate agrees to appear on the program to appeal to a specific target audience, such as stay-at-home mothers. First-run syndicated talk shows are mostly non-political in nature but share an essential element with the late night comedic talk show: when appearing on them, presidential candidates primarily display elements of their character and background

without discussing policy other than on a very broad level. Examples of this type of program include the currently airing *Dr. Phil* and *Live with Kelly* and the now-defunct *Oprah* and *Donahue*. Remarking on the differing levels of gravity of *See It Now* and *Person to Person*, “John Lardner, the television critic from *The New Yorker*, [...] coined the phrases ‘high Murrow’ and ‘low Murrow’ to distinguish between the two broadcasts” (Hewitt, 2002, p. 109). In today’s media environment, shows such as *World News Tonight* and *Meet the Press* are the descendents of the “high Murrow” *See It Now*, while shows such as *Dr. Phil* and *Live with Kelly* carry on the tradition of the “low Murrow” *Person to Person*. These programs may differ in focus, with the “high Murrow” shows focusing on politics and the “low Murrow” shows focusing on human interest stories and celebrities, but they do not differ in the fact that their primary purpose is to inform viewers, regardless of how inane the information that the “low Murrow” shows present may be. One major exception to this non-political focus by a successor to *Person to Person* was a special episode of *Donahue* in 1992 that acted as an unofficial Democratic presidential debate between Bill Clinton and Jerry Brown. Notably, in the 1984 campaign, *Donahue* “won an exemption from the Federal Communications Commission [...] that absolved the show from having to grant equal time to political candidates; for the purposes of political interviews;” in that election, at least, the FCC classified *Donahue* “as a news program” (Perlez & Boyd, 1984).

In sum, an entertainment-based venue has to focus primarily on entertainment, with news value being a secondary trait that may or may not be valued. The difference between a program like Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show* and *The O’Reilly Factor* is that the audience who watches the former understands that the primary element of the program is

humor, and they can learn sometimes something in the process, while the audience who watches the latter understands that the primary element of the program is political opinion, and they can sometimes laugh while watching it. The primary draw of Stewart's program is his comedy; the primary draw of O'Reilly's program is his politics. O'Reilly can be funny but is first and foremost politically motivated; Stewart can be political but is first and foremost a comedian, and an entire episode of the program that did not feature any instance of laughter from the studio audience would likely be considered a failure by the producers and writers of the program even if the political news content of the episode was masterful. While O'Reilly cannot produce an entire episode of *The O'Reilly Factor* without discussing politics to some degree, Stewart can produce an episode of *The Daily Show* entirely devoid of political content – theoretically, one segment could focus on the host's obsession with eating pizza without utensils, a second segment could focus on Stewart's playful pretend feud with another host such as Stephen Colbert, and the last segment could feature an interview with an actor or comedian promoting a new creative project. Finally, a program like *Dr. Phil*, which is not overtly humorous, is more similar to *The Daily Show* than *The O'Reilly Factor* because the purpose of the program is to entertain first and inform second, even though *Dr. Phil* shares with *The O'Reilly Factor* and *The Daily Show* a focus on the host reacting to the craziness that surrounds him. *Dr. Phil* and *Oprah* are entertainment-based programs in a way that programs which focus on celebrities, such as *Access Hollywood* and *Entertainment Tonight*, are not because while the latter group does not maintain a serious tone, they are nevertheless designed to provide information first, even if that information is largely inconsequential, and are structured like news programs such as *World News Tonight* and *The Today Show*.

This study focuses on the embrace of the entertainment-based venue by campaigns and administrations beginning with the Reagan administration, which was the first to place a sitting president in an entertainment-based venue when Ronald Reagan welcomed *The Merv Griffin Show* to the White House in September 1983. Before exploring theory and outlining the methods used in this project, it is worthwhile to provide a brief historical overview of how presidential campaigning evolved to allow the use of the entertainment-based venue prior to Reagan's inauguration in 1981.

Presidential Campaigning – from Adams to Eisenhower

At the dawn of the republic, the eligible voting pool was limited to men who owned property and presidential elections were largely contested using newspapers and pamphlets. Despite some contentious contests involving mudslinging by various campaigns, specifically the rematch between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson in 1800, three of the first seven presidential elections featured a candidate running unopposed. In the 1820s, many states removed the property ownership requirement, increasing the eligible voter base; turnout for presidential elections was actually lower than turnout for midterm Congressional elections before these changes, and these changes helped make presidential elections major cultural events (DeSilver, 2014). In 1824, a four way race for the presidency featured Andrew Jackson, a military hero of the War of 1812 who had faced economic hardship in his youth. Jackson's upbringing notably contrasted with the privileged childhood of his primary opponent, John Quincy Adams, and when the four way election of 1824 ended up being decided by the House of Representatives, which chose Adams to be the next president despite the fact that Jackson had won the most popular votes and the most electoral votes, Jackson's supporters righteously denounced a

“corrupt bargain” made by Jackson’s elitist election opponents (De Silver, 2014). When Jackson returned to challenge Adams in the next presidential election, he made the unprecedented decision to campaign for himself, giving speeches and organizing picnics to mobilize voters (Sides, Shaw, Grossman, & Lipsitz, 2012). Jackson framed the campaign around his persona as a commoner against an out-of-touch aristocrat, and this strategy succeeded; Jackson won decisively with a turnout that greatly exceeded the previous election (Sides et al., 2012).

Parts of Jackson’s successful strategy were adopted by other candidates for the rest of the 19th century, but some parts remained taboo. Jackson’s use of slogans and mobilization events were adopted by his successors, and the importance of a candidate’s biography remained equal to, and sometimes eclipsed, a party’s platform (Sides et al., 2012; Troy, 2016). However, Jackson’s decision to campaign for himself, giving speeches to mobilize supporters, was less successfully applied by future candidates, who were often criticized by journalists as being self-serving and undignified (Ellis & Dedrick, 1997). During the 1860 election, Stephen Douglas was attacked by the *Jonesboro Gazette* for “going about peddling his opinions as a tin man peddles his wares; [...] small business it is for a candidate for the presidency to be strolling around the country begging for votes like a town constable” (Greenfield, 2014). The 1896 election provided a notable contrast in campaigning: While William Jennings Bryan “traveled eighteen thousand miles and gave an estimated six hundred speeches” across the nation, William McKinley gave speeches “from his front porch in Canton, Ohio, to visitors [...] brought to see him” by his campaign; McKinley easily won the election (*New York Times*, 2000). The Bryan-McKinley rematch in 1900 saw McKinley continue his practice

of not campaigning for himself but his new vice presidential candidate, Theodore Roosevelt, attempted to match Bryan's hectic pace of campaigning across the nation (Miller Center for Public Affairs, 2016). With the death of McKinley, Roosevelt became president and slowly ushered in a new era in which candidates vigorously campaigned for themselves and traveled across the country to mobilize popular support for specific policies; Woodrow Wilson's aborted campaign to mobilize public support for the League of Nations in 1919 has become a template for the latter (Schudson, 1998).

Advances in media technology made it easier for presidents and presidential candidates to communicate with voters in a more efficient way, which aided politicians savvy enough to embrace these advances. By the time the radio became commercialized in 1920, the Constitution had been amended to allow for the direct election of senators and for women to vote. The first president to truly grasp the power of radio was Franklin Roosevelt. Elected during the Great Depression and facing intense criticism from both the left and the right, including a number of prominent journalists, Roosevelt decided to occasionally update citizens on his efforts directly through the radio. Over the course of his twelve year presidency, Roosevelt delivered thirty "fireside chats" and often appealed directly to his listeners to pressure their congressmen and opinion leaders into supporting his policies (Burns, 1996). Roosevelt tended to deliver these radio addresses roughly two to three times per year; his successors expanded upon that blueprint, with Ronald Reagan becoming the first president to deliver a radio address on a weekly basis beginning in 1962 (Rowland & Jones, 2002).

In the early 1950s, television grew at a rapid rate, and the 1952 election was the first in American history in which television played a major role. Both parties bought

television time to help promote their candidates, both with extended live campaign speeches and with brief televised advertisements. For the latter, while Adlai Stevenson relied primarily on surrogates, Dwight Eisenhower appeared in a number of advertisements titled “Eisenhower Answers America,” in which the candidate took pre-scripted questions from seemingly ordinary American voters (MacDonald, 1985). The Eisenhower campaign also featured the famous “Checkers” speech by running mate Richard Nixon, who proclaimed his innocence in a slush fund scandal during a professionally lit live studio monologue. While various Eisenhower and Stevenson speeches were delivered from campaign stops and broadcast live on television, the Nixon speech marked the first time that “the camera would not be a journalistic instrument, looking in upon an event and conveying that story to the public; [...] [instead] a national television audience would participate directly in a living room to living room encounter” (Huebner, 2012).

Eisenhower defeated Stevenson in 1952 and did so again in 1956, even though Stevenson finally agreed to personally appear in his televised ads during the latter election. The Eisenhower reelection campaign was aided by the president’s embrace of television as a medium and his comfort with the entertainment industry. Eisenhower invited a number of Hollywood stars to the White House for a televised *Dinner with the President* in 1953 (MacDonald, 1985). In October 1956, Eisenhower “conducted a special television news conference, substituting questions from reporters with those developed by his campaign staff and asked by handpicked volunteers” and later participated in a televised event celebrating his birthday that featured James Stewart and Helen Hayes (Allen, 1988, p. 357). While Eisenhower did not use entertainment figures

or formats to push for specific policies, his ease around celebrities and his comfort with using television for reelection purposes influenced many of his successors.

The 1960 Election

As stated earlier, the 1960 campaign marked the first time that presidential candidates used televised entertainment-based venues to reach out to citizens not engaged in the political process. John Kennedy and Richard Nixon both appeared on *Person to Person* and *The Tonight Show*, but the two candidates' appearances on the latter differed in a number of crucial ways, including timing, prior history, and the tenor of the conversation, that helped ensure that one of the appearances would be received far more negatively than the other. Kennedy visited the show on June 16, after he had secured the nomination during the primaries but before the Democratic convention. Despite his previous appearances on the show during his time as a senator, the presumptive Democratic nominee "seemed a little uncertain and showed signs of being more accustomed to the traditional campaign trail" (Parkin, 2004, p. 23). On the other hand, Vice President Nixon made his first appearance on the show on August 25, after the Republican convention, and "seemed eager to trade friendly jabs" with Paar (Parkin, 2004, p. 23). After Nixon's appearance, the traditional press furiously criticized the light atmosphere: "The Washington reaction [...] was expressed in one word: revolting; [...] after the taping, Richard Nixon himself emerged from the studio to face reporters to sort of apologize for his presence on this commercial show" (Koterba, 1960, p. 4). The negative reaction to Nixon's appearance was doubly damaging to his campaign because they came on the heels of President Eisenhower's press conference remarks the day before; when asked for "an example of a major idea" of Nixon's that had become

administration policy, Eisenhower coldly replied, “If you give me a week, I might think of one” (Eisenhower, 1960).

After the two candidates appeared on *The Tonight Show*, the two met in a series of televised presidential debates, which famously led to the myth that while Nixon was judged to have won the first debate by those listening to it on radio, Kennedy was considered the winner by those watching on television (Vancil & Pendell, 1987). In that case, both candidates agreed to debate because they both felt that they had something to gain: Kennedy needed to introduce himself to the larger American public while Nixon had to validate his experience as Vice President at a time when that position was largely ceremonial. Today, debates have become almost a requirement with the Commission on Presidential Debates organizing the number, structure, and moderators of general election debates; journalists have pointed to the 1960 debates as establishing this tradition. However, there were no general election debates in 1964, 1968, or 1972. The debates only returned in 1976 when, for the first time since 1960, both candidates saw something to gain from debating: Gerald Ford, an unelected president lacking a mandate from the American people that an election brings, was trailing Jimmy Carter, an unknown, untested governor who needed to cement his soft support and introduce himself to the wider public. Even in 1980 the likelihood of holding debates was tenuous as Carter dealt with the Iranian hostage crisis and refused to debate Ronald Reagan and John Anderson simultaneously, leading to the bizarre spectacle of a presidential debate taking place without the sitting president who was running for reelection. Later, one proper debate took place featuring Carter and Reagan but not Anderson. It took until 1984 for the innovation of 1960 to become tradition.

The 1960s and 1970s

The same concept, of innovation not immediately becoming tradition, can be applied to presidential appearances on entertainment platforms. Whereas our shared collective memory often treats Bill Clinton as an innovator for his electric appearance on *The Arsenio Hall Show* in 1992, Clinton was not the first politician since Nixon in 1960 to appear in primarily entertainment-based venues. Throughout the 1960s, famous national politicians occasionally visited a variety of talk shows such as *The Merv Griffin Show*, *The Mike Douglas Show*, Paar's self-titled show after his *Tonight Show* exodus, *The Joey Bishop Show*, and the version of *The Tonight Show* hosted by Paar's successor, Johnny Carson. Among the more famous politicians who appeared on these programs were Nixon, Barry Goldwater, Hubert Humphrey, and Robert Kennedy. As a newly elected Senator, Kennedy used Carson's show as a vehicle to address his grief over his brother's assassination, appearing on *Tonight* close to the one year anniversary of that event.

Nixon, in particular, used appearances on these shows to maintain a national profile after his devastating loss in the 1962 California gubernatorial race, appearing on Paar's show four months later to display his musical talent and his sense of humor. In preparing to run for president in 1968, Nixon visited Carson's *Tonight Show* in November 1967 and promised *The Joey Bishop Show* that he would appear there, which he eventually did in July 1968. Nixon expertly used his *Tonight* appearance to show his biting sense of humor that had largely been unnoticed by the public outside of the comfortable confines of Paar's show. When Carson asked him about his future plans, Nixon replied, "I thought I'd save that answer for *The Joey Bishop Show*; I've been

reading the ratings [and] he needs it” (Parkin, 2004, p. 24). Most famously, of course, Nixon made an out-of-character cameo on *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In* in late September 1968, briefly popping up to say one of the show’s catchphrases, “Sock it to me.” For a four second cameo on a show popular with younger, lower-information voters, “it took six takes before Nixon was able to deliver the line without sounding angry or offended,” remembered *Laugh-In* creator George Schlatter, and Nixon’s team turned down suggestions to say some of the other catchphrases popular on the show such as “What’s a bippy?” and “Good night, Dick” (Nesteroff, 2010). Yet much like the other primarily entertainment-based venues that Nixon and other politicians frequented in the 1960s, the show attempted to be neutral and bipartisan, according to star Dick Martin:

We also offered the same thing to Hubert Humphrey a week later; [...] his advisor said no. He said to Humphrey, and I heard him say this, “They’ll end up throwing water on you.” Like we’re gonna throw water on a fucking presidential candidate; absurd! (Nesteroff, 2010)

Once elected president, Nixon refused to appear in entertainment-based venues, though he did allow Vice President Spiro Agnew to visit *The Tonight Show* on multiple occasions (Times Wire Services, 1970, p. 4-A); incidentally, Carson was absent on these occasions, as he often took time off but arranged for celebrities or comedians to guest host the program. Other politicians, such as Ed Muskie and George McGovern, appeared on *The Tonight Show* and *The Dick Cavett Show* before and after the 1972 presidential campaign but not during it, and soon presidential candidates by and large disappeared from these formats for a period of time. It is unclear if this absence from the entertainment television world was primarily due to a dwindling amount of options, but by 1976, Jack Paar, Joey Bishop, Mike Douglas, Dick Cavett, and *Laugh-In* were no longer airing on network television, and Merv Griffin had moved into first-run

syndication, which limited his viewership compared to his tenure at CBS. The only nationally available entertainment-based talk show that attracted significant numbers of viewers was Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*; I will cover Carson in more detail in the next chapter.

Two notable figures made entertainment-related appearances during the mid-1970s under very different circumstances. Throughout the 1970s, California Governor Ronald Reagan swapped jokes with his friends from Hollywood in venues such as *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* and *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roast*, and in March 1975, Reagan visited *The Tonight Show* to talk to Carson about his vision of national politics in anticipation of soon challenging the new unelected president, Gerald Ford. The next year, during a brutal primary election battle with Reagan, Ford pre-taped a brief cameo on the new comedy show *Saturday Night Live*, which had portrayed him as a bumbling oaf on a weekly basis. During an episode hosted by his press secretary, Ron Nessen, Ford mocked his frequent impersonator, Chevy Chase, by using a variation of the catchphrase Chase made famous: "I'm Chevy Chase and you're not" (Jones, 2013, p. 80). Reagan and Ford, in addition to Nixon's famous cameo on *Laugh-In*, illustrated the significance of showing that a candidate could "laugh along or participate in directly [...] a powerful and widely commented-on political interpretation" of themselves in a negative light (Jones, 2013, p. 80). However, Reagan's obvious comfort in these settings, due to his history as a film star and as a television star on General Electric's weekly variety program, offered a clear contrast with Nixon and Ford, whose appearances in entertainment-based settings were brief, stilted, and, in the case of Ford, largely unmemorable.

Sourcing and Trajectory

Before proceeding, it is appropriate to contextualize how much the presidential-level embrace of the televised entertainment-based venue has changed since the 1960 campaign. The reason I cannot provide a completely accurate count of presidential-level visits to televised entertainment-based venues per decade is because of the practice of many television networks prior to 1970 of reusing old tape to record new programs, erasing vestiges of prior material. This practice is especially notable in the case of Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*, whose library of reruns available to broadcast begins largely after Carson's move to Burbank in 1972 because of NBC's 1960s-era "self-destructive improvidence" (Tynan, 1978). I faced similar struggles when delving into certain programs in the modern videotape era depending on ownership of material. I am grateful that the owners of certain programs have done their best to catalogue and advertise episodes of their programs in a searchable manner: most notably, MervGriffin.com offers a searchable archive in which a researcher can plug in names and find exactly when that guest appeared on an episode of *The Merv Griffin Show*. I am also grateful to the organizers of EpGuides.com for cataloging each episode of *The Late Show with David Letterman*, but I recognize that part of the reason that the entries for that show are complete on that website is because that program was produced by Letterman's own Worldwide Pants. Jay Leno's *Tonight Show*, owned and produced by NBC, is partially catalogued by EpGuides.com, but episodes before 2001 are marked blank. However, a number of candidate appearances on programs that I have attempted to chronicle for this project have been discovered through searching for contemporary print news articles that mention a candidate's appearance on a televised entertainment-based program.

Largely using Google to find various contemporary websites and current-at-the-time newspaper and magazine articles, I was able to partially construct a rough trajectory of presidential candidate appearances in televised entertainment-based venues spanning the period between 1960 and 2004. Since the 2008 election cycle, the internet has increasingly become an important medium for candidates to connect with citizens not likely to consistently engage in the political process. In the pre-internet era, the number of candidate appearances in entertainment-based venues has fluctuated by decade, not displaying a linear trajectory. During the 1960s, presidential-level figures made over a dozen appearances on entertainment-based talk shows, with Richard Nixon alone making seven – *Person to Person* and *The Tonight Show with Jack Paar* in 1960, *The Jack Paar Show* in 1963, *The Merv Griffin Show* in 1966, *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* in 1967, and *The Joey Bishop Show* and *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* in 1968. However, it is difficult to evaluate each appearance as being worthy of this project: Nixon's appearance on *The Jack Paar Show* in 1963, for example, came shortly after a defeat in the California gubernatorial race of 1962 that commentators considered fatal to Nixon's political future. Nixon was not seen as a presidential contender during that appearance; on the contrary, Nixon was perceived as retired from politics. Likewise, Ronald Reagan's visit to *The Tonight Show* in March 1975 occurred nine months before Reagan announced his intention to challenge Gerald Ford for president; did Reagan know for sure in March that he would contest the party's nomination, and would that *Tonight Show* appearance count as one involving an active presidential candidate? Regardless of how one might answer that question, there were fewer appearances by presidential-level figures in entertainment-based venues during the 1970s than there were during the 1960s. The

1980s saw an increase in this phenomenon compared to the 1970s but not compared to the 1960s, and the 1990s continued that trajectory upward; the amount of appearances in the 1990s rivaled the amount of appearances in the 1960s. Only in the 2000s did presidential-level appearances in entertainment-based venues significantly increase; potential theoretical explanations for this trajectory will be explored in the next chapter.

Conclusion

Entertainment-based talk shows and sketch comedy programs offer a comfortable platform for presidential candidates to reveal elements of their personalities and character to largely non-political audiences; in many cases, specific policy platforms take a backseat in these venues. Presidential candidates need to raise their familiarity and favorability with the American public; likewise, presidents need to maintain a strong electoral position and rally the public to place pressure on Congress to pass preferable legislation. However, to appeal to the ordinary invites the risk of coming across as ordinary; presidents have to balance the desire to use every available outlet at their disposal to communicate with citizens with the concerns raised by citizens that taking certain communicative actions would harm the presidency as an institution. Therefore, while presidential candidates have been using these venues to some degree since the 1960 general election cycle, it was only in the 1980s that incumbent presidents began to reach out to these venues personally rather than using surrogates like the Vice President to appear on these platforms on the administration's behalf.

Important changes occurred throughout American history in terms of presidential campaigning and media strategy, but some of the moves that we now call inevitable were not so; in fact, it was questionable that these moves would be replicated by future

campaigns. The Kennedy-Nixon debates of 1960 were not followed with similar debates in 1964, 1968, or 1972. On an unrelated note, Kennedy invited the NBA champion Boston Celtics to the White House in 1963, but “it wasn’t until the 1980s when sports fan Ronald Reagan took office [that championship] teams [started] coming to the White House on a yearly basis” (Bates, 2015). More relevantly, Richard Nixon’s *Tonight Show* visit in 1960 received an incredible backlash from the traditional Washington press, but Nixon continued to use these venues throughout the 1960s until he became president; then, having achieved his goal, he ignored these venues for the entirety of his presidency. If the backlash to Nixon had truly been scarring, Barry Goldwater would not have continued the practice in 1964, nor would Hubert Humphrey and Nixon have made similar appearances in 1968.

The next chapter will discuss three theories that partially explain the desire for presidential candidates and sitting presidents to utilize these venues and outlines the research questions driving this study.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There have been numerous books written about presidential rhetoric in its many forms; perhaps the most definitive, by Campbell and Jamieson (2008), examines inaugural addresses, State of the Union addresses, pardons, vetoes, calls for war, calls for healing in the face of national tragedy, and even calls for Congress to avoid impeaching the president. In some stricter definitions of rhetoric, the presidential visit to an entertainment-based venue does not count as rhetoric because dialogues are unscripted; similarly, a presidential press conference or an interview with an established journalist would not count as rhetoric. Due to significant changes in technology, the speed of communication and the sheer amount of communication by the president have increased dramatically, and conversations, as opposed to prepared speeches, have become increasingly prevalent. During his two terms, Dwight Eisenhower “gave approximately 750 speeches and held 193 press conferences;” a half century later, George W. Bush through seven and a half years, “gave 3611 public addresses and remarks, an average of 40.6 a month” (Kumar, 2008, p. 688). Out of those 3611, only five of Bush’s public remarks came in nationally popular televised entertainment-based venues: interviews with *Dr Phil* and *Fishing with Roland Martin* in 2004; a brief phone interview with his daughter and the titular host of *Ellen* in 2007; a pre-taped cameo appearance on the game show *Deal or No Deal* in 2008; and a pre-taped message to soldiers serving in Iraq during a professional wrestling show in 2008. Bush’s successor, Barack Obama, greatly expanded the amount of visits to nationally known entertainment-based venues during his presidency and, in general, preferred to communicate through one-on-one televised

interviews rather than press conferences in which multiple reporters asked questions. Through seven years, Obama held 142 press conferences featuring question-and-answer segments with multiple journalists to Bush's 182 and Bill Clinton's 185 (Peters, 2016); however, through two years, Obama appeared in 269 televised one-on-one interviews compared to Bush's 83 and Clinton's 136 (Kumar, 2011). Of those 269 televised interviews, at least three were groundbreaking in terms of traditionally non-political venues: *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* in March 2009, *The Late Show with David Letterman* in September 2009, and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in October 2010.

Three theories partially explain this rapid expansion by the Obama administration, but each theory has important limitations that call for a synthesis that appreciates nuance and complexity: role theory, postmodern presidency theory, and technological determinism.

Role Theory

According to role theory, a president has to adopt "certain perceived qualities and characteristics [...] over time" in order to respond to "public expectations and perceptions of the office" (Denton, 1983, p. 380), and by the early 1980s, the five roles that each president had to assume in order to soothe public opinion were "chief of state, chief executive, chief diplomat, commander in chief, and chief legislator" (Denton, 1983, p. 369). The necessity of adapting to each role has not changed in the three decades since, and each successful president must display an ability to act as a ceremonial representative to the country and the world at large, organize the federal bureaucracy in a streamlined manner, negotiate agreements with foreign nations, direct the United States Armed

Forces in a moral and comprehensible way, and propose clear guidelines for members of Congress to work within when crafting legislation.

In its current form, role theory does not explain the presidential embrace of the entertainment-based venue. Variations in presidential communication have not created a new role but instead reveal a change in tactics and strategy for interacting with voters. However, voter preferences since the late 1960s and early 1970s, when primaries and caucuses became more democratic and conventions became stylized commercials for candidates rather than the place where the nominee is decided, could lead one to argue that a new, sixth role has been created as a precondition to becoming president: the Washington outsider.

In this argument, while the seeds of this new role began earlier with Eugene McCarthy's shocking New Hampshire primary victory over President Lyndon Johnson in 1968 and continued through George McGovern's rise to the Democratic nomination in 1972, the victorious campaign of Jimmy Carter in 1976 represented a pendulum shift in which the successful presidential candidate must rhetorically separate him or herself from the culture of Washington, D.C. There are numerous reasons for this, including the structural factors of giving more autonomy to voters through the primary and caucus process and the pervading sense of criminality associated with Washington culture thanks to the Watergate scandal and the revelations about the Central Intelligence Agency's activities that were the subject of the Church Committee (Young, 2015), but the scoreboard is clear: prior to Carter's rise, previous presidents had been judged suitable by their governing experience in the halls of federal power. Warren Harding, John Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, and Gerald Ford all came to the

presidency with congressional experience, even if the latter three rose to the presidency not through the election process but through unforeseen circumstance. Calvin Coolidge was thrust into the office after the untimely death of Harding, and Herbert Hoover gained national prominence as a member of the Harding/Coolidge cabinet before undertaking his own run for president. Even Franklin Roosevelt, the governor of New York at the time of his nomination, had first come to national prominence as the assistant secretary to the Navy during World War I. From 1920 to 1972 every successful presidential candidate had significant Washington experience except for Dwight Eisenhower, but his deft diplomacy in managing the emotions of the Allied generals on the European front during World War II made him a natural political figure. Yet since Carter's successful 1976 presidential run, every president, with the exception of George H. W. Bush in 1988, initially campaigned as a Washington outsider immune to corruption, bitter partisanship, and ineffectiveness. Three governors with no experience in Washington and a first-term senator who barely spent eighteen months in the U.S. Capitol before embarking on his White House run followed the Carter path to success.

This schism that becomes apparent in 1976 is important for two reasons. First, candidates operating outside of Washington, D.C. do not have the ease of access to reach large audiences through the traditional news apparatus as senators, representatives, and cabinet members and must look for alternative outlets to publicize themselves. A sitting senator or a governor of a large state featuring an important media market, such as New York or Massachusetts, can appear on programs such as *Face the Nation* or *Meet the Press* fairly often; a governor of a less prominent state like Georgia or Arkansas, by contrast, may find it difficult to be booked on one of these programs in the first place and

is at risk of being preempted if a major foreign policy crisis develops. Because of this, prominent presidential candidates that were governors had to devise alternative ways of reaching audiences. Jimmy Carter, for example, did an interview with *Playboy* in 1976, though he was the Democratic nominee at that point. Second, Carter was the first candidate to explicitly make character the central attribute of his candidacy and candidates since Carter have used softer outlets, such as entertainment-based venues, as vehicles to reveal their character. Carter's *Playboy* interview focused on his Christian morals and his pledge not to lie to voters. The entertainment-based venue focuses on character, and this focus allows even experienced candidates to downplay their resume and present themselves as at least partially separated from Washington culture, fulfilling the potential sixth presidential role of Washington outsider.

According to role theory, Carter failed as president partially because his attempts "to convince the public that the barriers between them and top government officials were being removed" created a dangerous "personalization of the office" that undermined him (Denton, 1983, p. 369). In doing so, Carter abdicated some of his more official roles in the eyes of a public, and this is dangerous because "a president must appear 'presidential'" (Denton, 1983, p. 376). Ronald Reagan's administration, by contrast, understood the necessity of distance to maintain the perception of authority. Michael Deaver, one of Reagan's key advisors, argued, "The more you expose yourself, the more you expose yourself to trivialization" (Sullivan, 2007), and Deaver, more than anyone else in the Reagan administration, ensured that limited presidential exposure could be used for maximum advantage by understanding the changes in the media environment that journalists operated in. By the 1970s "the pacing" of television news reports

“increased” dramatically, with “an increasing flow of images” taken from many different places “squeezed into a shorter time span” with hyperactive editing and cutting (Barnhurst & Steele, 1997, p. 47-48). The aim of a television news reporter was “to search for a good picture,” making the most effective reporters those who “could deal with all of the technical problems, guide [the] cameraman to the right shots, and put the film together to form a coherent story” (Crouse, 1973, p. 154). Grasping that television “couldn’t show something that wasn’t happening,” Deaver and the rest of the administration limited the national press’ access to Reagan, producing only positive images of the president for use in news telecasts (Schram, 1987, p. 303). This often produced a result beneficial to the Reagan administration even in negative news stories: while the audio voiceover and tone of the story was negative, the images were positive, and in a conflict between the senses, for many people “the visual outlasts the spoken word” (Freie, 2011, p. 36). Reagan’s successors took these concepts but were not always as successful at them because the media environment had expanded to include the twenty-four hour cable news cycle and especially the internet. Sometimes Reagan’s successors failed due to odd external factors: most famously, George W. Bush’s speech denoting the end of major combat operations in Iraq in May 2003 was delivered in front of a banner saying, “Mission Accomplished,” which contrasted Bush’s more cautious words and suggested to the television audience that the Iraq War had arrived at a successful conclusion (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008).

In addition to utilizing the technological structures and economic incentives of popular journalism to their advantage, the Reagan administration also reinstated a number of ceremonial traditions that had largely been eschewed by Gerald Ford and

Jimmy Carter as a course correction. “Keenly attuned to the ceremonial side of the presidency,” Reagan began the practice of “reviewing the troops at arrival ceremonies,” restored “the prestige of the Herald Trumpeters” after they had been cast “into the shadows” during the Ford and Carter administrations, and ensured that “the band always played ‘Hail to the Chief’” during his entrances, after Ford and Carter had replaced the song for their entrances with the “Michigan Fight Song” and “Jubilation,” respectively (Cannon, 2000, p. 120). Reagan felt that the president must convincingly represent all aspects of the presidential role and lobbied his successors to continue his institutional innovations. Tellingly, when president-elect Bill Clinton went to visit Ronald Reagan during the last month of the first Bush administration, Reagan “had noticed during the campaign that Clinton didn’t have any idea how to execute a proper military greeting” and spent part of the meeting teaching the president-elect how to properly salute” (Gibbs & Duffy, 2012, p. 414). For days after the meeting, Clinton “spent time practicing his salutes with aides” until he could confidently execute the gesture (Gibbs & Duffy, 2012, p. 415). The Reagan administration’s success stemmed partially from focusing on the personality of the president while maintaining the requisite distance to retain an adequate perception of authority which the Carter administration lacked.

However, the failures of the Carter administration cannot be blamed on the man himself for “exposing yourself to trivialization” because Bill Clinton maintained high popularity ratings and achieved legislative success with an incredibly hostile Congress despite engaging in more “personalization of the office” and more trivialized exposure than all of his predecessors (Denton, 1983, p. 369; Sullivan, 2007). Both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, to varying degrees, continued personalizing the office, though their

media strategies were quite different. Bush largely used traditional venues and created presidential distance in the Reagan mold while learning from the mistakes that led to his father's defeat to Clinton, focusing enough on personality that he became someone voters "would rather have a beer with" than his election opponents (Benedetto, 2004). Obama, on the other hand, aggressively embraced an entertainment-based media strategy that brought the president closer into the lives of the American people, at times exposing himself to trivialization through doing one-on-one interviews with YouTube celebrities and detailing his NCAA March Madness brackets on ESPN (Geraghty, 2014). At times, Obama has symbolically abandoned the role of the president to criticize a corrupt Washington, D.C. governing culture as if he were not part of it. On one occasion, Obama did more than just symbolically abandon the presidential role:

In the history of the White House, there has never been anything like it. Two presidents – President Barack Obama and former President Bill Clinton – sit down to talk on a Friday afternoon. There are no plans for a news conference. Not even plans for a photo opportunity. In fact, while they're meeting, the White House staff Christmas party is underway. But suddenly Obama and Clinton decide they want to talk to reporters. [...] Obama introduces Clinton for a spirited defense of the tax deal he cut with Republicans. Within minutes Obama has to leave to join the First Lady at the Christmas party. But Clinton carries on, on his own, for another half hour – and makes the best case for the tax deal anybody has made yet, including Obama. (Press, 2010)

Despite differences in approach, Clinton, Bush, and Obama all won reelection, and in the 2016 presidential primaries, four of the five most successful candidates were a businessman with no government experience (Donald Trump), two first term senators (Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio), and a congressman so divorced from the Washington establishment that he maintained independent status until running for the Democratic nomination in 2015 (Bernie Sanders). However, the fifth successful candidate during the cycle, Hillary Clinton, has been the most famous woman in the United States of America

for the last quarter century and has come to be perceived by many as the personification of Washington experience. Having a two term president be succeeded by that president's Secretary of State is an echo of our nation's pre-Jacksonian history, when presidential election voting was restricted and the presidency was considered secondary to the legislative branch; Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, and John Quincy Adams all became president after serving in the position that Clinton occupied during Obama's first term. The conduct of Clinton's 2016 campaign with respect to entertainment-based venues will be the ultimate arbiter of whether this updated conception of role theory has theoretical value, which will be explored in Chapter 10.

The Postmodern Presidency

Significant increases in the stature and authority of the presidency have been made by the administrations of Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, and each administration has embraced the concept of the permanent campaign, a strategy developed by Pat Caddell, an aide to Jimmy Carter during the 1976 election campaign, which was largely rejected by the Carter administration during its time in office (Blumenthal, 1980, p. 39). In embracing the permanent campaign and adding new elements to the presidency, these four presidents have governed in a postmodern way, according to political scholar John Freie (2011). There are three significant elements in Freie's conception of the postmodern presidency that make the performance of the institution postmodern. First, the postmodern presidency attempts to appeal to voters primarily through emotion rather than logic, stressing style over substance and using visual images to augment details and, sometimes, to override contradictory audio. The postmodern presidency "is much more about image

manipulation than policy creation and implementation” (Freie, 2011, p. 21). Second, the postmodern presidency recognizes the fragmentation of American culture and embraces “identity politics,” where the president eschews “developing [...] sweeping visions” but instead attempts “to appeal to niche voters by addressing small-bore issues” (Freie, 2011, p. 24-25). Third, the postmodern presidency is an institution that favors executive action over working with Congress to pass legislation (Freie, 2011). In this conception, elements of the postmodern presidency emerged in its embryonic state during the 1968 Nixon campaign but were not implemented by an administration until the 1980s, while different administrations added new elements to the presidency. The Reagan administration masterfully manipulated the traditional media, embracing visual images and emphasizing persona and style over policy and substance to appeal to the emotions of the citizenry. The Clinton administration used unprecedented levels of polling to devise unique appeals to niche constituencies, presenting the president as a political chameleon who embraced issues not primarily on the merits but rather as symbols of his priorities and his character. The Bush administration leveraged the power of the signing statement as a de facto line item veto and pushed the concept of the unitary executive, in which the president maintains complete power over the executive branch and can ignore laws passed by Congress that attempt to restrict how the executive branch organizes itself and how it deals with wartime emergencies (Edelson, 2013; Van Bergen, 2006). According to this theory, while the Bush 1988 and Obama 2008 campaigns displayed postmodern elements, those two administrations governed in a more modern style during their first terms, focusing more on passing legislation through Congress and less on utilizing executive action and emphasizing spectacle over substance.

All three aspects of the postmodern presidency theory instituted by the Reagan, Clinton, and second Bush administrations strongly encourage the use of the entertainment-based venue. Entertainment-based venues, with their focus on persona and character (and often humor), allow candidates to focus on style over substance. Because the expansion of television through cable and satellite channels and the synthesis of television and the internet due to high-speed broadband connection have led to media fragmentation, there has been a major increase in the number of entertainment-based venues. Politicians need to utilize as many entertainment-based venues as possible to reach and potentially mobilize niche audiences. Finally, since presidential candidates and sitting presidents are more likely to receive invitations to entertainment-based venues than members of Congress not running for president or Supreme Court judges, appearances in entertainment-based venues by presidential candidates and sitting presidents create an illusion that the presidency is the most important and most powerful branch of the federal government.

There are a few problems with the concept of the postmodern presidency. Freie accurately diagnoses the Reagan administration's masterful manipulation of images and the Clinton administration's pursuit of niche voting blocks. In particular, Freie's argument that the Clinton administration governed with the belief that "there is no overarching agreement about what can be done to improve society, or even what the major problems are that should be addressed" is quite effective (Freie, 2011, p. 86). If "the postmodern political environment is characterized by fragmentation" and the voting public is not "a mass bound together by common values and beliefs," then it was necessary "to connect with people using small-bore issues designed to appeal to niche

voters” (Freie, 2011, p. 87). However, Freie does not delve into a sufficient explanation of why the Clinton administration believed that and the Reagan administration did not. Were there significant changes in the media environment between Reagan’s terms and Clinton’s terms that led to that difference? Also, if the public were fragmented as Freie argues, an argument could be made that a campaign could only be successful if the campaign implemented a “command focus” on two or three issues at the most or on a brief and powerful slogan. Many successful campaigns can be summed up in a few words that could then be repeatedly stressed to a national audience. To give multiple examples from both before and after the Clinton era: Richard Nixon in 1968 and 1972: “Law and order; the silent majority;” Jimmy Carter in 1976: “Washington outsider” offering “A government as good as its people” (Axelrod, 2016, p. A21); George W. Bush in 2000: “compassionate conservatism” and the revival of decency; Barack Obama in 2008: “Hope and change” ending the war in Iraq. Notably, the major slogans and phrases Ronald Reagan used in 1980 – “Strong leadership;” “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” “Make America great again” – have been routinely recycled by Republican politicians since Reagan’s departure from the national stage (Daly, 2015). Another criticism of Freie’s work is that the work does not sufficiently address whether the second Bush administration shared the Clinton administration’s belief in niche voting blocks and how that affected their popular culture media strategy. In short, Freie grants significant agency to specific administrations without addressing why those administrations made the decisions they made. A coherent argument could be made that these presidential administrations merely reacted to technological changes and did the best they could to survive in a rapidly evolving media environment.

Technological Determinism

Marshall McLuhan famously opined, “The medium is the message.” Writing in 1964, fifteen years after the commercialization of television, McLuhan accurately diagnosed that different mediums have different attributes that shape messages and responses. The evolution of media technology has had a substantial impact on how informed the American public is. After centuries dominated by print, the 20th century saw the rise of electronic media such as radio and television which began to orient largely toward entertainment programming. However, in one sense, “broadcast radio and television were really just extensions of the printing press: expensive, one-to-many media. [...] We don’t make TV; we watch it” (Rushkoff, 2011).

The successful commercialization of cable and satellite television in the 1990s, especially the popularization of cable news channels like CNN after the first Gulf War and Fox News prior to the 2000 election, did not offer the true revolution that the internet would in turning information consumers into producers, but the sheer breadth of channels available, moving from three national channels and a handful of local channels in the analog television environment to hundreds of channels in the cable/satellite environment, allowed each individual to construct his or her own personal media experience. It is notable that major works of scholarship contending that a certain segment of the American populace were “chronic know-nothings” (Bennett, 1988; Hyman & Sheatesley, 1947) were written before the popularization of cable and satellite television; in theory, these chronic know-nothings would at least passively receive some information that received a high level of publicity if only because their viewing options were limited. Hyman and Sheatesley (1947) contended that one of the major reasons for political

ignorance, along with the lack of motivation to learn information, was access to information: people who had more access to information were more likely to learn it (p. 414). However, cable and satellite television have allowed citizens boundless options and control over satisfying their preferences for news and entertainment, leading to the opposite conclusion: Those who want political information are able to obtain more of it, whereas those who want to ignore the news can do so, without even being passively exposed to it (Prior, 2005). In other words, having increased access to media can allow a person to construct an information environment in which they are less likely to know certain news, because that news may never appear in any of the various media content they consume.

The limitless media environment of the 21st century created by the internet is seen by some as a positive development (Cacciatore, Scheufele, & Corley, 2014) that might close the knowledge gap between low and high socioeconomic individuals (Donahue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1975; Tichenor, Donahue, & Olien, 1970). However, the World Wide Web, along with the rise of cable and satellite television, has created the possibility of a new type of knowledge gap in which voters who consider themselves informed may narrow, rather than expand, their consumption of news to those sources generally favorable to their political views (Coe et al., 2008). Miller and Krosnick (2000) argued that those most likely to be affected by news reporting were those with high levels of political knowledge and who trusted that news source, with reports from non-trusted news sources sometimes being dismissed by the highly knowledgeable consumer. This would lead to an inequality of facts, according to Jerit and Barabas (2012), who found that partisans had more knowledge of information that confirmed their worldview and

less knowledge of information that contrasted with it. Stroud (2010) warned that partisan selective exposure led to increased polarization and found some evidence, although not as much, that increased polarization led to partisan selective exposure; in that case, a feedback loop would exist, with the consumer leaning towards media sources that support his or her worldview and becoming more polarized, leading her or him to be even less trusting of news sources that did not support her or his worldview. Therefore, in order to overcome “the negative impact that content choice and the allure of entertainment have on the political knowledge and participation of politically uninterested citizens” (Prior, 2007, p. 286), presidential candidates must insert themselves into “the personally constructed worlds [...] of individuals [...] separated from people and issues that they don’t care about or don’t want to be bothered with” (Turow, 1997, p. 7). These personally constructed worlds include a number of entertainment-based venues which might accommodate visits from presidential candidates and incumbent presidents, such as *Mythbusters* and *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*, which each produced episodes featuring President Obama.

There are four problems with applying technological determinism to explain the use of entertainment-based venues by presidential candidates and sitting presidents. First, this theory discounts individual personality and the respect a potential president might have for the *dignity of the presidency*, which might lead that potential president to refrain from engaging to his or her full potential in this fragmented environment. A president who wishes to maintain the decorum of the presidency might choose not to appear on a comedy program because he or she feels that the president should not perform comedic bits. Second, this view discounts important societal or cultural factors that might make a

president or presidential candidate feel as if engaging in entertainment-based venues would be inappropriate, even if that engagement is in the candidate's best interest. A president might find it distasteful to appear on a comedy program during wartime, especially if that president gave the order to go to war.

Third, this theory does not account for the consolidation and synergy that major media organizations have engaged in since the passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act. When President Obama requests time to speak on an issue of national security, Comcast's NBC Universal, for example, generally allocates space on NBC, MSNBC, CNBC, and Telemundo for the president to speak, in addition to time on its radio properties. In the digital age, the president's speech would also be available forever on NBC's various web properties in either its complete form or in important fragments. In the case of a catastrophic national emergency like a nuclear attack, theoretically Comcast could allocate every NBC Universal broadcast and digital outlet in its repertoire for a nationally televised presidential address, placing the president not only on the aforementioned channels but also on entertainment channels like USA, SyFy, Bravo, and others. When Comcast's reach is combined with the reach of all of the varied holdings of the major elite media powers of the digital age (including CBS/Viacom, Fox, Disney, Cumulus, Clear Channel, and Google, among others), the president could potentially communicate with almost every consumer of audiovisual media whether they would like to hear him or not. This has not been the case in practice so far – in fact, the major broadcast media organizations have rejected presidential requests for nationally televised speeches at times from presidents ranging from Ronald Reagan to Obama (Boyer, 1988;

Woolf, 2014). However, in theory, during a true emergency the president could be given almost unfettered access to American homes.

The fourth point, which is somewhat related to the third, revolves around the basic economic principle of scarcity. The application of this view of technological determinism – that the fragmentation of the media environment has forced politicians to substantially increase how often they communicate and increase the number of outlets they attempt to use for communicative purposes in order to reach citizens who may not be involved in the political process – has largely been embraced by political strategists, and the disparity of public appearances between President Eisenhower and the second President Bush noted earlier is evidence of this embrace (Kumar, 2008, p. 688).

Eisenhower's second in command, Vice President Nixon, recognized the necessity of increased communications when he eventually became president:

One of President Nixon's early actions in 1969 was to create the White House Office of Communications. The office was tasked with sending information to the out of town press and news organizations targeted towards particular audiences and its director was made responsible for dealing with editors and publishers as well as the associations representing them. [...] The office fit in with President Nixon's interest in establishing a communications planning operation and a media contact organization for the nation's news outlets. (Kumar, 2009, p. 1)

However, with this infrastructure now in place, an effective counterargument could be made that with a diligent communications outlet dealing with the established press on a daily basis and with the delegation of communication responsibilities to Cabinet members, a president might have more success in convincing the public to support the administration's agenda if the president limited his or her public appearances. That president could conceivably scrap appearances that lead to few changes in public opinion, such as party fundraising speeches or the annual State of the Union address, in an attempt to make the few that do occur carry more weight and gravitas. A soft spoken president

could find scarcity and synergy to be beneficial. However, this counterargument would not to a presidential candidate, who offers no independent news value.

Conclusion and Research Questions

While an updated version of role theory, the postmodern presidency theory, and a theory of technological determinism applied to politics each attempt to explain the changing nature of media and the presidency, none of the three theories fully explain why presidents and presidential candidates have felt it increasingly necessary to appear in entertainment-based venues. Despite the daily struggle between the executive and legislative branches of the federal government failing to attract the interest of the majority of Americans, the presidency as an institution, and in particular presidential elections, has become so ubiquitous in American culture that there are millions of citizens otherwise disengaged from politics that pay attention to, and become emotionally invested in, the presidential election cycle that occurs every four years.

Using grounded theory, this project will attempt to form a synthesis of role theory, postmodern presidency theory, and technological determinism that allows for the agency of individual personality. The three existing theories, as well as the recognition of the agency of individual personality, lead to the following research questions:

RQ1a: What are the major factors that have led to presidential campaigning in traditionally non-political entertainment-based venues?

RQ1b: How much of an impact does the individual personality of the president or presidential candidate play in guiding these decisions?

These questions address both the theories inspected above and the individual personality of the politician but do not quite address the entire situation. One important aspect behind

these decisions is absent: the role of the individual personality of the hosts and producers of the entertainment-based programs being considered. As the preeminent figure in late night, Johnny Carson rarely invited politicians onto *The Tonight Show* because “he didn’t want it to become a political forum” (Miller, 2003, p. 265). The only politicians to appear on his show repeatedly after the program’s move to Burbank, California in 1972 were mayors with local connections to *The Tonight Show* that either displayed considerable charisma and a sharp wit, such as New York City mayors John Lindsay and Ed Koch, or were particularly newsworthy, such as Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley, the first African-American mayor of a major city. In light of this information, another research question is:

RQ1c: How much of an impact does the individual personality of the host of an entertainment-based program play in guiding these decisions?

With that in mind, the second major research questions consider the difference between a mere candidate and a sitting president:

RQ2a: What are the benefits and costs of presidential candidates appearing in traditionally non-political programs?

RQ2b: What are the benefits and costs of sitting presidents appearing in traditionally non-political programs? How do they differ from those for candidates?

Since some of the most significant televised entertainment-based venues are late night comedic talk shows and the comedic sketch program *Saturday Night Live*, presidential candidates may be asked to appear in a comedic sketch.

RQ3: What factors determine whether a president or presidential candidate chooses to participate in comedic sketches or merely agrees to be interviewed on a late night comedic talk show?

The most notable appearance of any presidential figure in a comedic sketch was Barack Obama's visit to the digital talk show *Between Two Ferns* to promote signups for the government-run Healthcare.gov website. *Between Two Ferns* acts like a *Saturday Night Live* parody of a talk show with an ostensibly hostile host insulting his guests, and the Obama episode was no exception. Although the antagonistic relationship between host Zach Galifianakis and his guests is a fundamental part of the program and understood by guests before they agree to participate, some of Galifianakis' quips to Obama were quite harsh. That appearance specifically led to the development of the following research questions:

RQ4: Will future presidents expand upon President Obama's embrace of these formats, continue President Obama's trajectory, or retreat from his approach?

RQ5: Has the concept of the *dignity of the presidency* or *respect for the office* changed?

RQ6: Has the growth of the federal government's reach made it necessary for presidents to take risks that threaten the *dignity of the presidency*?

These were the six major research questions this study began with in 2014, but the success of Donald Trump's campaign for president led to the formation of an important related series of questions. Especially in light of his communicative strategy that focused heavily on a high volume of earned media (creating content by appearing on existing television programs rather than paying for advertisements during those programs'

commercial breaks) and unscripted speeches peppered with insults and outlandish statements, Trump's presidential campaign more closely resembled an entertainment spectacle than any prior campaign.

RQ7a: Has the embrace of entertainment-based venues by presidential candidates and sitting presidents led in any way to an entertainer with no government experience like Donald Trump being considered a viable presidential contender?

RQ7b: What changes in the media environment have led to Trump's rise?

The answers to these questions will shape a theoretical construct for this aspect of presidential campaigning and hopefully offer practical value as well for future presidential campaigns and administrations going forward.

CHAPTER 4

METHOD

At its most basic level, this project examines the production of media messages in the presidential sphere, specifically using traditionally non-political entertainment-based programs to communicate those messages. The best method to understand the development of these messages is the oral history interview. However, because the research questions for this project are partially concerned with the future of this trend, specifically targeted questions were also necessary to gauge the reactions of interviewees to certain developments, to challenge interviewees on why certain developments did not occur, and to induce predictions about how this trend will evolve. Therefore, to best document the thought processes behind the production of these messages, this project uses as its method a hybrid of a targeted interview and an oral history interview with key veterans of presidential campaigns and entertainment-based talk shows.

This chapter explains why I chose a qualitative method for this project and examines how my interviews blended the targeted approach with an oral history approach. It details how I chose my interviewees, how the interviews were conducted, and how the data were transcribed and analyzed. This chapter also explains why the identities of those who spoke to me for this project must remain confidential and notes how I will refer to each informant during subsequent chapters.

Sampling

In 2014, after Barack Obama's appearance on *Between Two Ferns* inspired me to undertake this study, I initiated protocol #21254 with Temple University's Institutional Research Board, which granted me approval in February 2015 to conduct research

involving human subjects for one calendar year. The parameters of the project extended from the Obama administration back to the Reagan administration. I chose the Reagan administration as the earliest administration to examine for two reasons. First, the relevant literature examined earlier: Denton's article on presidential role theory was written in 1983 during Reagan's presidency; Freie's begins his theory of the postmodern presidency with the Reagan administration's focus on persona; and the popularization of cable and satellite television channels began during the Reagan years, beginning the first major shift in media consumption since the popularization of television in the late 1940s. Second, Reagan was the first sitting president to be the focus of an episode of a traditionally non-political televised talk show, acting as the featured guest on the syndicated *Merv Griffin Show* in September 1983. I considered the Carter administration because of the argument that role theory should be altered to account for the Washington outsider attribute, but the Reagan administration seemed like a more natural fit for the reasons listed above.

For this project, I used purposive targeted sampling, which involves the selection of individuals who display characteristics or have experiences directly pertinent to a study (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 45). With this in mind, I began to contact the individuals in each presidential administration and campaign that would have the most direct knowledge of the process of booking a presidential level figure on a program and preparing that figure for the appearance. The individuals most involved in this process are usually chiefs of staff, press secretaries, and deputy press secretaries within administrations and campaign managers, press secretaries, deputy press secretaries, and deputy campaign managers within campaigns. I did, in perhaps the height of arrogance,

attempt to contact the four living presidents within the purview of this study and two other presidential nominees directly, but none of these figures agreed to an interview (I should note that the representatives for these individuals were quite cordial and gracious in their correspondence with me, through email or by telephone). After I secured my initial interviews, my targeted sampling process evolved to include snowball sampling. At the end of each interview, I asked the interviewee, “Can you think of anybody else that would be useful in contacting for this project and who would be willing to do so?” This led me to include speechwriters and individuals working in the White House press office who were not the press secretary or deputy press secretary of a certain administration.

I also used targeted sampling and snowball sampling to contact bookers and producers for a number of entertainment-based programs: *The Tonight Show* (Carson, Leno, and Fallon versions), *The Late Show* (Letterman and Colbert versions), *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, *The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson*, *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, *Oprah*, and *Live with Kelly*. Of these, only two individuals agreed to be interviewed, but a number of people I contacted were also very gracious through emailed conversations and helped the snowball sampling process. All in all, I reached out to one hundred individuals between February 2015 and January 2016, including eighty two veterans of presidential campaigns and eighteen individuals in the entertainment industry primarily through email but also using the phone. Campaigns were selected by order of success: I contacted veterans of the five presidential administrations first and then veterans of the most prominent campaigns in each cycle working backward from 2016, starting with party nominees and then moving to challengers who had used

entertainment-based venues during their campaigns. In each initial email or voicemail, I introduced myself via my name and institution and mentioned that my dissertation “focuses on presidential candidates and incumbent presidents appearing in entertainment-based venues, such as being interviewed on *The Tonight Show*” – for those I emailed who worked for competing programs, I replaced *Tonight* with the name of their show – “or making a cameo appearance on *Saturday Night Live*.”

In the end, twenty-two veterans of presidential campaigns and administrations agreed to be interviewed, as well as one writer of *The Tonight Show* and one producer of *The Late Show*. One individual worked both for a presidential administration and for a late night comedic talk show. Overall, I interviewed twenty-four individuals, including two individuals who worked for official 2016 presidential campaigns and two individuals involved with SuperPACs active during the 2016 presidential primaries. This tally includes two White House chiefs of staff, three campaign managers, three deputy campaign managers, ten individuals who worked in campaign or administration press offices (including three press secretaries and three deputy press secretaries), two speechwriters, and two media consultants. It is important to stress that many of the people interviewed worked for multiple campaigns in different capacities over time.

Interviews

This project features in-depth interviews that mix oral history with specific questions. The use of this qualitative method comes with the understanding that there is no such thing as a completely unbiased researcher, because “all knowledge is affected by the social conditions under which it is produced, [...] grounded in both the social location and the social biography of the observer and the observed” (Mann & Kelley, 1997, p.

392). However, this project focuses on process, thought, experience, and perception, and while certain quantitative methods can be useful in recording those, the specific type of qualitative interview used, which features a mixture of targeted questions and questions more suited for an oral history project, allows for variation that is necessary considering the difference in position and experience that many of the interviewees had. It also allows the researcher to take into account answers, particularly on the questions that were more oral history-based, that are somewhat insufficient due to the passage of time.

While these interviews were not oral history interviews because of additional targeted questions that were asked in each interview, these interviews nevertheless borrowed one quality from a typical oral history project: because this project is concerned primarily with personal experiences and perceptions, factual inaccuracies stated during the interviews by respondents were not challenged during the conversation. This decision was made because factual inaccuracies accrued during the course of an interview can illustrate a “tension between history and memory” that can reveal certain insights about events or character (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 137). Some of the events that I asked about in interviews were not remembered by many of the participants for a variety of reasons; in particular, half of the members of the Clinton administration that I interviewed did not recall his pre-presidential campaign appearance on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* in July 1988. At least two of the individuals I spoke to appeared to misremember this event, conflating it with Clinton’s appearance on *The Arsenio Hall Show* in 1992 when discussing the important shift in campaign strategy to appeal to non-political audiences. Both appearances featured Clinton engaged in conversation with the host of the program and also featured a Clinton saxophone performance, which may have

led to the confusion. Unfortunately, none of the Clinton administration veterans I interviewed were working for then-Governor Clinton at that time.

While maintaining the oral history component, these in-depth interviews were also issue oriented, focused on long, in-depth answers, and semi-structured: there was a general list of prearranged questions, but the answers sometimes ventured into unplanned yet valuable directions. In some cases the interviewee, in answering one question, delved into a complete answer to another question I hoped to ask later in the interview, so in those cases, the format was a little more free-flowing. However, the specific questions that I asked to each participant, including those who worked for *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show*, were RQ1a, RQ1b, RQ2a, RQ2b, RQ3, and RQ4. I also asked RQ1c to three individuals: I asked the two interviewees who worked *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show* that research question about Leno and Letterman, respectively, and I also asked that question, this time about Jon Stewart, to a Clinton administration veteran who had previously worked with Stewart prior to the comedian's takeover of *The Daily Show*.

When feasible, I conducted these interviews in person at a location convenient to the informant. Initial interviews were conducted in areas I could reach via car, including Washington, D.C., and New York City; most of the individuals I met with were at work, so I conducted interviews in their offices or in a restaurant close to their place of work. I did travel to Los Angeles in August 2015 to conduct one interview, also in an office. However, at least three individuals only agreed to be interviewed over the phone, outright rejecting a face to face interview. The first of these individuals worked for a 2016 presidential campaign; as such, I realized that certain individuals I was targeting could not make time for a face to face interview but might become available over the phone. I

initially pitched interviews to the participants in emails and voicemails as in person interviews only, but once two of the initial phone interviews were conducted in July 2015, I offered, in initial contact emails and voicemails, to conduct interviews by phone “if necessary.” There was a significant increase in the number of people who responded positively to doing phone interviews. Overall, ten interviews were conducted in person, while fourteen interviews were conducted over the phone from my home. I taped each interview, even the phone ones, with a video camera; for the phone interviews, the video taken was of a wall, as I did not want to record the phone and potentially display the phone numbers of the participants in this study. It was vital to maintain the anonymity of my informants because it is clear that certain aspects of the data, particularly in some of the anecdotes shared in the chapters to come, would not have been revealed if the interviews were conducted under the assumption that the identities of the informants would become public. At least one person I contacted refused to do an interview for this project because a number of academic interviews that were published ended up being appropriated by Politico, through no fault of the academic researcher. While I provided interviewees with IRB consent documents before the interviews informing them of their rights, I asked my first two interviewees if they would waive their confidentiality for this project. When each person hesitated and then refused to do so, I stopped asking future participants about this possibility.

Interviews lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. I felt it essential to conduct interviews in real time, rather than through email, because the driving force behind the acquisition of data was authentic experience and memory, even if inaccurate. A conversation conducted via email allows the respondent to process the questions over a

period of time and even submit a revised version of an answer previously drafted. The type of conversation conducted via email is “a different type of dialogue altogether; [...] people write more slowly and differently than they speak, so responses are apt to be more thought out, less spontaneous, and shorter” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 99). While emailed conversations may lead to more accurate reflections of memory, some level of authenticity is sacrificed. Therefore, no interviewee was told the specific questions I was going to ask prior to the interview; all questions were new to the interviewees during the course of the interview.

In the interest of anonymity, as detailed above, I list below the programs or organizations that these twenty-four individuals worked for, with the exception of the 2016 SuperPACs. Due to the focus on SuperPACs by media outlets like Politico and BuzzFeed, a reader could have easily deduced the identity of the informants who worked for SuperPACs in this campaign cycle if I listed the names of these organizations. Given the insular nature of the political process and the political community, more than twenty-two campaigns are listed because individuals who worked on one campaign ended up working on others in differing capacities over time. The lists are organized chronologically.

Programs:

Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher ABC

The Tonight Show with Jay Leno NBC

The Late Show with David Letterman CBS

Administrations:

Ronald Reagan

George H. W. Bush

Bill Clinton

George W. Bush

Barack Obama

Campaigns:

Ronald Reagan 1980 and 1984

Edward Kennedy 1980

Walter Mondale 1984

Dick Gephardt 1988

Michael Dukakis 1988

George H. W. Bush 1988 and 1992

Bob Kerrey 1992

Bill Clinton 1992 and 1996

Bob Dole 1988 and 1996

Dan Quayle 2000

Al Gore 2000

George W. Bush 2000 and 2004

Howard Dean 2004

John Kerry 2004

John McCain 2008

Fred Thompson 2008

Hillary Clinton 2008

Barack Obama 2008 and 2012

Mitt Romney 2008 and 2012

Jon Huntsman 2012

Bobby Jindal 2016

Rand Paul 2016

Data Analysis and Presentation

I transcribed the data myself before analyzing the transcripts for key themes. It was important to handle the transcription process personally because I conducted the interviews and was able to piece together parts of the conversations (and nonverbal communication in the videotaped in-person interviews) that provided important context. It was also important for a number of the participants to maintain their confidentiality, especially those actively working in some capacity in the 2016 presidential primaries. Because of this, it was essential to do all of the initial communication, interviews, and transcription work myself to best maintain the confidentiality of the participants in this study. In that spirit, I will only refer to individuals in the analysis by the campaign or administration that they worked for and a generic term such as *advisor*, *veteran*, or *official*. For the three individuals who worked in the entertainment industry, I will refer to their position.

Data analysis was inductive and I applied aspects of grounded theory. When conducting data analysis using a grounded theory approach, one can take either a constructivist or systematic approach. The constructivist approach focuses on revealing the ideologies and assumptions of interviewees, while the systematic approach explains an action or process (Creswell, 2007). In looking over my initial interviews, I realized that the data should be analyzed through a constructivist approach because my data was

collected based on an “underlying assumption that the interaction between the researcher and participants ‘produces the data’ [...] [and that] data do not provide a window on reality; rather, the ‘discovered’ reality arises from the interactive process” (Charmaz, 1995; p, 35; Charmaz, 2000, p, 524; Glaser, 1992; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006, p. 6). This production of data through the interaction of the researcher and the interviewee, in which the mixture of targeted questions and oral history leads to a specific recollection of certain events and leads to certain opinions being registered, can be best illustrated through one of the major limitations of this study. Since the first four interviews for this project were conducted between March and May of 2015, these interviews did not discuss Donald Trump, whose entrance into the race in June came as a surprise to many. More crucially, Bernie Sanders’ candidacy, though announced in May 2015, did not begin to display potential frontrunner status until December 2015. Unfortunately, because of this oversight at least sixteen of my interviews, including six interviews with Democratic Party-affiliated media figures, examined how various Republican candidates and Hillary Clinton might follow in Obama’s footsteps; in these interviews, I assumed that Clinton was the only Democratic candidate that could become the party’s nominee. Only four interviews included questions about a potential Sanders presidency.

Transcriptions were not created immediately after interviews but were created at two separate points: in October 2015 and in January 2016. I decided to transcribe the data in October 2015 in order to see if certain themes might emerge from early transcriptions which could shape questions for future interviews. One particular line of questioning, involving the impact of Washington-based humorous gatherings – such as Gridiron dinners and White House correspondents’ dinners – on President Obama’s use of

entertainment-based venues, was largely rejected by my informants, and I dropped this aspect from subsequent interviews. In October 2015, in analyzing the first set of transcripts, I also began to construct a narrative that incorporated the postmodern presidency theory, the agency of individual personality, and technological determinism. The second set of transcripts were created in January 2016 after the interview process had concluded, and in analyzing these transcripts, I realized the importance of role theory and began to construct a synthesis of role theory, the postmodern presidency theory, and technological determinism that allowed for the agency of individual personality in the communicative process. Despite a number of themes emerging from the data and some disagreements occurring from interviewees with different perspectives, I have chosen to present, in the chapters that follow, the relevant data from these interviews in a chronological narrative that groups particular eras, themes, and personalities together.

Limitations

One of the major problems with both presidential politics and the entertainment business is a lack of diversity, and this project offers a glimpse of this issue. Of the twenty-four participants in this study, only three are female and every single participant would be considered white by the United States Census bureau. Of the one hundred people I reached out to, only fourteen were female and only six were ethnic minorities. A full accounting of the major figures in each campaign since the 2000 election cycle hosted by Democracy in Action illustrates the lack of diversity in many campaigns, especially at the levels of chiefs of staff, campaign managers, and press secretaries, which were the positions I attempted to contact for this project (Appleman, 2016).

Another major limitation of this study is the timeframe in which the study was conducted: February 2015, when I first received approval from Temple University's IRB, to February 2016 when my research concluded. This timeframe coincides with a vigorous presidential campaign and many individuals who I reached out to could not or would not participate because of their hectic day-to-day responsibilities working in some capacity in the political process. I am eternally grateful to the four individuals who did find time to speak to me for an interview despite their roles in the 2016 campaign. In addition, this timeframe also saw a tumultuous reorganization of the late night comedic talk show scene, with esteemed figures such as David Letterman and Jon Stewart retiring. I fully acknowledge that my attempts to reach out to programs such as *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, and *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* were frustrated by the commercial organizations of ABC, NBC, and CBS, as one cannot reach out to those programs directly but must navigate the entire byzantine corporate structure. My position as a graduate researcher did not afford a level of sympathy in these structures.

One final limitation of this study concerns the Reagan administration. The two figures I interviewed who were involved in that administration were lower level figures that did not have a significant impact in the day to day responsibilities of that White House. I reached out to a senior figure in the 1984 campaign multiple times but did not receive a response. Therefore, my data on the Reagan administration and campaigns does not display the level of clarity and detail of my other data. Despite that, the next chapter will focus on the Reagan years.

INTERMISSION: ROADMAP

Before proceeding with the results, I briefly pause to detail the organization of the data. The next chapters progress chronologically starting with the 1980s and the Reagan era, and each chapter begins with a brief introduction, followed by a historical examination of key elements that features important insights from the project's interviewees. At the end of Chapters 5, 6, and 7, certain research questions are reintroduced and answered to the extent they could at the time the chapter ends, but the timing is not uniform because important elements need to be linked thematically. For example: Chapter 6 focuses on the Clinton era, which officially ended in January 2001; however, the 2000 presidential race is saved for Chapter 7 (the George W. Bush era) because it provides an important contrast between Bush's use of entertainment-based venues as a candidate in 2000 and his use of entertainment-based venues as a sitting president. The same is true with the 2008 presidential campaign, which is saved for the chapter focusing on Barack Obama (Chapter 8). Likewise, George H. W. Bush is discussed only in the Clinton chapter in order to provide a thematic contrast between Bush's and Clinton's conduct as president in utilizing entertainment-based venues.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 feature the reintroduction of the research questions; Chapters 8 and 9 do not. Those three chapters provide partial answers to the research questions as of 1988, 2000, and 2008, respectively. Chapters 8 and 9 both cover events still occurring at the time of this project's publication: the Obama presidency and the 2016 presidential race. The full answers to the research questions dealing with ongoing events are provided in Chapter 10, and those answers help lead to a synthesized theory which explains how and why presidential level figures embrace entertainment-based venues.

CHAPTER 5

THE REAGAN YEARS

“Hasn’t anybody else done a little experimenting?” – Nancy Reagan appearing on “The Reporter” episode of Different Strokes, March 19, 1983

In a 2008 interview in Reno before the Nevada caucuses, then-candidate Barack Obama, running against Hillary Clinton, argued that partially because of the combination of the right candidate and the right moment, “Ronald Reagan changed the trajectory of America [...] in a way that Bill Clinton did not” (Obama, 2008). Obama stressed that he was referring partially to the public’s mood towards individual policies but that Reagan had also “tapped into what people were already feeling, which was: we want clarity [and] we want optimism” (Obama, 2008). Reagan’s administration masterfully used the media of the moment to get his messages across with clarity and optimism, specifically placing the president in visual settings that associated him with strong positive emotions, and each president since Reagan has attempted to utilize or expand upon this approach to buoy approval ratings, even if that meant that a president’s personal popularity ratings might significantly outpace public support for his or her policies (Freie, 2011).

According to the political strategists I interviewed for this project, the major difference between the Reagan administration and his successors’ administrations was that the former was the last administration to operate in a certain predictable media environment, and the administration used that predictability to its advantage. Even by the end of the Reagan administration, changes in the structure and content of news programming, driven by cultural and economic factors, had begun to manifest and helped derail a promising presidential candidate: Gary Hart. By the time Reagan’s immediate

successor, George H. W. Bush, ran for reelection in 1992, those changes had fully developed, leading to a radically different media environment that required new strategies from presidential candidates that stressed connection over capability. In 1988, Michael Dukakis famously remarked, “This election isn’t about ideology; it’s about competence” (Dionne, 1988). Four years later, Bill Clinton famously remarked, “I feel your pain” (New York Times, 1992a). Dukakis lost by a landslide; Clinton won decisively. According to the experts I interviewed, changes in the media environment partially accounted for the difference.

The Reagan years have been overlooked in terms of innovative conceptualization of presidential media strategy related to entertainment-based venues. Many of the works of scholars focused on the Reagan administration’s media strategies have concentrated on the administration’s tremendously effective manipulation of the traditional Washington journalism environment. However, in small but important ways the Reagan years set the stage for Barack Obama’s full-throated embrace of the entertainment world. Notably, the two major advances of politicians courting the entertainment world for political purposes were done by strong female supporting figures: Nancy Reagan and Geraldine Ferraro. This chapter begins by defining the media environment in which these politicians operated before examining the Reagan administration’s introduction of the First Lady into popular culture and analyzing key points of the 1984 and 1988 campaigns on the Democratic side.

Command Focus

When Ronald Reagan prepared to run for president again in 1980, the media environment, according to a rival campaign manager, had barely changed since 1960,

with television setting an agenda for viewers but certain newspapers setting the agenda for the three major television news outlets:

It used to be that the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and then, once under Otis Chandler it got on the up and up, the *L. A. Times* were where the networks looked every day to kind of decide what they were going to put on the news. The country – everybody, much more than today, people watched one of the evening news [shows].

In this elite-influenced environment, successful campaigns such as Reagan's used a "command focus" strategy, according to a veteran of Reagan's 1980 and 1984 campaigns, stating, "The candidate and the top of the candidate's team – the top of the pyramid of the strategic and operational team – really were absolutely committed to a set of themes and everyday they just wanted to reinforce those themes." To do so most effectively, the Reagan administration focused on engineering successful television coverage in brief packages, according to that advisor:

If you were a Ronald Reagan and you were running for president, you were virtually guaranteed to get a thirty or forty-five second segment on the evening news on each of those networks every night. That was the maximum that you were going to get. Sometimes there'd be more in-depth stuff, but usually it would be that. If you're a campaign strategist and you're thinking, "Okay, I'm getting this one shot to get these three networks and to reach the vast majority of voters in our country that easily, then I'm going to be really careful about controlling the message that I put out. I'm going to maintain absolute control of that message rather than allowing someone else to potentially trip my guy up," or not even trip him up but get him talking about something else that is going to occupy that time.

The major entertainment-based talk show of 1980, *The Tonight Show*, often featured Johnny Carson conducting freewheeling conversations that could last for multiple segments lasting ten minutes each; a forum like that would contradict the Reagan campaign's focus on a controlled message.

There are other reasons why each campaign in the 1980 election, but especially the Reagan campaign, had incentive to avoid using entertainment-based venues. First, the

1980 campaign took place during the Iranian hostage crisis. In most elections there are moments of levity and slow news days, but the hostage crisis began before Reagan and Ted Kennedy announced their runs for president in November 1979 and continued up through Inauguration Day 1981. During 1980, Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* received a significant ratings challenge from *Nightline*, a news program airing each weeknight that focused exclusively on the hostage crisis; in some markets, *Nightline* outdrew *The Tonight Show* (Karp, 1982, p. A10). "Teddy would've been happy to do it, but I think people were asking less at that point," noted a member of the Kennedy campaign, adding, "I don't know whether, in '80, it was the controversy over the hostages or whether it was that they didn't necessarily want politicians – that they thought they wouldn't get the same ratings as celebrities. I just don't know." Second, the lousy state of the economy, with inflation rising and gas rationing occurring, may have made the Reagan campaign focus less on glitz and glamour and more on Reagan's gubernatorial record. "This is a pure guess," said a member of the Kennedy campaign, "but I think especially leading up to the '80 campaign and in the '80 campaign they did not want to emphasize the celebrity stuff. They wanted him to be the governor of California who solved the fiscal crisis."

The Reagan Presidency

After Reagan became president, the administration moved to exploit the three channel television environment. The power of the presidency still carried a lot of weight with the major television channels, and Reagan often gave nationally televised speeches from the Oval Office in prime time, particularly during his first term. "You could go to ABC, NBC, and CBS and say, 'The president would like to address the nation,'" a veteran of both Bush administrations told me in an interview for this study, adding,

“They’d go, ‘Oh, that’s a big deal!’ and they’d try to adjust their programming.” One of the few exceptions to this rule came in 1987, when the three major networks repeatedly rejected Reagan administration requests for time to push for the nomination of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court (Boyer, 1988). Still, that rejection was a rare occurrence then and still is today; in recent years, only the Obama administration’s announcement of executive actions towards illegal immigration in 2014 has been rejected by the broadcast networks (Woolf, 2014).

Despite understanding how to effectively communicate through traditional means, Ronald Reagan became the first sitting president to appear on an entertainment-based talk show, and the individual personalities of Reagan and his wife Nancy were the key factors behind that appearance. On September 27, 1983, a special edition of *The Merv Griffin Show* featuring Ronald and Nancy Reagan aired in syndication (Reagan, 2009, p. 182). One reason that the Reagans agreed to appear on the program was Nancy’s decades-long friendship with Griffin (Fessier, 2016). However, the altered format of this special episode undoubtedly played a role in the Reagans agreeing to appear. The Reagans also maintained cordial relations with Johnny Carson; Carson served as the emcee for Reagan’s first inauguration (Bushkin, 2013, p. 175), and Nancy Reagan was the only featured guest on an episode of *The Tonight Show* in November 1989, but neither Reagan appeared on Carson’s program during Reagan’s term in office. The *Merv Griffin Show* episode was taped in the White House on September 23, lacking a live audience the program usually had (and *The Tonight Show* always had). The extended conversational format, with its mixture of humor and serious discussion focused on persona more than the intricacies of policy beyond the broadest level, closely resembled Jack Paar’s

interview with candidate Richard Nixon in 1960 and the interviews Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Arsenio Hall would conduct with presidential candidates beginning in the 1990s (and that Carson conducted with the former First Lady in 1989). “Reagan and his team were trendsetters and breaking new ground in the information environment back then,” noted a member of the Reagan administration, but “He had a great sense of what was appropriate and what wasn’t.” Because of this recognition on the part of the Reagan administration, Barack Obama’s appearance on *The Tonight Show* on March 19, 2009 remains the first time a sitting president visited an entertainment-based talk show at the show’s location, complete with a humorous monologue and a comedy bit from the desk preceding the president’s introduction.

One of the undernoted innovations of Reagan’s presidency was the use of the First Lady to push for specific policies in entertainment-based venues. A number of individuals I spoke to for this project traced Laura Bush’s and Michelle Obama’s political activities to Nancy Reagan’s example. “I think it’s wise to find a project like that for the First Lady,” noted a veteran of the Reagan administration. Nancy Reagan became the public face of the anti-drug political movement called “Just Say No” during the 1980s, although the First Lady had to overcome negative media coverage during the first year and a half of her husband’s term before being able to serve as an effective surrogate for the movement. A former Clinton administration speechwriter recalled:

She was getting all kinds of flak for borrowing and keeping, I think, designer dresses from famous Hollywood designers. The story was all over the place; she was getting pummeled in the press. At the Gridiron dinner, she was a star of a skit called “Second Hand Clothes” to the tune of “Second Hand Rose” from “Gypsy,” and you can just about calibrate and quantify the shift, the tone of the news coverage she received pre- and post- her appearance at the Gridiron Club.

The skit received a raucously positive response from the journalists who attended the annual insular Washington dinner, and the First Lady capitalized on the shift in coverage to more positive frames to expand the “Just Say No” campaign to non-political audiences. In 1983, Reagan taped cameo appearances on the popular television programs *Dynasty* and *Diff’rent Strokes* (Anderson, 2016), which provided a new opening for presidential administrations: using first ladies to engage with softer non-political outlets, even to promote specific policies.

The 1984 Campaign

The 1980s are known as the Reagan era partially because of the strength of the president’s electoral victories. After winning over four hundred electoral votes in a three way general election race featuring an incumbent president in 1980, Reagan would ride an economic recovery that was apparent by 1984 – seven percent GDP growth in the second quarter of 1984 and four percent GDP growth overall from the first quarter of 1982 to the third quarter of 1984 (Campbell, 2013, p. 23) – to a reelection that almost saw the president sweep all fifty states in the Electoral College. In the 1988 election, Reagan’s vice president, George H. W. Bush, would ride Reagan’s popularity to a victory that also tallied over four hundred electoral votes. While the era is rightfully seen as a Republican era, a number of under the radar moves by Democratic presidential candidates are notable for pushing the envelope when it pertains to entertainment-based venues.

A key moment in a Democratic primary debate that helped the frontrunner, Walter Mondale, halt the momentum of an upstart challenger, Gary Hart, marked the first time in which a major presidential contender aggressively used a non-political slogan adapted from television to great political effect. In early 1984, the fast food chain

Wendy's began airing an advertisement featuring an elderly woman examining the hamburgers of competing fast food chains and disapprovingly asking, "Where's the beef?" During the early portion of the primaries in late 1983 and the first two months of 1984, "Hart could say almost anything, and the press would fall all over it and voters were responding positively to it," according to a Mondale campaign strategist. At that point, one Mondale advisor argued that the candidate needed a spark, as another Mondale campaign strategist recalled:

In the debate prep for a debate in Georgia, the campaign manager, Bob Beckel, blurted out, sort of like, 'Where's the beef?'" As I remember this – it's been a long time ago – he had to really explain to Mondale, who hadn't seen the commercial, what the concept was, but Mondale used the line, and it ended up being kind of a critical moment because in that debate, Hart did not have an immediate answer, and it crystallized for voters their concerns about Hart, which was, "Yeah, this seems really good, but who is he really?" And that helped us turn the campaign; we were very close to losing that campaign.

Despite Mondale's eventual victory, Hart and another candidate, Jesse Jackson, did not suspend their campaigns before the Democratic National Convention, where Mondale accepted the party's nomination for president and selected the first woman to ever appear on a presidential ticket as his running mate: Geraldine Ferraro.

Two appearances in entertainment-based venues during the final two weeks of the general election campaign of 1984 displayed new possibilities for presidential level politicians in the future – one by Jackson and one by Ferraro. While struggling to maintain its momentum after losing its original cast members and creator Lorne Michaels, the Dick Ebersol-led *Saturday Night Live* began looking for any and all kinds of hosts to come in as ratings stunts and began to offer hosting spots to nationally famous politicians with brash personalities. In 1983, after losing the New York gubernatorial primary contest to Mario Cuomo, New York City Mayor Ed Koch became the first

politician to host *Saturday Night Live*. An occasional guest on *The Tonight Show* even though the program had moved to Los Angeles, Koch, according to a veteran Democratic strategist, “had kind of a Borscht Belt personality, take no prisoners, lot of sass, mild form of Donald Trump and it made for good TV.” Koch’s appearance was considered a one-off by many, a New York mayor hosting a New York-based show, but two weeks before the general election in November 1984, Jesse Jackson became the second politician, and first former presidential candidate, to host *Saturday Night Live* on October 20. Jackson poked fun at his existing persona and his failed presidential campaign and, in doing so, provided a potential blueprint for presidential candidates to rehabilitate one’s image, which Steve Forbes, Bob Dole, Al Gore, and John McCain would also do decades later after disappointing election results. Jackson would run for president again in 1988 but achieve similarly paltry results to his 1984 performance.

On October 30, 1984, the Mondale campaign sent Ferraro to tape an appearance on the syndicated *Donahue* show, a move “calculated by the campaign to make a last-minute appeal for women's votes” (Perlez, 1984). Unlike previous talk show appearances by presidential candidates, Ferraro dealt almost exclusively with “a series of dramatically personal questions from Mr. Donahue [ranging] from whether she cried when learning of harsh newspaper articles to why she believed she had to ‘make up’ to her family for the trials of the campaign” (Perlez, 1984). Despite failing to make an electoral impact, Ferraro’s appearance on *Donahue* to target a specific niche voting bloc would eventually be successfully replicated by the Clinton campaign in 1992, both on *Donahue* itself in targeting female voters but also on *The Arsenio Hall Show* in targeting African-American voters and MTV’s *Choose or Lose* in targeting younger voters. The almost exclusively

personal nature of the *Donahue* interview would also eventually become a major part of future campaigns and lead campaigns to send candidates to tape appearances in venues such as *Oprah* and *Dr. Phil*. However, one of the key factors behind Ferraro's appearance on *Donahue* was a willingness not only by the campaign but by the host of the program to interject politics into a generally non-political atmosphere. When I asked a Mondale campaign veteran why the campaign did not exploit entertainment-based venues more during the campaign, he replied:

We were still living in a three network environment where there weren't a lot of opportunities. These shows weren't necessarily interested. They had a formula that didn't include politicians. I guess we could have called Johnny Carson's people and said we wanted to come on, and maybe they would have considered it, but there's no guarantee they would have said yes.

In this answer, two individual personalities played an important role. First, Carson attempted to keep his show strictly non-political, and while he had politicians on his program, no presidential level figure appeared while officially a nominee, which offered a contrast with his predecessor, Jack Paar (who welcomed Republican nominee Richard Nixon in 1960), and his successor, Jay Leno (who welcomed Al Gore and George W. Bush when they were officially their parties' nominees in 2000). Second, more positive elements of Mondale's personality were not revealed in public often, according to a former advisor:

He was a guy who privately is, like, one of the warmest people you're ever going to meet, and one of the funniest people you're ever going to meet. But when the camera came on, he was all business and all serious, so I don't think he would've done very well in 1984. You know, fast forward 15 years; it's a new kind of politician, who knows in that case? What you saw on camera with Governor Dukakis was much closer to his real personality; just a very serious guy, just not a jokester by any means. Mondale was very different; privately just a very funny guy. But I don't remember there being very many opportunities, places to go. You look back with hindsight: you look at Clinton and you see how he effectively communicated in a variety of formats and think maybe we should've done this –

I'm not sure Dukakis or Mondale or Jimmy Carter, for that matter, would've been as effective in those.

The 1988 Campaign

While the 1988 race between George H. W. Bush and Michael Dukakis established a key historical marker for negative campaigning, the general election campaign was waged traditionally by both parties in terms of ignoring entertainment-based venues. The political veterans I interviewed for this project argued that the primary reason for this conventional style of campaign was the continued prominence of the three channel environment and the success of the Reagan administration in manipulating television news organizations into producing positive stories. Both the Bush and Dukakis campaigns believed that they could achieve similar success in that regard and the Dukakis campaign maintained an early lead. "It almost looked as if he had an insurmountable lead coming out of the Democratic convention," said the Bush advisor, adding, "Some of it was given credibility by the normal kind of party fatigue after a president has served two terms. The normal cadence was not to elect somebody of the same party after a two term president." In the end, negative campaigning by the Bush campaign, epitomized by the Willie Horton advertisement that attacked Dukakis' record on crime as governor of Massachusetts, helped the Republican win a major electoral victory. "The story of the '88 campaign, and Governor Dukakis is pretty honest about this himself," noted a Dukakis advisor, "is after we left Atlanta seventeen points ahead, and I don't think we capitalized on that." The Dukakis campaign maintained a rapid response team but could not effectively counter the onslaught of negative ads, which led to a key development four years later: "the whole notion of a war room," a member of both the Dukakis and Clinton campaigns noted. That advisor added, "One of the great lessons of

'88 I think proved very helpful to those of us then on the Clinton campaign was the notion of a broader range of ways to communicate a message,” and this included the use of entertainment-based venues.

Besides the primary role of the traditional media environment, individual personality did play a role in shaping the campaign in a conventional manner. Dukakis was “pretty uncomfortable with doing what some people call the softer side of politics,” stated a Bush advisor. When it comes to the softer, and especially the lighter side of politics, “It has to seem natural; it has to be that you really feel like you’re listening to their voice,” argued a Clinton administration speechwriter, adding, “As a guy who used to write jokes for Mike Dukakis, it was inconsistent with the candidate; a bunch of funny jokes written by staffers will only get you so far.” Unlike the Mondale campaign, which featured in Geraldine Ferraro a unique asset that could offer a more intriguing personality for entertainment-based venues, the Dukakis campaign selected a vice presidential nominee that was closer to Dukakis in terms of personality: Lloyd Bentsen. “We went and visited the Buddy Holly statue in Texas, because he was simultaneously campaigning for reelection to the U. S. Senate in Texas,” a Dukakis campaign member travelling with Bentsen recalled, “and as we pulled up I remember him saying, ‘Now, who exactly was this Buddy Holly?’” The Bush campaign operated in a similar manner, choosing Dan Quayle as a running mate but keeping him and Bush away from entertainment-based venues.

Multiple campaign veterans I interviewed for this project noted that the biggest difference between the 1980s and the 1990s was a rapidly changing media environment, and the most important development in this regard occurred not during the 1988 general

election campaign but early in the primary season. By 1981, *Entertainment Tonight* became the first syndicated show to use a television news format to focus almost exclusively on Hollywood stars and celebrity culture. Combined with the success of *Donahue* and, beginning in 1986, *Oprah*, the rise of celebrity and scandal-based news programs such as *Entertainment Tonight* and *A Current Affair* – and later *Hard Copy* and *Inside Edition* – used news-style formats to focus on the scandalous side of the personal lives of major celebrities. This economic shift in the media environment, ostensibly catering to what television viewers and tabloid magazine readers wanted to consume, occurred at the same time that a generational shift in traditional political journalism became apparent. A cohort of journalists who had “entered the business at almost exactly the moment when Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post* (who helped expose the Watergate scandal) were becoming not just the most celebrated reporters of their day but very likely the wealthiest and most famous journalists in American history” were coming into prominence, and because of Woodward’s and Bernstein’s example, “there was no greater calling than to expose the lies of a politician, no matter how inconsequential” (Bai, 2004, p. MM37). These two factors – a new generation of journalists needing to uncover hidden news, no matter how trivial, and an increasing focus on the personal lives of famous individuals – combined to destroy Gary Hart’s second presidential run soon after it began in May 1987.

Hart’s exit from the presidential race happened dramatically and rapidly. “History, the way the scenario is: ‘That idiot said, ‘Follow me and you’ll be bored;’ we did and we caught him – no, it didn’t happen that way,” said an advisor to Hart’s campaign. After weeks of innuendo, Hart did an interview with the *New York Times*

denying his extramarital affair with Donna Rice at the same time that reporters from the *Miami Herald* were completing an investigative scoop confirming the affair. Years later, *Miami Herald* reporter James Savage corrected the mythologized timeline in a letter to the *New York Times*:

Gary Hart is irritated that “every story about him suggests he invited the press furies by daring a *New York Times* reporter to follow him,” [...] [pointing] out that the *Miami Herald* began its surveillance on Friday and his quote did not appear until Sunday. The *Herald's* first article on Mr. Hart's meeting with Donna Rice appeared on Sunday, May 3, 1987 – the same day as the article in the *Times*. However, the *Herald's* political editor, Tom Fiedler, had obtained an advance copy of the *Times*’ article on Friday, May 1. Obviously, the quote [...] was not the reason the *Herald* pursued the story, but contrary to Mr. Hart's assertion, *Herald* reporters were aware of the quote before doing so. (Savage, 1998)

The advisor to Hart’s campaign I spoke to recalled a key detail that illustrated how the economics of television had changed the practice of journalism:

When the Hart campaign was falling apart, and I showed up at Troublesome Gulch, a guy popped out of the bushes with a microphone. He sticks a mic in my face and says, “I’m here for *A Current Affair*,” and that was like the first time I’d ever heard of the show, and I was like, “They’ve got a show about this now?” because I thought it was specifically about the Donna Rice scandal.

On May 8, Hart withdrew from the presidential race. If the revelations of scandal had been limited to just one affair and had transpired over a longer period of time, it is possible that Hart might have used a venue like *Donahue* or *Oprah* as a confessional venue to regain momentum, as Ferraro had made it appropriate for presidential level figures to visit these softer, traditionally non-political venues. We may never know if Hart would have gone that route. As the Hart campaign advisor remembered:

There was like a one hour conversation about that, and then it all spiraled so far out of control that it was pretty clear that we were going to be getting out of the race and that there was no reason to try and do something like that. That thing happened in a week, and there was a, like I said, a one to two in the morning conversation about, “Maybe we could do something like that,” and by the next day, it was clear that he was going to withdraw, so we just kind of bagged that idea.

One footnote: soon after the Hart withdrawal Bill Clinton canceled a nationally scheduled press event in Little Rock, Arkansas in which he was going to announce a run for president. When Clinton finally did run for president four years later the combination of a more diverse television environment and a willingness by the Clinton campaign to embrace persona, both positive and negative, made him a more compelling candidate for the Democratic nomination.

Conclusion

Interviews with key figures present during the 1980s reveal that the most important factor in presidential level communication strategy was the information environment. Since most Americans received their political information from the nightly news broadcasts of ABC, NBC, and CBS, administrations and campaigns tailored their tactics to ensuring positive coverage in those venues. However, a new generation of journalists hungry for fame, as well as economic pressures that led to a rise in cheaply produced syndicated content during non-primetime hours which both reflected and helped shape a desire on the part of television audiences to learn more about the personal lives of celebrity figures, helped doom Gary Hart's presidential campaign in 1987. A Democratic presidential figure engaging in an extramarital affair is not an uncommon thread in American history; Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson, to name three examples, entertained numerous paramours. However, Hart was the first presidential candidate to suffer consequences in the public sphere because of illicit behavior in his private romantic life. The destruction of Hart's campaign and the successful destructive tactics employed by the Bush campaign against the Dukakis campaign helped shape a desire for presidential candidates after 1988 to use

entertainment-based venues to reach beyond the traditional filter of journalism and counter negative perceptions about them. While Bill Clinton may have been uniquely suited to entertainment-based venues that focused on persona and empathy, other Democratic candidates in the 1992 election would have undoubtedly done more than the Dukakis campaign did in 1988 to present their candidate more favorably, and a recognition of the value of entertainment-based venues would have developed eventually, if more slowly.

Leaving aside the changes that occurred in the media environment that affected the 1988 campaign, a number of key developments occurred during the 1980s that partially address when, how, and why presidential candidates and surrogates should appear in entertainment-based non-political venues for political purposes. The major events during this decade that relate to the research questions for this project were the Reagans' appearance on *The Merv Griffin Show* in 1983, Geraldine Ferraro's visit to *Donahue* in October 1984, and Nancy Reagan's cameo appearances on *Dynasty* and *Diff'rent Strokes*. The Reagans' appearance on *The Merv Griffin Show* can partially answer RQ1b and RQ1c, regarding the effects of individual personality on the decision-making process, because Nancy Reagan's personal friendship with Griffin was vital to securing the appearance. The *Griffin* episode also partially addresses RQ2b, referring to the costs and benefits a sitting president faces in making these appearances. Ronald Reagan agreed to appear on the program partially because of his wife's friendship with the host but also because the program could easily be reorganized into a more serious format; it is unlikely, given Reagan's respect for the presidential office, that he would have appeared on a program featuring a live studio audience and bawdy comedy as a

sitting president, even though he made appearances in these venues during the 1970s when not officially running for president.

However, there is no assurance that Reagan would have even been invited onto a program like *The Tonight Show* during his presidency. Johnny Carson's insistence that his program remain largely neutral and non-political played a role in the program's focus, as candidates other than Reagan and Bush could have been invited if Carson were more politically inclined. Nancy Reagan's visit to *The Tonight Show* in 1989 came after the family's retirement from politics, making her visit newsworthy and non-political. One can argue that even if Carson had decided to invite presidential level figures onto *The Tonight Show*, the personalities of Walter Mondale, Michael Dukakis, and Lloyd Bentsen might not have translated well to the format. However, Jesse Jackson did have the personality for such an appearance, as showcased by his *Saturday Night Live* hosting gig, but Carson never invited him on. Therefore, individual personality and recognition of the appropriateness of role were key factors in the decision-making process – Reagan as America's "chief of state, chief executive, chief diplomat, commander in chief, and chief legislator" (Denton, 1983, p. 369), and Carson as America's nonpartisan court jester.

Based on the example of the 1980s, the most notable answer to RQ1a, regarding factors that led to the use of entertainment-based venues by candidates, involves desperation. Geraldine Ferraro's appearance on *Donahue* came in the last week of a campaign for a ticket doomed to win only one state. The struggles of *Saturday Night Live* during Lorne Michaels' exile from the program led its producers to invite newsworthy individuals to host, and the combination of a failed campaign for higher office and an ebullient personality inspired figures like Ed Koch and Jesse Jackson to accept the

show's invitations. Even the most prominent examples of political figures validating the concept of *You go where they are* during the 1980s – Nancy Reagan's cameo appearances on *Dynasty* and *Different Strokes*, as well as an aborted attempt to place Vice President Bush on an episode of *Miami Vice* in 1986 (UPI Archives, 1986) – were driven by a desperation to stop largely young, largely apolitical citizens from engaging with illicit drugs. Conversely, the Reagan administration's command of the traditional media environment and its use of command focus ensured that there was not any urgent need to reach beyond outlets of televised journalism to effectively communicate most of its messages. In some ways, the 1988 campaign reflected a consensus and a lack of desperation on both sides: the Dukakis campaign did not appear desperate because they maintained a large lead through the Democratic National Convention, and the Bush campaign did not appear desperate because it knew that its negative advertising would be effective in derailing Dukakis' momentum.

In sum, desperation, individual personality, role theory, and technological determinism all offer important insights to help explain why presidential campaigns and administrations utilized entertainment-based venues to the extent that they did during this era. The next chapter will examine the 1990s but will reach back to examine two key developments that occurred in the 1980s: the presidency of George H. W. Bush and an appearance on *The Tonight Show* by then-Governor of Arkansas Bill Clinton in 1988. I did not discuss Bush in detail in this chapter because I wish to offer a contrast between Bush's outlook and Clinton's outlook on the entertainment-based venue, which encompasses a central part of the 1992 campaign.

CHAPTER 6

THE CLINTON YEARS

“Mr. President, the world’s dying to know: Is it boxers or briefs?” – Town hall questioner to Bill Clinton, MTV’s Enough is Enough, April 19, 1994

In retrospect, the most important moment of the 1988 presidential campaign was not a successful speech but a failed one. The Democratic National Convention in Atlanta showcased the marriage of Michael Dukakis and Lloyd Bentsen as a presidential ticket and the convention’s speeches helped the Dukakis/Bentsen ticket jump out to a seventeen point lead in the polls. Ann Richards introduced herself to a wider audience with a stem-winder attacking George H. W. Bush climaxing with the insult, “Poor George, he can’t help it; he was born with a silver foot in his mouth” (Kennedy & Silverstein, 2006). Yet the most anticipated speech outside of the two nominees’ was to be delivered by a rising star out of Arkansas and a former chair of the National Governors’ Association: Bill Clinton. Given a primetime speaking slot, Clinton spoke for over thirty minutes and irritated the crowd; when he began to wrap up his speech, the crowd in the Omni Arena let out a sarcastic cheer. In the aftermath of the convention, Clinton became a national punch line for news anchors and comedians across the country. Within a week, however, Clinton had saved his political career by appearing on *The Tonight Show*. Three years later, as Clinton’s associates began to plot his path to the presidency, the success of *The Tonight Show* visit became a major inspiration for the campaign’s media strategy.

It is funny to think that two consecutive nights in Atlanta in 1988 may have inspired a generation of presidential leadership. If Ann Richards had not been so vicious and sarcastic in attacking the Texan-based Republican nominee George H .W. Bush in

her speech, his eldest son George W. Bush might not have been motivated to challenge her gubernatorial reelection effort in 1994. If Clinton had given a successful convention speech as planned, he would not have ended up on *The Tonight Show* and might not have settled on a campaign strategy that focused on persona and utilized entertainment-based venues. More certainly, if Clinton had run for president in 1988 as planned, he would have failed. Major technological, economic, and personnel alterations to the television landscape that occurred between 1987 and 1992 created a favorable media climate for Clinton to take advantage of. External factors, such as rising conservative dissatisfaction with Bush, an economic recession, and racial riots in major American cities played a much larger role in the election outcome, but a Clinton run in a media environment similar to the one outlined in the last chapter would have been unsuccessful.

According to the political strategists I interviewed for this project, the major difference between the Clinton era and the Reagan era was an evolution in the television environment that featured more competition and more outlets for candidates to appear in. I focus the first part of this chapter specifically on Clinton's visits to *Donahue*, *The Arsenio Hall Show*, and MTV during the 1992 campaign; however, a number of strategists I interviewed associated with both the Bush and Clinton campaigns specifically (and unprompted) brought up *Larry King Live* as an example of a venue with entertainment elements that helped shape the course of the 1992 campaign. *Larry King Live* had a significant news component as a call-in talk show on CNN, and I would not define it as an entertainment-based venue or place it and *The Tonight Show* in the same category; rather, I would place *Larry King Live* somewhere between *The Today Show* and *Access Hollywood* on the Murrow spectrum outlined in Chapter 4. However, these

interviewees argued for the program's inclusion in this study as an example of a major risk for presidential candidates and presidents to take during the early 1990s.

The strategists I interviewed noted the key role of individual personality in the performance of the presidency regarding the entertainment-based venue but tethered that value to a larger picture of the changing media environment. The Bush administration's hesitance to use these venues was largely evaluated by those who knew the president to be partially due to Bush's acceptance of the traditional Reagan-era media environment and partially due to Bush's personal view of the dignity of the presidency. Veterans of the Clinton administration argued that the Clinton administration aggressively used local media outlets to bypass the Washington establishment and utilized some entertainment-based venues in its first two years, but a combination of one unfortunate appearance by President Clinton on MTV in April 1994 and external factors limited that outreach by Clinton and his running mate Al Gore for the rest of his presidency.

The interviewees for this project noted that while major changes in the media environment in the 1980s, such as the rise of cable television and syndicated entertainment-based talk shows, bore fruit in 1992, similarly important changes in the 1990s, such as the development of the internet and the attempt by cable networks to create competition in the late night comedic talk show genre, did not affect presidential media strategy until the very end of the Clinton administration. While the Clinton campaign of 1996 did not use entertainment-based venues to the extent that the initial Clinton campaign of 1992 did, the campaign of Bob Dole attempted to use these venues on a limited basis, producing only minimally positive results. Dole's post-election appearances in these venues led many to marvel at his wit and sense of humor, and two

Dole campaigns veterans disagreed as to whether Dole could have had more success acting like that during the campaign.

When Clinton Met Carson

When the Dukakis campaign and convention organizers scheduled Bill Clinton in a prime speaking slot during the 1988 convention, expectations were high among political insiders of both parties, which made his dull speech all the more shocking. “He was a young, dynamic, smart, telegenic, politically adept governor,” noted a veteran of both the Dukakis and Clinton campaigns, adding, “I think everyone was stunned, honestly, because it was very uncharacteristic.” “I was really surprised at the speech because Bill was a pretty good speaker,” noted a close advisor to the Bush campaign, “and I think his problem was that he was dealing with a speech that had been vetted by so many people and neutered by so many people that he was struggling through the teleprompter game.” A future Clinton administration advisor working at the podium that night recalls:

After his teleprompter speech ran out and he was struggling, trying to find something to connect with the audience, which wasn’t happening. We kept writing on the teleprompter screen, “Get off now! Get off now!” and he didn’t. He kind of kept going, because he was trying to reach back and find something to connect.

The reaction to Clinton’s speech was universally negative and Clinton became a target for jokes not only from professional comedians but from other Democrats, as a future Clinton speechwriter remembers:

I was running around that week doing a goofy video for the campaign, just a gonzo video we did for ourselves and for the donors. I interviewed him for that, and the joke of it was, I went up to him – we found him in a lobby, I had a microphone and a guy with a camcorder, and I said, “Governor, how do you think your remarks went last night?” And then, in the video – I forget what his answer was, but in the video, the joke of it was “Edited for length.”

With Clinton's future national ambitions in jeopardy, his advisors needed to make a bold, dramatic move to shift the conversation in Clinton's favor. Harry Thomason, a Clinton advisor at the time, argued that Clinton needed to go on *The Tonight Show* to poke fun at himself, but the non-political operating procedure of *The Tonight Show* made it a tough sell:

Freddie de Cordova, who was of course Carson's producer, [...] [argued that] Carson has never had a politician on his show in his entire career and he's not going to now. [...] I said, "Okay, you've never had a politician on, but what if he comes on and plays the saxophone? This guy's a musician," and de Cordova laughed, and he said, "I'll get back to you. Let me go down the hall and talk to Johnny." (Goodman & Durrance, 2012)

Carson agreed to allow Clinton onto the show on the condition that Clinton played the saxophone in addition to doing the interview. "Johnny was just not a really political animal" said a veteran of *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, adding, "Obviously he would do jokes about the Richard Nixons of the world or things that were going wrong but he would wait for something to really be big before he would tackle that subject." Therefore, the only reason that Carson would accept Clinton onto the program was because Clinton was not appearing as a political figure promoting specific policies; instead, Clinton was allowed on the program partially because he was a national joke at the moment and partially because of the novelty of a politician who could play a musical instrument. By 2016, figures such as Mike Huckabee and Martin O'Malley have made the musically-talented politician a more common occurrence, but Clinton's saxophone performance on *The Tonight Show* was somewhat new, even though he was not the first politician to play a musical instrument on a late night talk show. Richard Nixon played a piano solo on *The Jack Paar Program* in 1963.

While Clinton's musical performance on *The Tonight Show* was forgettable, his opening segment was more memorable. During the taping, as Carson performed a mockingly long introduction for Clinton, the governor's advisors had planned a visual joke for Clinton to perform: Clinton would pull out an hourglass place it on Carson's desk. However, according to a veteran of Clinton's gubernatorial staff, Clinton was encouraged by the producers not to go through with the visual joke for a notable reason:

We're getting ready and we give him the hourglass and Freddie de Cordova comes running in a panic to us, he said, "Do not let him take that hourglass out there!" And we were sort of startled at this cause he was upset [...] and we took it away from [Clinton]. So Clinton goes out and sits down and Carson says, "Well Governor Clinton, how are you doing?" and [Carson] takes an hourglass out, plops it on top of the desk. (Goodman & Durrance, 2012)

The decision to appear on *The Tonight Show* was "pretty gutsy" and "proved genius," noted a future Clinton advisor, saying, "I think it cleansed the moment." Another future Clinton administration official argued that the importance of that appearance was not only that it "kind of caught everybody's attention [but also] at least in Clinton's mind, [the thought became] 'When I run the next time, I'm pretty good at that.'" By the time that Clinton did run the next time, the television environment had changed significantly so that there were more opportunities for him to make those kinds of appearances.

The Changing Media Environment

Throughout the 1980s, the growing popularity with stay-at-home mothers of syndicated talk shows such as *Donahue* led networks to begin optioning more talk shows for timeslots less profitable than primetime. Syndicated talk shows were cheaper to produce than the soap opera dramas that had long anchored the midday hours of major networks and provided Hollywood production companies an opportunity to display more diversity on a television landscape that was primarily ethnically white. By the end of

1991, *Live with Regis and Kathie Lee* and *Oprah* had become popular mainstays of syndicated television. In addition, the failure of CBS to challenge Johnny Carson's reign as the late night leader meant that the only three programs being produced by networks after primetime were *The Tonight Show*, the news program *Nightline* on ABC, and a cost-cutting move by CBS to air an old motion picture after the local news. In 1986, Australian billionaire Rupert Murdoch launched Fox, a channel he hoped would become a national content producer on the level of ABC, NBC, and CBS. To make a splash for his new network, Murdoch's executives hired *Tonight Show* permanent guest host Joan Rivers to anchor her own talk show as a competitor to Carson's. Rivers' *Late Show* ultimately ended up as a failure, but one of her program's guest hosts impressed Paramount executives enough that they created a syndicated late night talk show for him: Arsenio Hall.

Concurrent with the expansion of entertainment-based venues was an increase in the number of news programs, such as the celebrity-based scandal programs that covered the Gary Hart meltdown, and an increase in the popularity and reach of cable and satellite television. A member of the Hart campaign asserted:

Start back in 1980: there were three channels, and that was it. Soon you get CNN; we're talking four or five places you had to be and you could pretty much reach everybody. By '88 it started and by '92, the fragmentation is already there so much that the Clinton campaign becomes the first one that tries to deal with it.

The emergence of CNN, created in 1980 by Ted Turner, throughout the 1980s was greatly aided by the first Gulf War in 1991. By late 1990, CNN had so steadily built up a reputation as more independent and focused on international issues than the American broadcast networks that Saddam Hussein, whose army was occupying Kuwait and whose regime was under threat of punishment from a US-led coalition, invited CNN anchors to

Iraq to present an alternate narrative to the ones being pushed by the rest of the American news establishment. On January 17, 1991, CNN reporters staying in the al-Rashid Hotel in Baghdad were the only American media in Iraq when the Gulf War began. Other television channels around the world used the CNN feed, giving CNN access “to more than a billion viewers;” by the culmination of the war, Bush press secretary Marlin Fitzwater said that “to convey to America’s allies its response to various Iraqi diplomatic feints, the ‘quickest and most effective way was CNN because all countries in the world had it and were watching it on a real-time basis’” (Rohwer, 2001, p. 10). After the war, CNN continued to draw tremendous ratings by cable standards, which provided a significant audience for its existing programming such as *Larry King Live*. At the same time, the Music Television Channel, a popular and influential hub for youth culture that acted largely apolitical since its emergence on August 1, 1981, decided to insert itself into the presidential campaign to inspire its younger viewers to become more involved in politics. It was in this rapidly changing media environment that Bill Clinton and independent billionaire candidate H. Ross Perot challenged the incumbent president George H. W. Bush in the 1992 election.

The 1992 Campaign

The 1992 campaign began with two competitive primaries, despite one involving an incumbent president, but while the Republican primary was contended exclusively in traditional settings, the Democratic primary expanded to certain entertainment-based venues. However, by the time the Republican primary had ended, a third party candidate critical of the sitting president had emerged. In the span of twelve months, President George H. W. Bush had gone from receiving record high presidential approval ratings to

dealing with a primary challenge from Pat Buchanan. Bush ultimately solidified his position as the Republican nominee after the two clashed in traditional settings while the Democratic primary dragged into the spring, but on February 20, H. Ross Perot appeared on *Larry King Live* and signaled his intention to seek the presidency. “Larry King helped make Perot,” argued a former Bush advisor, adding, “He was a celebrity candidate; beyond the Larry King show I don’t think he had a lot of traction in popular media.” Perot appeared on *Larry King Live* six times, and King also welcomed Clinton onto the program often; by October, the Bush campaign acquiesced to CNN’s consistent requests to appear on the program and made three appearances on *Larry King Live* before Election Day (Davis & Owen, 1998, p. 246). Despite his erratic campaigning, exiting the race on July 16 (on *Larry King Live*) and then reentering the race in October, Perot won nineteen percent of the popular vote in the election.

On the Democratic side, the syndicated program *Donahue* played an important role in elevating Bill Clinton over main rival Jerry Brown. Clinton and Brown competed in an unofficial debate on the syndicated *Donahue* program on April 6, in which the candidates acted more courteously towards each other than they did in debates moderated by ABC and NBC (Germond & Witcover, 1992). Just prior to that, however, Clinton appeared alone on *Donahue* and used the format to appear sympathetic to a key niche voting audience: stay-at-home female voters. After *Donahue* focused on Clinton’s “alleged infidelity [and] belated admission of marijuana use,” the host, as usual, allowed the audience to ask questions; one audience member used her time to attack *Donahue*, saying, “I can’t believe you spent half an hour of air time attacking this man’s character; [...] I’m not even a Bill Clinton supporter but I think this is ridiculous” (Jehl, 1992).

Clinton's repeated use of *Donahue* – he also appeared with running mate Al Gore on the program in October – allowed him to explicitly appeal to the program's large female audience, and Clinton used *The Arsenio Hall Show* and MTV's *Choose or Lose* special in June 1992 for a similar reason: to appeal to younger voters and to African-Americans (Ifill, 1992).

Each of the campaign veterans I interviewed, whether associated with the Clinton administration or not, pointed to Clinton's visit to *The Arsenio Hall Show* in June 1992 as a defining moment in presidential politics that made it more acceptable for politicians to appear in entertainment-based venues. "It was fabulous," remembers a member of the Bush administration, adding, "That was a watershed moment for Bill Clinton reaching an audience that might otherwise not be paying attention, so I think that it was compelling." Another member of the Bush campaign recalled that while it was "sad to be on the receiving end of it on the other side of the campaign, it was impressive." That campaign veteran added:

I know people thought it was disrespectful and he shouldn't have done it and all these kinds of things but I always thought the reluctance to go on the late night shows back then, and that was considered cutting edge, I thought that reluctance was a little bit silly. At the time, and these are ballpark numbers, thirty-five to forty percent of young people, who we were always trying to attract as voters, were getting their news and information from late night shows, so if you want to attract young voters, then you go where they are. You go to the late night shows. I thought he was smart to do it.

What is widely known is that Bill Clinton played Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel" to open the program while wearing sunglasses before sitting down, first alone with Hall and later with Hillary Clinton joining the two of them, to discuss a mixture of policy, persona, and character. Clinton was the first official presidential nominee of a party to make an appearance in an entertainment-based venue since Richard Nixon appeared on *Rowan*

and Martin's Laugh-In in September 1968. What is not well known is that *The Arsenio Hall Show* was not the campaign's first choice: "I do remember we had been offered Bill Clinton in '92," remembers a veteran of *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, explaining, "The producers didn't really like political guests that much at that time, and then Clinton went on Arsenio and it was a big event." Johnny Carson's farewell *Tonight Show* was May 22 and Jay Leno debuted the next week on May 25; if his recollection is accurate, Clinton could have been the first guest on the new *Tonight Show*. One Clinton administration veteran drew a parallel to today's media environment in noting that Stephen Colbert, replacing David Letterman on *The Late Show* in September 2015, hosted Jeb Bush on his first episode, stating, "I think the Jeb booking was deliberate to signal that he was going to be fair and friendly to any candidate that he's interested in having on." However, the Colbert interview with Bush was plagued by timing issues and awkward edits as Colbert attempted to navigate a new format and a new character. In retrospect, the confident, experienced tone of *The Arsenio Hall Show* proved a better match for Clinton than *The Tonight Show* would have, as Leno would have been trying to find a balance between introducing elements of his own personality into the format and maintaining elements of Carson's tenure. *The Arsenio Hall Show* allowed Clinton to make a bold impression with key demographics in a settled environment, and Clinton's subsequent appearance on MTV's *Choose or Lose* special later in June helped raise his profile with younger voters.

Especially when compared to the use of entertainment-based venues by the Clinton and Perot campaigns, the Bush campaign's belated use of these venues was done half-heartedly. Bush did understand the power of symbolism and popular culture and

continued some of the Reagan administration's innovations of pageantry and spectacle but primarily in areas where he was comfortable doing so personally, as a senior Bush advisor recalled:

Bush was even a bigger sports fan than Reagan and Bush wallowed in that. He loved doing it, even to the point where in '91 when it was the fiftieth anniversary of Ted Williams hitting .406 and Joe DiMaggio's fifty-six game hitting streak, we hatched a plan to invite Williams and DiMaggio in to get a presidential citation and then we would stuff them in Air Force One and fly them up to the All Star Game in Toronto. That way, we would not only get the visibility of a presentation of two sports heroes, but we'd lock them in Air Force One for two hours and talk baseball to them.

Reagan invented the now-tradition of inviting championship sports teams to the White House in 1987, welcoming the Super Bowl champion New York Giants; Bush maintained that tradition and expanded the presidential reach into other sports, but in the much larger area of persona-based politics, the administration did not fully engage until the last month of the 1992 campaign. In October, Bush finally scheduled an appearance on MTV's *Choose or Lose* after initially rejecting the program, saying, "I'm not going to be out there being a teenybopper; at sixty-eight I just cannot do that anymore" (van Zoonen, 2005, p. 44). At one point, the Bush campaign said that it would consider "just about any invitation" except for *The Arsenio Hall Show*, which led Hall to attack Bush during his monologue, exclaiming, "I don't remember inviting your ass on my show" (Parkin, 2014, p. 27). During Bush's third appearance on *Larry King Live*, this one only days before Election Day, Clinton campaign advisor George Stephanopoulos called into the program and debated Bush about the president's culpability in the Iran-Contra scandal. All in all, the tenor and direction of the 1992 campaign did not fit into Bush's wheelhouse, according to an advisor to his 1992 campaign:

Everyone who has known the man over the years always says, "To know the man is to really, really like and respect the man," and that didn't always come across in

the things that he was doing in the information communications arena, and I think some of those vehicles, some of those [softer] platforms would have really brought that out, but I've always thought that if he could come to work every day and work on the policies and work on the politics and build coalitions, he would've been very, very happy. Focusing on what he considered the less serious side of politics and governing was not his favorite thing to do. So he would do it; he wouldn't always do it happily; he sometimes entertained and humored those of us who were on campaigns encouraging him to do interviews with MTV, etcetera, but not happily.

The Bush campaign advisor praised Clinton's decision to use programs like *The Arsenio Hall Show* to appeal to different demographics but also expressed admiration for Bush for not doing so:

President Bush believed there were certain things that were disrespectful to the office of the presidency and he resisted a lot of the things we encouraged him to do because he thought it was beneath the dignity of the office. He realized it might hurt him politically not to do those things but he cared so deeply about the office that he declined to do them, and you've got to respect that.

In the end, Clinton won the election and became president. As a footnote, in 1994, noted Bush impersonator Dana Carvey returned to *Saturday Night Live* as a host only to be greeted by a humorous pre-taped message from the former president. "There is a freedom that does come afterwards," said a former senior Bush advisor, adding, "I think Bush was very sensitive to what he felt was the dignity of the presidency while in office and after he left office he felt a lot more comfortable being more reflective."

The First Two Years

Members of the Clinton administration that I interviewed for this project noted that the administration used alternative outlets aggressively in its first two years to push for specific policies such as enacting gun control, curbing violent crime, reforming the health care system, and concluding a free trade agreement with Mexico and Canada begun under the Bush administration. These advisors noted the significant risks the administration made in utilizing these alternative venues. The most risky decision,

according to two interviewees, was an appearance by Vice President Gore on *Larry King Live* in November 1993 to debate the merits of the North America Free Trade Agreement against one of Clinton's election challengers, Ross Perot. "I was skeptical that it was a good idea for the Vice President to do it; I was a little worried about the stature of giving Perot a platform," recalled a close advisor to Gore, adding, "He was kind of barking from the sidelines on the issue, and the idea of taking him on as the voice of the opposition and then having a debate seemed precarious." Nevertheless, the Clinton administration came prepared to ensure that the debate would be won not only on the merits but on persona as well. A Clinton administration speechwriter noted that he had composed "three pages of jokes for" Gore for the event, which was viewed by over eleven million people and set a record for cable television viewership that would not be broken until over a decade later (ESPN.com news services, 2006). In the eyes of the public, Gore's risky venture was a huge success: "He cleaned up in that debate," remembers the Clinton administration speechwriter, remarking, "It was actually one of the first big wins in that White House, really." The close Gore advisor who had initially been skeptical of the decision noted, "I fully admit that I was wrong about that; it was successful; it was a hugely watched event; it had an impact."

The expansion of the television landscape and the economics of aggressive competition that were not present in the 1980s led to another significant opportunity for the Clinton administration to reach out to non-political audiences. Beginning in 1989, the success of *The Arsenio Hall Show* with younger viewers and African-American viewers and new attempts by CBS to start its own late night talk show led NBC executives to evaluate the wisdom of keeping Johnny Carson as the host of *The Tonight Show*.

Beginning in 1979 and continuing through 1982 and 1986, Carson's legal team had engaged in a successful series of negotiations that not only compensated Carson extremely well financially but reduced his workload and allowed him to create a comedic talk show to follow his each night. By 1990, the formula that had been put in place in 1982 had solidified: Carson would host *The Tonight Show* on Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays; Tuesdays would feature a *Best of Carson* special; new Monday episodes would star Rivers' replacement as permanent guest host, Jay Leno; and each episode would be followed by *Late Night with David Letterman*. In May 1991, Carson announced that he would retire the following May, closing a successful thirty years hosting *Tonight*. The ensuing drama between NBC executives, Leno's representatives, and Letterman's representatives would end with Leno hosting NBC's *Tonight Show* by June 1992 and Letterman hosting a direct competitor to *Tonight* on CBS beginning in September 1993.

Feeling it necessary to make his new program a national phenomenon, Letterman and his bookers reached out to the White House, who agreed to provide Gore as a guest for the program. Gore's appearance was designed to promote the "Reinventing Government" initiative, which "was kind of a task force put in place inside of the White House that the vice president led to try to streamline some of the waste in federal government programs," noted a Gore advisor. In agreeing to visit Letterman's program to promote that initiative, Gore made the first appearance by a sitting vice president in a late night comedy venue since Spiro Agnew's visits to *The Tonight Show* during Nixon's first term. Yet while Agnew calmly chatted with Johnny Carson's guest hosts, Letterman's team had spent much of the 1980s perfecting an off-brand sense of humor that they were not going to eschew just because a presidential surrogate was visiting for the first time in

a generation. The Letterman team and Gore team agreed to have the vice president present a Top Ten list, a Letterman staple, and also display an example of government waste: an ashtray “that the government had procured where there was some process for testing it,” but the Clinton administration believed that the process was flawed, remembered a Gore advisor. To show how fragile the ashtray was, the two men put on goggles and used hammers to smash the ashtray into a dozen pieces. “In and of itself, having the vice president on Letterman wearing goggles, it was a little bit of a sight gag,” argued a Gore advisor, “but it was a way to communicate something to a broader audience and it was successful.” “When Gore smashed the ashtray on television: that was a nice moment,” said a future Gore advisor who was unaffiliated with the Clinton White House. “I think those [kinds of] events helped” the White House.

In the first half of 1994, the Clinton administration focused on health care and crime, and in these cases, the president himself took the risk of appearing in non-traditional venues. “There was an immense push in 1994 – it was actually before I was working there, but you could go back and see how much media he did to try and get universal healthcare passed and all of those venues,” noted a future Clinton administration official, adding, “There were a lot of shows that you think about now that aren’t around but that were really, really major ratings drivers.” One of those was *Imus in the Morning*, a drive-time radio program that Clinton called into on February 17, 1994. “Remember, at that point Imus was really considered more of a comedy show, so I would say given the influence that Imus had at the time and the ratings he was like a safer version of Howard Stern,” noted the future Clinton administration official. In the focus on crime, Clinton staged an MTV town hall session similar to his 1992 *Choose or Lose*

appearance called *Enough is Enough*, which aired on April 19. That appearance, unlike the successful appearances on *Imus*, *Larry King*, and *Late Night* by Clinton and Gore, would cause more trouble than it was worth due to some off-topic questions. The Clinton administration based the appearance on Jimmy Carter's two-hour CBS special featuring Walter Cronkite in March 1977, in which President Carter took telephone questions from ordinary citizens. Carter did not receive any questions of a personal nature besides a question of how he spent his time away from the Oval Office, and Carter did not personalize any of the questions with one exception: when struggling with an answer on a tax rebate question, Carter told Cronkite in response to the caller, "I might say Walter that if I can't find the answer before we go off the air, I will call Mike personally and give him the answer if I can" (Carter, 1977). Clinton, on the other hand, while promoting his appearance as open-ended, intended to promote a crime bill he was supporting in Congress and emphasized in his opening statement, "No matter what we do with the laws, we have to have a change in behavior and attitude and feeling among young people all across this country, in every community in the country" (Clinton, 1994). For the first forty-five minutes, the questions from young Americans and moderator Tabitha Soren focused on crime and other serious issues, such as the ethnic conflict in the Balkans, Singapore's caning laws, and the Brady handgun bill; in the last segment, however, Soren opened up questioning to any topic, leading to questions about Pearl Jam, Howard Stern, and, most infamously, the kind of underwear the president preferred to wear (Clinton, 1994). The reaction among traditional journalists was virulently negative, similar to a previous generation of journalists' reaction to Richard Nixon's visit to *The Tonight Show*.

The MTV appearance “moved [Clinton] uncomfortably close to the edge of becoming too personal,” which threatened to “undermine his own authority” (Freie, 2011, p. 91-92).

After the MTV event, the Clinton administration pulled back from formats in which there was less control, and events outside of the administration’s control also kept them from entertainment-based venues. One of the important questions debated within the White House was: “How do we reach out to a key demographic? How do we utilize other new media?” said a former Clinton administration advisor, also saying, “There was always a broadening born from the frustration with the traditional media or the mainstream media.” The advisor added:

In my office, there were four TVs; that was it. There was a wet bar in one part of the office because in olden days, the president’s staff would invite in the press after the news cycle for a drink. The question even in my time was the end of the news cycle: was it before *Larry King*? After *Larry King* but before *Nightline*? That’s about as tough as it ever got for us. *Nightline* was the end.

However, this same Clinton advisor admitted that “the whole MTV thing kind of paused” those attempts at outreach and said:

This was new. There wasn’t an example of any of this. Even [with] the kind of softer [outlets] – *Parade* or *People* – those weren’t kind of pop culture questions as much. It was a different genre and different cadence in the questioning, so yeah, I think there was a pause. We wouldn’t want to place him in settings that are inappropriate.

The Clinton administration decided that venues which were appropriate but also reached around the traditional Washington press included local affiliates and softer national print media outlets. “I think there was a broadening of regional media in the Clinton administration,” said a Clinton administration veteran, adding, “The president, vice president, Mrs. Clinton, and cabinet members would do regional interviews to try to not just limit ourselves to those in the press pool of the White House press corps.” Another former Clinton advisor adds:

In one of the first ever ways to draw the nation's attention to global climate change, we invited all of the local weather reporters who do the weather on the local news every night to the White House for a series of briefings and then an opportunity to meet the president, hear from the president, and then do a series of quick interviews. We engaged them and kind of targeted a way in which we might move beyond the more traditional political broadcast press.

Any thoughts of pushing further than that were affected by the somber events of 1995 beginning with the domestic terrorist attack that killed 168 people in Oklahoma City in April. "It was really that incident that gave him an opportunity to reestablish the president's authority in using the bully pulpit and reestablish a connection to the American people," noted a Clinton administration advisor. The aftermath of that attack and the government shutdown in November and December brought a focus and seriousness to governing that made using entertainment-based televised venues unappealing, according to Clinton advisors. By the beginning of 1996, Clinton had become favored to win reelection.

The 1996 Campaign

Interviewees for this study agreed that the major reason the Clinton reelection campaign avoided using entertainment-based outlets explicitly was Clinton's electoral strength. "We had a very strong position in the 1996 campaign," noted a Clinton administration official, explaining, "The economy was doing very well; the dot.com phenomenon had taken over; we were consistently large margins ahead of Bob Dole." The Clinton administration attempted to pursue the niche voter, a key foundation of the postmodern presidency theory, using softer outlets, but these outlets were neither televised nor entertainment-based. A member of the Clinton reelection campaign explained:

Sitting with our targeting people, I remember we had voters divided up into different categories: you know, strong Democrats, strong Republicans, and then

sort of swing voters. There were Swing 1 voters and Swing 2 voters, and Swing 2 voters were the more conservative of them, and we knew from our research that the publication that reached them the most effectively and the most often was *People* magazine, so we had a rule in the campaign and then in the White House that we had to be in *People* magazine once a month in some way. So we'd invite them in for Easter dinner or the Easter egg roll, and then so for the variety of holidays, the variety of things, and there would be a conscious effort, and that was no different than putting then-candidate Clinton on *The Arsenio Hall Show*.

Despite the comparison to *Arsenio*, Clinton administration veterans believed that the focus of a reelection campaign differed from an initial campaign and there were some things a candidate could get away with that a sitting president could not. A veteran of the Clinton reelection effort explained:

When you're running as an incumbent, when Clinton was running in '95, '96, people knew him. There wasn't a sense that we had to go out and introduce him in different ways. If you're introducing yourself or a new concept, or you don't have the advantages of incumbency, you might have to do that. But we didn't have to, and even in 1996, and I think this has changed: there was this sense that doing things like that were not presidential.

"You have a president running for reelection in his own right," stated another Clinton advisor, "and at that time even, putting the president of the United States on a late night show seemed a little bit risky and/or inappropriate." The Clinton approach in 1996 was mostly continued by George W. Bush in 2004, though Bush expanded to softer outlets like *Dr. Phil*, but a president running for reelection did not appear on comedic program until Barack Obama visited *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* in 2012.

One of the earliest beneficiaries of the competition between Jay Leno and David Letterman was Bob Dole, the most prominent Republican leader in Congress. Dole appeared on *The Tonight Show* in June 1993 and *The Late Show* in February 1995 to set the stage for a presidential challenge to Clinton. However, Dole faced an unexpectedly tough primary challenge from Pat Buchanan and multimillionaire businessman Steve Forbes. Dole eventually prevailed in the primary cycle through the use of traditional

campaign tactics, but internal fighting that began during the primaries continued into the general election campaign, as a former Dole advisor recalled:

In the '96 race, there was a pretty big fight that broke out between the “Let Dole be Dole” people and the “Let’s change Dole and make him a neoconservative guy,” and the “Make Dole a neoconservative” crowd won. They tried to recreate him, which I think was completely fraught with peril from the beginning because you can’t remake a guy with thirty-six years of legislative experience.

A junior member of the Dole campaign noted that campaign advisors decided to keep Dole away from televised entertainment-based venues for the most part – an appearance, together with his wife Elizabeth Dole, on *Live with Regis and Kathie Lee* on July 2 proved an exception (Bennet, 1996) – because “He was of a different generation and wasn’t going to be as natural and as comfortable. That kind of setting, instead of serving to help him connect, would serve to make him look old and sort of out of touch.”

After a humiliating electoral defeat, Dole made a cameo on *Saturday Night Live* and visited *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show*, showing a side of himself that much of America was not introduced to during the campaign. “Dole really broke out after the election,” remembered a former Dole advisor, adding, “That’s when he broke out: when he appeared on Leno and he appeared on Letterman, he just brings the house down in both those, and everybody’s saying, ‘Well, why didn’t we get to see that Dole before the election?’” Dole parlayed those well-received media appearances into a popular culture presence that led him to endorse Viagra and appear in a Pepsi advertisement with pop star Britney Spears, but it is questionable whether he could have displayed his persona in 1996 while running for president. “It’s a lot easier to pull off when you’re not the candidate anymore,” noted the junior Dole campaign veteran, adding, “The scrutiny is very, very different.” One footnote to the 1996 campaign: after losing to Dole in the 1996 primaries, Steve Forbes, like Jesse Jackson in 1984, tried to rehabilitate his image by

hosting *Saturday Night Live* on April 13, 1996. Combined with George H. W. Bush's pre-taped cameo during Dana Carvey's hosting gig in 1994, Dole's visit in November 1996, and New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani's hosting appearance in 1997, Forbes' *Saturday Night Live* episode continued the program's increasing respectability among the political class, which would pay off tremendously for the program in 2008.

The Last Days

During its second term, the Clinton administration continued its embrace of softer, persona-based news outlets but did not use the president in entertainment-based venues. One of the reasons for this avoidance of entertainment-based outlets was the constant shroud of scandal that surrounded Bill and Hillary Clinton. While the most famous example of impropriety, Bill Clinton's conduct with Monica Lewinsky, led to the president's impeachment by the House of Representatives in December 1998, lesser controversies reaching as far back as 1993 also kept the Clinton administration on the defensive at key moments. A Democratic strategist unaffiliated with the Clinton administration contended that any policy initiatives the Clinton administration might wish to promote in entertainment-based venues would have become a secondary focus due to the nature of the programs:

Travelgate; Filegate; Whitewater – In my view, the allegations were not something that had worth. They weren't scandals at all; they were just sort of created by his opponents and to some extent by the press. But if he went on one of these shows, what were they going to talk about? Then you have the Monica thing which is a big part of that whole second term and there's no way you could go on Leno and not have Leno talk about it.

Specifically regarding the Lewinsky scandal, I asked a number of these political operatives if Clinton could have used *Oprah* as a confessional platform to soften the blow of things, but all disagreed. "I don't remember the debate well enough, but I don't think

there was a strong movement behind doing a confessional via *Oprah* or via *60 Minutes*,” said a former Clinton administration official, adding, “He went and gave a speech at the National Prayer Breakfast, which for him was very appropriate. It struck an authentic chord of confessing in that context.” The former Democratic strategist not affiliated with the Clinton administration agreed that *Oprah* would have been inappropriate:

I don’t think you could’ve done that because it was too serious. I think when you confess something of that kind after you’ve denied for the better part of more than a year you need to do it in a very straightforward way speaking directly to the American people. I don’t think you can appear in a context that looks light or soft. I think you’ve just got to look into that camera and tell people, “Yeah, it happened and it shouldn’t have happened and I apologize.”

A Clinton administration official agreed that a televised entertainment-based program would not be an appropriate venue for a sitting president, but for a mere presidential candidate, things might be different:

Eight years earlier, when the Clinton campaign was on the ropes, they did sit down with *60 Minutes*. If, for some reason, Bill Clinton was running for president in 2000 and hadn’t been president, my guess is it wouldn’t have been *60 Minutes* that he would’ve done that interview with; at that point, he would’ve probably done it with *Oprah*.

The Clinton administration used traditional media outlets such as the Sunday morning news shows to effectively defend themselves, but doing so in entertainment-based venues would have been considered unwise and inappropriate according to interviewees for this project.

Near the end of its second term, the Clinton White House did acknowledge a changing media environment in which the speed of connection to the internet, fully commercialized in 1995, grew and Comedy Central’s new talk show, *The Daily Show*, shifted from the largely pop culture focus under Craig Kilborn’s tenure as host to a more

political focus under Jon Stewart. On the latter front, a former Clinton administration official remembered:

In the fall of 2000 Stephen Colbert came down when he was still a correspondent and pretended he was a White House reporter for the day. He didn't do anything with the president but he came to the briefing room and he asked the press secretary a question and he acted like he was from a real news show.

However, multiple veterans of the Clinton administration pointed to a forgotten funny video produced for Clinton's last White House correspondents' dinner in 2000 as, in retrospect, a historically significant entertainment event that showed the burgeoning power of the internet. Preparing for the dinner, the White House press office decided against having the president just tell jokes as usual and instead worked with Hollywood producers to also create a satirical video called "The Last Days." With Al Gore running for president and Hillary Clinton running for senate in New York, the premise of the video involved Bill Clinton engaging in mundane and pathetic tasks in a lonely White House. A former Clinton administration official remembered how the video was conceived:

The guys who did *The West Wing* had this idea. They were coming to the correspondents' dinner for the first time and they wanted to promote their show. They got in touch with the head of the correspondents' association and said, "We've got this idea. Can we get the White House press secretary to come to our set, and we'll do this funny little short video?"

When the video looked to be the high point of the evening, the Clinton press office collectively realized, "We've got to do something, because we can't have this be funnier than the president," so they conceived of a video starring Clinton that would make sure that the president received the most laughs, according to a person involved in the creation of the video:

The first idea was during the time when *The Sopranos* was in its first or second season: "You know, the First Lady's off running for the senate, the president's

alone by himself and he should talk to a psychiatrist,” and it was Lorraine Bracco. We got down the road with them at one point; they agreed to do it, everyone was excited, and, then we realized, “We can’t do this!”

In the course of deliberations over what would be hilarious but also appropriate, according to the advisor, the Clinton team brought the concept down to its core essence: “He’s by himself and what do you do?” and the consensus became: “It’s not *The Sopranos*; it’s *Home Alone*.” The *Home Alone* idea had actually been conceived four years earlier and initially rejected but received renewed consideration after a *New York Times* editorial had mentioned Clinton’s “*Home Alone White House*” (Katz, 2003, p. 355). With a few tweaks from the initial concept, the video took shape, according to another Clinton advisor: “Hillary had a role in it,” Gore had a role, “and then they had the president kind of washing the car and doing the laundry; it was just a very funny, self-deprecating way of saying that he was a lame duck.”

The “Last Days” video was an enormous success in the context of the correspondents’ dinner, but due to changes in technology, the video ventured far beyond its intended target. “It was hugely effective in a very small scale,” noted a former Clinton administration official, “which was: all we wanted to do was make three thousand people laugh.” However, “It took on a life of its own in ways that you couldn’t anticipate,” noted a Clinton administration speechwriter, adding, “For three days after the White House correspondents’ dinner it was on CNN every twenty minutes. It was up on a site called AdCritic.com, I remember. Now it would’ve been everywhere.” Despite the fact that it was a comedy video for an expressly comedic setting, the video’s startling popularity outside of the initial venue in which it was presented led to a debate similar to the debates that followed Nixon’s appearance on *The Tonight Show* and Clinton’s *Enough is Enough* MTV special. As a former Clinton administration official recalled:

It launched a debate over whether, was it demeaning? One of the five smartest people in Washington is a columnist named E. J. Dionne, and he's been one of the five smartest people for at least three decades – he wrote a column about how we demeaned the president. You know, I still argue with him, and when we have that argument, I say, “You might be right, but you've got to move with the times.” It'd be like saying that when John Kennedy used television in 1960, it was demeaning the process by having moving pictures instead of radio. It's like, okay? If we just took a little bit out of the presidency, so be it; guilty. But it was hugely effective.

The interviewees for this project noted a similarity between “The Last Days” video and Barack Obama's appearance on *Between Two Ferns*: despite *Ferns* being done for more explicitly political purposes – to promote Healthcare.gov – President Obama's use of comedy in internet settings today raises the same questions about presidential decorum that President Clinton's “Last Days” video did. The reach and scope of the Clinton video in a pre-YouTube era displayed the power of the internet, and both the Bush and Obama administrations would attempt to use the internet to entertain as well as inform citizens through the use of seemingly silly video content.

Conclusion

In light of all of this, the Clinton era, like the Reagan era, partially addresses RQ1a, RQ1b, RQ1c, RQ2a, RQ2b, referring to the major factors that led to presidential campaigning in entertainment-based venues, the role of individual personality on the decision-making process, and the differences between having a sitting president make these appearances and other figures, such as mere presidential candidates or vice presidents. In addition, the Clinton era also introduces a partial answer for RQ5, which refers to the concept of the *dignity of the presidency* and *respect for the office*. Interviews with key figures present during the 1990s reveal that the most important factor in presidential level communication strategy, and the best answer to RQ1a, was the information environment, and the significant changes in that environment that manifested

by 1992 hurt George H. W. Bush and aided Bill Clinton. The 1992 campaign featured a president running for reelection, which brought the usual advantages of incumbency to a race, such as guaranteed media coverage and the ability to make news through executive action. Bush, of course, was hurt by a sluggish economy and an attempt to win a fourth consecutive term for one party during a period in which two parties vibrantly contested presidential elections, a feat accomplished only by the Republicans of the post-Civil War era – Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses Grant, Rutherford Hayes, and James Garfield won six consecutive elections between 1860 and 1880 – and by the Democrats of the Great Depression era – Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman won five consecutive elections between 1932 and 1948. However, Bush’s natural command of the media environment was lessened by the sheer number of television options available to consumers, and both Bill Clinton and Ross Perot aggressively used entertainment-based venues, or quasi-entertainment-based venues like *Larry King Live*, to neutralize that advantage.

Nevertheless, desperation and individual personality played major roles in the campaigns of Perot and Clinton. Perot used *Larry King Live* to amplify coverage of his candidacy that would suffer without the structural advantages of a major party backing his run. Clinton, on the other hand, used entertainment-based venues to amplify the positive elements of his personality and allow him to show strength and vulnerability when necessary. Clinton’s rebuke of the titular host of *Donahue* over questions about his personal character endeared him to the *Donahue* audience, while *The Arsenio Hall Show* and *Choose or Lose* allowed Clinton to speak about policy on a general level and engage with niche voters while ignoring the seedier sides of his history. In short, Clinton’s gregarious personality played a major role in the campaign using entertainment-based

venues. Yet the timing of his general election appearances also suggests a level of desperation: Clinton visited *Arsenio* and MTV in June, not long after he had secured the Democratic Party's nomination but well after Bush had secured the Republican Party's nomination and begun the process of bringing the party together; before these ventures into the entertainment world Clinton was in a clear third place in some major polling (New York Times, 1992b). Clinton visited *Donahue* with Al Gore in October, after Perot had reentered the race and made a positive-looking outcome in November less assured. Clinton's and Perot's appearances clearly reflected the benefits of appearing in these venues, partially answering RQ2a.

Individual personality also clearly played a role in Bush's reticence to engage with entertainment-based venues until the very end of the campaign, and even then, the least traditional television program Bush visited was *Larry King Live*. Bush's decision to disappear from the political spotlight after his presidency, in contrast to Jimmy Carter's and Richard Nixon's active courting of the spotlight in their post-presidencies, reveals much about his character and explains how much his personality shaped his decisions on what venues were appropriate to engage with during his presidency and what he considered unseemly. However, Bush was also hampered by his understanding of the presidential role, partially answering RQ5; for him, the presidency was too dignified a position to sully by engaging with less serious and less established outlets. Notably, the Clinton administration that replaced Bush's attempted to engage with entertainment-based venues during its first two years, but the gravity of external events, such as the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the 1995 government shutdown, and the Whitewater and Monica Lewinsky scandals, played a key role in keeping President Clinton mostly out of

entertainment-based venues for the rest of his presidency. The backlash to Clinton's too revealing answer on underwear preferences on MTV's *Enough is Enough* also undoubtedly made the administration pause in using entertainment-based outlets, despite the risky but successful uses of Vice President Gore in 1993 on *Late Night with David Letterman* and *Larry King Live* – these two appearances help partially answer RQ2b. The Clinton administration still attempted to have the president engage with citizens in ways beyond the traditional filter of journalism, but nationally-available entertainment-based activities largely ceased between mid-1994, after the MTV underwear fiasco, and mid-2000, when Clinton hilariously lampooned his status as a lame duck in a White House correspondents' dinner video that both achieved a pop culture status beyond that dinner and also raised questions similar to RQ5. Notably, Clinton did not utilize nationally televised entertainment-based venues during his reelection campaign, partially due to his strong position throughout the race and partially due to the administration's respect for the dignity of the presidency.

The Clinton era was also clearly affected by economic competition and the influence of individual personality in television, reflecting RQ1c. Johnny Carson accepted Clinton as a guest in 1988 not as a political figure but as a newsworthy figure – both as a national punch line and as a musically talented politician. MTV executives felt it necessary to become more respected in the wider media environment, compelling them to become more politically involved in 1992. Jay Leno's individual personality, which I will discuss in the next chapter, was not fully apparent in his first month on *The Tonight Show*, and his producers rejected a pitch from the Clinton campaign to appear, leading to *The Arsenio Hall Show*'s most enduring popular culture memory. David Letterman's

individual personality, which I will also discuss in the next chapter, helped structure the Gore appearance to include a bizarre and funny comedic bit, although Letterman's booking of Gore had more to do with his competition against Leno for newsworthy guests than with an interest in politics, something that had not been evident during his tenure on NBC's *Late Night* – which may have possibly been affected by Carson's ownership of the NBC program.

In short, the media environment, both in terms of technological changes and economic competition, played the primary role in driving decision-making in this regard, but individual personality and role theory also partially explain what occurred during the Clinton era. New developments may require innovative strategies for political success, but it is within the purview of each candidate and campaign to decide whether innovative engagement would be in their best interests. The one individual personality that did not truly influence factors was Bob Dole in 1996. Dole listened to campaign advisors and did not reveal the more endearing aspects of his personality on a large scale until after the election had been decided. While the next chapter will examine the 2000s and focus mainly on how the second Bush administration navigated through a constantly changing media environment, this chapter offers a glimpse of an alternative reality in one respect. The Al Gore who appeared on *The Late Show* and *Larry King Live* displayed a sense of humor and a comfortable aura. However, the Gore campaign in 2000 shared a common theme with the Dole campaign of 1996: a struggle over direction and message that led to the candidate's wit only truly being showcased once the campaign had failed and the pressure was off. Dole's defeat was a foregone conclusion, but Gore suffered a similar fate in a much more winnable election.

CHAPTER 7

THE BUSH YEARS

“I’m thrilled to be on Deal or No Deal with you tonight. Come to think of it, I’m thrilled to be anywhere with high ratings these days.” – George W. Bush, April 23, 2008

The 1980s and 1990s were times in which technological change allowed savvy candidates to take advantage of new media opportunities, but no time in American history has displayed media change as rapidly as the decade in which George W. Bush became a national political figure. For a thought exercise, using two dates as brackets – Bush’s announcement of a presidential run on June 12, 1999, and Barack Obama’s presidential inauguration on January 20, 2009 – here is a list of media platforms that did not exist as of the first date but had become vital parts of the American daily experience by the latter:

The 3G smartphone; the iPod; iTunes; Facebook; Twitter; YouTube; Wikipedia; the Amazon Kindle; high definition television broadcasting; LCD and LED flatscreen televisions; podcasts

“When I first went to the White House, you had a little tiny pager and there’d be a code on it or a phone number; no message,” recalled a senior Bush administration official, adding, “George W. Bush lived through probably 8 transitions of technology.” The sheer amount of technological change during the Bush era ensured that each election of the 21st century, beginning with the 2000 election, brought new tactics and new strategies that would become obsolete by the next election. From a technological perspective, the elections of 1976, 1980, 1984, and 1988 were similar, even if the candidates and external factors such as the health of the economy were different. The amount of alteration in the media environment between the 1988 campaign and the 1992 campaign was significant,

but nothing equaled the amount of change in the media environment between each 21st century election.

In the interviews I conducted for this study, the veterans of the second Bush administration and major Democratic campaigns of 2000 and 2004 all believed that technological change had made it necessary to appeal to a wide range of voters in a variety of venues, including in televised entertainment-based venues. Advances in internet technology played a huge role in the 2004 Democratic primaries and a smaller role in the Bush administration, but everyone I interviewed stressed the fragmentation of the media environment driven by the internet as a major factor behind the decision-making of various campaigns. However, individual personality played a major role in the Bush administration's avoidance of entertainment-based venues – in particular, George W. Bush shared his father's reverence for the office but was also deeply affected by the September 11 attacks of 2001 and his decisions to go to invade Afghanistan and Iraq. Bush largely avoided entertainment-based venues during his presidency, even during his reelection campaign in 2004, due to a combination of external factors, campaign decisions, and his personal feelings.

This chapter begins with the 2000 campaign, the first in which presidential candidates of both parties enthusiastically embraced entertainment-based venues, before examining 2004, addressing significant changes that occurred during the Democratic primary cycle and explaining why that general election, rather than feature further innovation, resembled the 1996 general election cycle in terms of the incumbent's tactics despite featuring wildly different external variables such as presidential approval ratings, the health of the economy, and a changed media environment.

The 2000 Campaign

At the beginning of the 2000 campaign cycle, Al Gore looked to use the entertainment-based venue as a key outlet. As mentioned earlier, several members of the Clinton administration I interviewed for this project specifically brought up *Larry King Live* as an important quasi-entertainment-based venue. After the Clinton administration scored one of its first major successes in the realm of public opinion when Vice President Gore debated Ross Perot on the issue of NAFTA on *Larry King Live* in 1993, the Gore team maintained a close relationship with the producers of the program and planned to use the program to start Gore's presidential run in a significant way. In February 1999, Gore agreed to guest host *Larry King Live* in King's absence with Oprah Winfrey as his guest, but King was forced to appear, and Winfrey withdrew, after the Republican National Committee objected to the idea that the episode would be seen as "a contribution of free air time to the 'Gore for President' campaign" and demanded that "the same opportunity be offered to the GOP candidates and to Democratic contender Bill Bradley" (Kurtz, 1999). Gore was forced to appear as a guest on that episode of the program and did so again numerous times during the campaign cycle, as did Bill Bradley. *Larry King Live* maintained a nonpartisan aura by cancelling the Gore hosting event, which gave it enough respectability to earn the right to host an unofficial Republican debate featuring George W. Bush, John McCain, and Alan Keyes in February 2000.

Besides Gore's *Larry King Live* incident, the first presidential candidate to use entertainment-based venues to his advantage in the 2000 campaign was Gore's predecessor as vice president, Dan Quayle. By the late summer of 1999, George W. Bush had established himself as the frontrunner for the Republican nomination after officially

announcing his run in June. Unofficially, there was a different story, according to a senior Quayle advisor:

For the longest time, George W. hinted that he might run for president but he didn't say that he would, but he did something wonderfully brilliant: the whole time he was doing that, he tied up all the funding via his dad, so the Bush family tied up the funding.

Because of that, other Republican candidates faced a financial deficit and needed to take desperate measures to compete with the Bush organizational juggernaut, and the senior Quayle advisor remembered how the campaign decided to take a chance:

People kind of knew who Dan was but he had this "potatoe" incident and he had some flaws in his background that weren't his fault but it was a bad deal. So I'm desperate trying to find, "What can we do to get attention?" and all of a sudden I think, "Well gosh, millions of people watch Jay Leno every night. Millions of people watch David Letterman. I wonder if they would be interested in political candidate Dan Quayle," and we called and they were very interested, so we went through the process. And it's totally different in the days of Jay Leno and David Letterman on what you do, but in both cases he went through the process and he appeared on both and it was a huge success because we got millions and millions and millions of eyeballs for this much money, so that's what it was for.

After the success of Quayle's visits to both shows, particularly *The Tonight Show* in August (Quayle later appeared on *The Late Show* in October), each major campaign decided that the exposure a candidate could receive in a friendly setting would only benefit the campaign. The Gore campaign had already planned to do so but had the fiscal advantages of a frontrunner and did not need to appear until later in the cycle. "We naturally assumed that we would go on and were happy to go on," remembered a key strategist in the Gore campaign, which was more proactive in this regard than a Bush campaign that eventually placed its candidate on each program only after the Bradley and McCain campaigns had already done so (Moore, 2000). A news article from early February 2000 noted that while Gore was scheduled for an interview with Leno later that week, "Bush campaign spokesman Ari Fleischer would only say it's 'up in the air'

whether Bush [would] join the late-night comedy fray” (Brownfield, 2000). At some times, the candidate would appear for just a cameo: Bush, for example, did an extended interview with Letterman in October 2000 but briefly appeared in March to read a Top Ten list.

Bush would join the fray partially because his opponents were doing so (Quayle and McCain in the primary and then Gore in the general) but also because it was important for the campaign to differentiate him from previous Republican nominees, including his father. A former Bush administration official noted:

During the Clinton years, I think there was a lot of resentment at a sense that Republicans weren't cool. Republicans were conservative and stodgy and old and you couldn't be a Republican and be cool. This was a different kind of campaign. It could be cool to be a Republican and it could be cool to support Governor Bush.

The 2000 Republican convention, in particular, featured more significant celebrities than any Republican convention since the Reagan years, including Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Chuck Norris, and others; notably, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson sat next to George H. W. Bush and Barbara Bush in their private suite during a key moment of the convention. “We all kind of joke about Lee Greenwood [and how] every four years Republicans roll out Lee Greenwood to sing ‘God Bless the USA,’” said a senior strategist for the Bush reelection campaign in 2004, adding, “It’s a beautiful song and he’s a wonderful artist but at some point you would hope to have more and different faces, newer faces.” The embrace of the entertainment-based talk show circuit was another way to show that Bush was a different kind of Republican who could be attractive to voters that had previously shunned Republican candidates; while the 1988 campaign of George H. W. Bush reached out to popular country music singers of the moment to give him celebrity credibility at the Republican National Convention, the

2000 campaign of George W. Bush explicitly embraced entertainment more than any previous Republican candidate had.

Tonight, Late Night

One of the major factors behind the embrace of the entertainment-based venue by presidential candidates in the 2000 cycle was the willingness of the programs to book the candidates. Particularly in late night, the competition between *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show* ensured that each program would try to outdo the other in terms of booking high profile guests at a time in which ambitious politicians were increasingly looking to softer venues to emphasize their personal characteristics. However, the individual personality of each host also played a key role in determining how much political content appeared on each program.

Jay Leno, in taking over from Johnny Carson, continued Carson's success but reshaped *The Tonight Show's* structure and booking due to his enjoyment of the absurdity of politics. "Jay started out as a guy who loved politics," said a veteran of *The Tonight Show*, adding, "Maybe it's from coming from New England, but he loved the give and take; he loved the characters; and he followed it." Because of Leno's interest in politics and also because of Leno's different background from Carson – Leno from the beginning worked in nightclubs as a standup comedian while Carson, like Letterman decades later, began his comedy career writing and performing on radio and television programs – Leno expanded *The Tonight Show* monologue, according to the *Tonight Show* veteran: "Johnny's monologue was twelve to fifteen to seventeen jokes, where Jay's would be anywhere from twenty-five to thirty on all topics, and that just leads you to do more on politics." From the beginning of his *Tonight Show* tenure, Leno maintained a more active

interest in politics than his predecessor. As mentioned in a previous chapter, however, Leno's *Tonight Show* turned down an opportunity to host Bill Clinton in the first few weeks of the program. Another *Tonight Show* veteran I did not interview for this project corroborated that fact in an article he wrote for *USA Today* and noted exactly how Leno found his political footing:

At the time, we didn't understand the opportunity we had missed. Our only late-night role model was Carson, who had only a handful of politicians as guests. Our grand experiment began with Jimmy Carter, whose candor was a change from Hollywood guests who were often little more than self-promoters. [...] Carter turned out to be a big draw, so we forged ahead. (Berg, 2014)

After Carter, the show booked senators such as Bob Dole and Paul Simon in 1993 and 1994 and became more politically oriented, and Dole's post-presidential campaign appearance in November 1996 made the show and other politicians realize how beneficial each could be for each other. By 1999 and 2000, *The Tonight Show* would host numerous presidential candidates, reflecting Leno's interest in politics and allowing politicians to show a sense of humor.

David Letterman, though the first late night talk show host to welcome a sitting vice president since the early 1970s when Al Gore visited in 1993, did not take to politics as quickly as Leno. His program's use of political figures occurred partially due to the competition with Leno and partially because his own interest in politics grew gradually over time. The NBC *Late Night* program hosted by Letterman almost never had politicians visit the program; at CBS, many more political figures appeared on the program between 2000-2006 than between 1993-1999, which reflected not only the eagerness of political figures to use the program for their purposes but also Letterman's growing interest in politics. "He became interested not only in politics but in climate change and a lot of different avenues and aspects, and we booked accordingly,"

remembered a producer of *The Late Show*, adding, “A lot of times he would have the idea first, like, ‘You know who we should have on is Senator So-and-so;’ as we saw his interests grow, we kind of attempted to tailor the bookings towards him.” Like Carson, Letterman’s monologues were relatively short compared to Leno’s, but near the end of his tenure on CBS, almost every monologue contained jokes about politicians. On NBC and early in his CBS tenure, Letterman could go entire shows without mentioning politics, just like Carson.

One of the key things *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show* changed to make their shows more valuable for presidential contenders to visit in 2000 was clearing their slate of other guests, with the exception of a musical performance at the end of the program. Most premier late night talk show guests are one of a set of three, giving the guest two eight to ten minute segments to talk and promote their product; the second guest would get a single eight to ten minute segment after that; and finally, the musical performance would occur at the end of the program. When Bush and Gore appeared on these programs as their parties’ respective nominees in 2000, they received extra time due to being the only non-musical guests – three separate eight to ten minute segments. “It was one of the few places you could go as a politician or a newsmaker and have an extended conversation that wasn’t a forty-five-second cable news hit or a six minutes or four minutes,” said a *Late Show* producer, adding, “Some nights we would do twenty-five minutes with people, and outside of Charlie Rose, off the top of my head, there’s not many places you can do that anymore, especially in broadcast.” The interviews with Bush and Gore on both programs were a mixture of light and serious; Letterman’s discussion with Bush about the governor’s view of the death penalty was particularly revealing, as

Letterman effortlessly segued from a lighthearted recap of the presidential debates into a discussion of a policy preference on the surface that actually focused on the character of the individual. “That’s what always appealed to me about those interviews: they were wide-ranging,” said the *Late Show* producer, adding:

You would carve out these sections – you could do a whole section on foreign policy; you could do a whole section on race relations. You could do a whole section, and so you had this array of topics, and then some of them were heavy topics and some of them were light topics, and we could kind of roll up our sleeves and get in and out of those things, which is terrific instead of just focusing on one thing.

The *Late Show* and *Tonight Show* conversations were more serious than those on other softer television outlets like *Live with Regis and Kathie Lee* and *Oprah*, which both Bush and Gore also visited during the campaign.

Despite the extended length and variety of the conversations, both *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show* prided themselves on their capacity to entertain, and both Bush and Gore participated in bits. While each program offered suggestions to candidates that the show’s writing staffs engineered, the shows did not require candidates to accept these suggestions unless they felt that the candidate was comfortable performing the comedy bit. Nonetheless, the difference between the two programs in this area is instructive. *The Late Show* offered an easy format in which a candidate could walk on and deliver a Top Ten list with or without having to sit down to do an interview. *The Tonight Show*, without a signature collaborative bit like the Top Ten (that program’s signature bits, “Headlines” and “Jaywalking,” involved contributions from ordinary citizens), proved more flexible. “We would do cold openings with politicians; we would have them come on in different ways,” remembers a veteran of *The Tonight Show*, adding, “We might have them do something or show, let’s say, ‘Campaign Slogans I’d Wished I’d Used.’” However, the

negotiation process between campaigns and these programs could get tense depending on the personality of the politician and how laid back or serious the candidate felt about the presidential campaigning process. A senior advisor to Dan Quayle's campaign recalled the preparation for the candidate's appearance on *The Tonight Show*:

It was a big deal because who was Dan Quayle? Dan Quayle was the guy that Jay Leno had personally belittled for days and days and months and years on end over the misspelling of "potatoe" and every other subject you can come up with. We were dealing with them on the phone – of course it tapes down there in Burbank – the day of the show; we are getting scripts sent over on the fax machine with a lot of pretty corny jokes and "potatoe" jokes and things like that and we would simply say, "No." I'm sure they were pulling their hair out because, maybe more than most of those people we're talking about, Dan Quayle has an incredible respect for the office and an incredible respect for the political process, so to go on and have stupid jokes? He wasn't going to do that, and they're already stuck with him; they've already promoted he's on that day, so I knew all the cards were in our deck. We could say anything we wanted, but they fought and we fought and we came up a nice compromise: They sometimes have cold opens on that show before the titles comes up and everything, so there's an ad and then you see a camera going down the hall back with the various greenrooms at the Tonight Show and here's Jay Leno walking along in his blue denim shirt and blue jeans – he's not ready for the show yet – and he's going, "We've got Dan Quayle tonight. Oh God, I've made so many jokes about him and I don't know what to do; I hope he has a good attitude." And he gets to the door and Dan Quayle's name was spelled wrong like "potatoe" was spelled wrong. And that was witty and Dan loved that; it was a good joke, so we were happy to do that, but we cut, I'd say, ninety percent of their suggestions.

In many of these candidate appearances, the campaigns have significant power over what airs and what is rejected because they realize that they are the draw and that the programs book advertising well in advance. This fact was made clear in interviews for this project involving veterans of campaigns covered in this chapter as well as both Clinton campaigns (Bill and Hillary) and the Obama campaign.

Overall, while many Republican campaigns have ended up in practice preferring *The Tonight Show* to *The Late Show*, the interviewees I spoke to for this project preferred

The Late Show to *The Tonight Show* because of the former's more unpredictable nature.

A senior advisor to Al Gore compared the two from his own experience:

The Letterman show, there was not a lot of interaction with the host or with the team at Letterman beforehand. He kind of showed up and kind of went in a little cold with a general understanding of the time, whether one segment or two, were there going to be other guests out before or after, what was the general topic areas to be discussed, but not a ton of prep and not much interaction. I just think that had more to do with Letterman's own pre-show ritual. Leno was the opposite; he'd come to the green room and have a pretty thorough conversation and talk about how he wanted to conduct the interview and have a little banter. Sometimes they'd tape a little skit or something beforehand that would be used in the show; a lot of interaction with the writers and others beforehand to sort of suss out material. I would say it was a little bit of a looser environment.

A Republican operative concurred with that assessment based on his experiences with the two programs:

There's nothing scripted on Letterman. There's no such thing as a script. You kind of talk with the producer about what maybe Dave might want to talk about and they ask you what you'd like to talk about so Dave doesn't come out there cold – if everything's going really boring, he probably has some questions that his writers have written to keep the conversation going. That's what that card is on his desk. With Leno every word was scripted.

A producer on *The Late Show* provided a deeper insight into Letterman's interview process:

For the most part he didn't talk to guests beforehand. Occasionally he would just pop in and say hello, and that was really like, "Oh, maybe we'll get an extended stop-down break," because they were setting something up and the guests were waiting in the green room, but it wasn't like a sit down beforehand in the green room. As far as the prep went: essentially our research department would put together this massive packet on that guest that I would get a couple of days beforehand and I would go through it and kind of boil it down and figure out, "Alright, let me sketch out the areas that we're going to discuss with this politician." Sometimes I would get a politician on the phone for a pre-interview; most of the time I wouldn't. Sometimes it could be somebody on their staff; if I talked to them, I'd say, "Look, these are some of the areas that we're thinking of." And then, depending on Dave's interests, I would sit down the day before or the day of and I would type out eight or ten pages of notes and go through them and we'd hash it out. He did his own homework, too, because there'd be a lot of times where we'd have this fascinating chunk of the conversation and people would

look at me and go, “It’s great that you got that section on so-and-so in there,” but that’s all him. I didn’t come up with it; that’s his own homework.

“Jay’s a nice guy and he didn’t want to offend,” recalled a Republican operative, adding, “You’d go to Letterman and you’d roll the dice, but to me, Letterman was the better show because of it. It was fresher; you could tell it wasn’t scripted.” However, because of Letterman’s increasing shift towards a specific partisan perspective and *The Tonight Show*’s success in the Nielsen ratings and partially because things were more pre-planned, many Republican campaigns felt more comfortable utilizing *The Tonight Show* in the 2000s. A veteran of *The Tonight Show* argued that the key to the program’s success was that:

Republicans and Democrats got the sense that Jay never had an agenda. The agenda was comedy. Obviously he would ask pretty insightful questions and that’s why we had people on because they liked to be challenged a little bit, but if you go on Bill Maher, you know what Bill’s politics are. If you go on Jon Stewart, you know what Jon’s politics are. And that’s not bad that it’s a thing you know, but if you went on Leno, you were more likely to say that he’s not coming in with an agenda to “make a point” on his own; he’s coming for entertainment.

It is notable that while the Romney campaign did not send either Mitt Romney or Paul Ryan to appear in nationally televised entertainment-based outlets during the fall of 2012, Ann Romney made a solo appearance on *The Tonight Show* on September 25, 2012; she did not make a similar appearance on *The Late Show*. In his post-presidency, George W. Bush returned to the public sphere to promote two books he had written; to do so, Bush scheduled two appearances on *The Tonight Show* and none of *The Late Show*. In his actual presidency, Bush did not appear on either.

The Bush Presidency

After a closely contested election, George W. Bush ascended to the presidency in January 2001 and largely avoided entertainment-based forums during his two terms.

However, the Bush years brought one innovation to the presidency and reestablished as tradition another aspect of politics that had started during the Reagan presidency but did not continue with his successors. The innovation is the use of cabinet officials as surrogates in these formats; the rekindling is the use of the president's spouse as a surrogate on her own, without her husband by her side, in these formats. In September 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell visited *The Late Show* as a guest, and the previous year, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made a cameo appearance with Letterman's mother in a segment promoting the 2002 Winter Olympics in Utah. These visits marked the first time that active high profile cabinet officials visited an entertainment-based venue, and one person I interviewed noted that Bush's background in business, earning an MBA at Harvard, played a role in the delegation. "You can't have just one person carry the weight of driving whatever it is you're trying to drive in an information environment," said a veteran of the Department of Defense at the time. During the 2004 campaign, part of sharing the load included using First Lady Laura Bush in significant entertainment-based outlets, visiting *Live with Regis and Kelly* and *The Tonight Show* on her own during the crucial last month. During the Clinton administration, Hillary Clinton would make solo appearances on a number of television programs, but Laura Bush expanded upon that model to include entertainment-based venues, even if it was not her desire to do so. A former Bush administration official noted:

Mrs. Bush would rather never be in front of a camera. She's not at all interested in it, but she was very involved with certain causes and understood very well that her voice could be very important in trying to advance those causes: things like the work she did on literacy; Burma; and education of women and girls, education and health. She was very much involved in that and so she understood rationally that getting attention and communicating and getting on TV to talk about these things, that if that was the only way that you could get a morning show to talk

about Burma and Aung San Suu Kyi or women's health issues then she would go do it.

Indeed, in her visit to *The Tonight Show*, Mrs. Bush amusingly recalled a broken “prenuptial agreement” with her husband: “Back in 1977 when we were married, he was thinking about running for Congress [...] and so I said, ‘You’ll have to promise me I’ll never have to give a political speech’” (Office of the First Lady, 2004). Still, Laura Bush’s occasional use of entertainment-based venues, reestablishing an innovation of Nancy Reagan, helped turn the practice into a tradition that would be continued by Teresa Heinz Kerry, Michelle Obama, Jill Biden, and Ann Romney.

The Bush administration did not place the president in nationally televised entertainment-based venues during its first few months partially due to the president’s own personality and partially because the television environment of 2001 had not changed significantly since the early 1990s. Despite his comfortable use of these venues during the 2000 campaign, there were hints even then that Bush would not go as far as his predecessor did in the two MTV town hall meetings in sharing too much, as a member of a regional branch of the Bush campaign recalled:

I can remember him taking a series of questions, sort of a rapid-fire list of questions from a morning radio DJ in Columbia, South Carolina, over the phone, and he chose to pass on a lot of the questions. He would just say, “Pass,” when they asked about, let’s just say “wacky” kinds of questions. This is a man who then went on *Oprah* and went on late night shows and understood that there are a lot of different ways to reach the American voter and that Republicans needed to be of the moment without necessarily giving in to the full agenda of the entertainment-driven frivolous pop culture.

Another Bush administration official noted:

He is a very gregarious person and he likes to have fun. He’s also a very private person. He’s never been someone who’s really loved publicity. You see that now: you don’t see him out trying to get attention on things. He’s been very limited in anything he’s done in the public space in the post-presidency, and that’s his

natural thing. He could be on TV every two weeks if he wanted to; he just has no interest in it.

Each member of the Bush administration that I spoke to for this project noted his respect for the office and noted the similarity to his father's view of the dignity of the presidency.

"It's not about him at all; it's about the office," said a Bush administration official, adding:

I remember being with him in Alabama in 2006 or 2007 and there were tons of people lining the streets as the motorcade went by and I commented. I said, "These people love you here," and he said, "These people are all here because the American president is coming down the street, not because I'm coming down the street."

"Anything that diminished the office of the presidency I don't think he would do," noted a senior strategist on the Bush 2004 reelection campaign. Even beyond Bush's own personality, there are a number of logical reasons why the Bush administration did not utilize entertainment-based venues during its first few months. The contested 2000 election left the country divided, even though Bush claimed that "his election was a mandate" to govern as he thought appropriate (Dunham, 2001). With that proposed mandate, Bush spent domestic political capital on a tax cut bill and on his education reform proposal, "No Child Left Behind." The details of tax policy are not the type of political issue that translates well to softer venues that typically attract younger demographics. "[Even though] Leno's audience, I think, skewed a bit older, there are still a lot of young people" watching, said a veteran Democratic strategist. For its education initiatives, which might have been worth utilizing a *Tonight Show* or *Oprah* to help promote, the Bush administration did not think outside of the box and instead followed the examples of the Reagan and Clinton administrations by having the president give speeches or conduct special events at elementary and junior high schools. Most famously,

Bush was participating in one of these promotional vehicles at an elementary school in Florida on the morning of September 11, 2001 when he first received word of the al Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center in New York

Two other factors played a role in the administration's initial decision to keep Bush off of these shows. First, there was a perceived difference in treatment between Republicans and Democrats in popular media, as one Bush administration official contended:

President Clinton did break down some of the barriers a little bit, right, in the sense that he made it easier for presidents to be able to go on shows like that. It wasn't very remarkable or weird now because a president had already done a number of those. It was another step for, in particular, a Republican president to do those shows.

Another Bush administration official noted the same concern, although this was later in the administration during the height of the occupation of Iraq when public opinion of the war had soured:

I think the real issue was just because of the unpopularity of the war and was he going to be able to, on an entertainment program with a host that was openly antagonistic against him and insulting and those kinds of things, would you ever imagine us [having] a reasonable, civil conversation in which he got a fair shot and it didn't fall in that category of not being a worthwhile opportunity because it wasn't going to be a fair shot?

By the time the administration had gone into Iraq, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *Real Time with Bill Maher* had established themselves as influential comedic talk shows with a specific political perspective hostile to the Bush administration. In 2001, however, the major nationally televised entertainment-based venues were *The Tonight Show*, *The Late Show*, *Live with Regis and Kelly*, and *Oprah*, venues Bush had visited during the previous year's campaign. The major problem in this regard, in addition to Bush's own

feelings on the dignity of the office, was logistics, as a senior Bush administration official detailed:

I think it would be really hard to justify a trip to Los Angeles just to do the Jay Leno show. You might really want to do the Jay Leno show, and you might really want to do it on a Tuesday, but you have no excuse to be there on a Tuesday, so it usually becomes: I don't want to build the schedule around Jay Leno's show, but I would be glad to add it to the schedule of when we're going to be out there at a fundraiser or giving a speech in San Diego or another thing. So it's hard to make the rationalization of sending Air Force One and a team of Secret Service agents and limousines and staff to go to New York City to disrupt the traffic to go tape a show broadcasted at eleven o'clock at night.

An examination of Bush's travel itinerary during the first six months of presidency through the archived White House website shows no visits by the president to Los Angeles or New York, though Bush did visit Chicago, where *Oprah* taped (White House, 2009). Bush's first planned visit to New York would have been to attend the annual meeting of the United Nations General Assembly in September, but the 9/11 attacks occurred before that meeting.

Despite Bush's own personal aversion to major publicity campaigns, the September 11 attacks and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan played a crucial role in his decision-making in regards to televised appearances in lighter venues. "One of the reasons that he gave up golf [in September 2003], for example, is he thought that it would look trivial for a president to be out playing golf while he's commander-in-chief and men are out in the field fighting and dying," said a Bush administration official, adding:

He thought that was not a favorable picture, but I think he felt the same way with some of these kinds of shows: there he is yucking it up on TV with Jay Leno while men and women are out there fighting to defend the country in two wars, so that is the only reluctance that I ever picked up from him. He was very serious about that part of the job and how the men and women in the field would view him and that definitely impacted everything he did.

Another veteran of the Bush administration concurred, saying, “I think that had there not been 9/11, there would’ve been more than what you saw, but less than you’d experienced during the [2000] campaign. That’s a testament to the seriousness with which George W. Bush took his responsibilities.” A senior Bush administration official echoed that point and said:

You don’t want to be disconnected from reality. When you’re at war, you don’t want the president to be seen as disconnected from the sacrifices that are being made real time because of the order he gave. You don’t want to have a fancy dinner when there’s a story of starving people in Africa. You just have to pay attention to the context, and I think that’s a challenge.

One of the things that may have scared the Bush administration away from using entertainment-based venues during a time of war was the negative public reaction to a comedy bit Bush performed at the White House correspondents’ dinner in 2004 which was predicated upon the fact that the United States military had not uncovered a significant number of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq yet. A military veteran, reacting to the bit, said, “War is the single most serious event that a president or government can carry its people into; this cheapens the sacrifice that American soldiers and their families are dealing with every single day” (Teather, 2004). “I was there and I was just appalled that everybody was laughing at that,” said a senior Democratic strategist, adding, “That thing would’ve exploded in today’s social media world. I mean it exploded, but I mean in a much more powerful way.” A veteran Clinton administration speechwriter shared the negative assessment of the routine and explained:

The reason that joke rightfully bombed is because it was at the expense of the listener and the American people, not at the expense of the person saying the joke. The joke was on us, that we had been sold a bill of goods on WMDs. But even then, the room didn’t even respond terribly; it actually blew up in the twenty-four hours after the speech.

With a naturally serious view of the presidency amplified during an active war, the Bush administration's decision to have the president largely avoid entertainment-based outlets was somewhat vindicated by the major negative reaction to the one time the president did place the war in a non-serious context.

There were a handful of notable exceptions to the president's avoidance of entertainment-based venues that built off of the Clinton administration's example and helped set the stage for the Obama administration's expanded use of them.

Chronologically, the first major event of the Bush administration was the introduction of the Barney Cam. "Necessity is the mother of invention," remarked a senior Democratic strategist about a campaign that would rival Bush's in 2004, but the notion applied to the Bush administration's contribution to digital entertainment. "In 2002, the White House was still closed to the public after the attacks of Sept. 11," and at the same time, "we wanted to use the Internet to better connect with citizens" (Orr, 2013):

Our first attempt to bring people in to the White House virtually was a big hit. Millions of viewers went to our site to see President Bush give a personal video tour of the Oval Office. [...] When Dan Bartlett, counselor to the president, asked me what was on my agenda, I swallowed hard and then said, "As you know, Dan, White House tours are still closed due to terrorist concerns. And the theme for this year's Christmas at the White House is 'All Creatures Great and Small.' So it's only logical that we have a Barney Cam, Dan, which is where we strap a video camera on Barney's head and have him run through the White House looking at decorations while Christmas music is playing in the background." (Orr, 2013)

A Bush administration official who worked with Orr notes:

Things like the Barney Cam and those Christmas videos used humor, currency, and a lighter touch that was still true to the Bushes to get into the conversation in ways that weren't always policy and politics-driven. I think it was very much a product of the White House wanting to be where the conversation was taking place as much as possible. That was certainly a recognition of the web's power as a video platform, a power that was not fully realized at that point, let's face it.

As technology changed rapidly during the 2000s, the Bush administration attempted to embrace the digital world as best they could, including drafting the first presidential blog post in 2007 on the White House website and, in 2008, granting the first presidential interview with an exclusively online platform: Yahoo. In 2005, “the White House Internet forged an agreement with iTunes to host a page for downloading Presidential speeches, the radio address, daily press briefings and State of the Union” (Sullivan, 2009). However, the president’s performance was either formal and political – with the White House website posting audio and video clips of official speeches in the presidential role – or relaxed and non-political, such as the Barney Cam and live streaming videos of the president welcoming championship sports teams to the White House. It was only near the middle of President Obama’s administration that the president used digital entertainment-based settings for expressly political purposes.

The other noteworthy appearances by Bush in lighter settings occurred during his 2004 campaign and during his second term. Like John Kerry and Teresa Heinz Kerry, George and Laura Bush taped a joint appearance on *Dr. Phil* “scheduled for broadcast Sept. 29,” and the president “tore himself away from presidential duties in April to tape a whole episode of *Fishing with Roland Martin* that ran on the Outdoor Life Network” (Frey, 2004). On a December 5, 2007 of *Ellen*, Jenna Bush, promoting a book, called the White House and spoke to her parents live on the program. The call was made to look spontaneous, as if the younger Bush and the titular host were doing something that would get them in trouble, but it ended with a warm moment where the president wished the audience a Merry Christmas. A Bush administration official confirmed that “it was not

spontaneous. In the schedule of the president and managing presidential communications everything is planned and scheduled and discussed,” but he added:

That was one that the president was happy to do because obviously that was his daughter and he wanted to support what she was doing. *Ellen*, that show is the kind of show that is fun, has a light tone to it, and I don’t think there was a feeling that Ellen was going to do anything but find it respectful and all that.

Notably, the president’s brief cameo was in deference to his daughter, ensuring that she was the star of the moment, but that worked to his benefit as well. *Ellen*, like *The Late Show* and *The Tonight Show*, often featured more in-depth discussions of issues at times; Ellen’s discussion of gay marriage with John McCain in May 2008 saw her challenge the Republican nominee on the issue in a forceful but respectful way. Bush made appearances in similar venues as a candidate in 2000 but avoided them throughout his presidency. The other memorable use of the president in an entertainment-related setting featured a taped cameo appearance on the game show *Deal or No Deal* in April 2008 to wish a contestant, who was an Iraq war veteran, luck on the program. “Anything with servicemen he was always willing to do,” recalled a Bush administration official, adding, “If it was something that would bring positive attention for servicemen – that was an easy yes for him.” Another Bush administration official remembered:

That was a particular case where the soldier, as I recall, told the producers in the interview process. I don’t think the service member said, “I want to have George W. Bush on the show.” I think he said that he admired President Bush or something like that and the producers called the White House and said, “Hey, would you guys consider having the president call in or do a video talking to him?” When we brought that to him he was immediately for it because of the fact that the military service member was on.

Overall, appearances for the benefit of soldiers, such as his taped appearance on *WWE Tribute to the Troops* in December 2008, or for the benefit of his daughters, were the two areas in which President Bush felt it was appropriate to appear in entertainment-based

venues during his presidency. He largely did not utilize these venues during the 2004 campaign, even as his potential opponents did.

The 2004 Democratic Primaries

After the successful use of entertainment-based talk shows by Bush, Gore, McCain, Quayle, and Bradley in the 2000 election cycle, almost every Democratic candidate used these venues to their advantage in the 2004 primaries. To stand out, certain campaigns made innovative uses of these venues or turned to the internet to aid in campaigning. The most important entertainment-based venue for Democratic candidates by the time of the 2004 Democratic primaries was *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Despite Stewart's focus on politics during his *Daily Show* tenure, a producer who worked with Stewart said:

He was among a class of comedians that were topical and relevant although not necessarily political and I think if you asked him about his comedy now, he would say the same thing: his comedy is topical and relevant as opposed to say *Air America*. *Air America* was decidedly and deliberately political meaning it had a point of view and a political agenda. I don't think Jon would tell you that he has a defined political agenda.

Stewart's *Daily Show* started without the advantages of *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show* because of its home on basic cable, rather than broadcast, and even though broadcast network ratings have fallen over time, *The Daily Show* did not attract a significant amount of viewers over time. The important thing about the success of the program was who was watching, according to a veteran of the Clinton administration: "*The Daily Show* had a resonance that went beyond the size of the audience mostly because the media paid attention to it. The audiences were hovering around a million people." However, because the audience of the program included not just influential

media personalities but a lot of young people, the program grew into a valuable asset for politicians to visit to increase their visibility.

This recognition among the media elite and among young people led to the first time a presidential candidate officially announced their candidacy in an entertainment-based venue. Bob Dole almost unofficially announced a presidential run on *The Late Show* in February 1995, but on September 15, 2003, John Edwards officially announced his run for the presidency on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Edwards had jokingly said in 2002 that he would do so if he did run, and when asked after his announcement if he would also announce plans to take military action against another country on the program, Edwards joked, “Well, I kept this stupid promise to be on your show” (Stewart, 2003). Edwards did not pioneer the entertainment-based announcement in American politics: two months earlier, Arnold Schwarzenegger announced his intention to run for governor of California on *The Tonight Show*, but while Schwarzenegger wanted to reach a large audience familiar with him as an actor, Edwards wanted to target a *Daily Show* audience that was primarily young and leaning Democratic.

The most notable use of alternative venues to promote a candidacy was done by Howard Dean’s insurgent campaign in 2003. A senior strategist for the Dean campaign compared Bill Clinton’s appearance on *The Arsenio Hall Show* in 1992 to Dean’s appearance on Lawrence Lessig’s blog in the summer of 2003 “in terms of the first time where something really authentic happened: unguarded, unpredictable, you know, no one saw it coming, and was actually a key moment in the campaign starting to explode.” Lessig’s blog was assuredly not an entertainment-based venue, but Dean’s use of Lessig’s blog displayed a breaking down of communicative barriers that showed the

ability of the internet to bring candidates and voters closer together without a media filter.

The Dean campaign strategist outlined the motivation to do so:

There was no other way that we were going to get there. No one was going to give us the time of day or give us any money or anything in the establishment. That wasn't going to happen. I had desperately wanted to try it and he was open to doing it. It was sort of a whole bunch of people who were dangerous enough ended up in the same place and went to a medium that everyone else in the political world thought was [like the] bar scene out of *Star Wars*. That was their attitude towards it, so we had no competition. I mean, frankly, we had no competition. No one was even [thinking about it] – they were still on ABC and CBS and CNN and doing it the old way, and we were the only ones that actually realized, “Wait, there's a way to actually talk to people directly and have them own part of the campaign and actually lift it up.” And it was actually people realizing, “Hey, there's a campaign that gets me, gets where I'm at,” that was so different from everybody else's. They became our network. We didn't need ABC or CBS or NBC. We had this network of people.

While Clinton's visit to *The Arsenio Hall Show* began with the candidate at the absolute peak of his charisma, playing “Heartbreak Hotel” on the saxophone with sunglasses shading his eyes, Dean's use of the Lessig blog was more akin to Clinton's rote saxophone solo on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* four years earlier, as the Dean campaign strategist explained:

Howard gets on it and his first post was, “You're all terrific,” and the comments were like, “Oh my God; you've got to be kidding me; this is embarrassing; come on.” And he would go and do another post and it would be, “No I really mean it; you're terrific. You're all terrific.” It was just a massive backlash. People were like, “I knew they were going to have a ghostwriter for him, that it wasn't really going to be him, but this is ridiculous!” So I'm sitting there and I come in the comments section and I go like, “Guys, let me ask you something? If you think we're ghostwriting for him, don't you think we'd be doing a better job of it?” And all of a sudden, everybody realized it was really him, that the candidate for president of the United States was actually on the blog, had no clue what he was doing, but it was actually really him!

After surging throughout the fall, Dean lost momentum in the campaign right before the Iowa caucuses and then most infamously let out a haphazard rallying cry that became a punch line for comedians and news veterans alike. “The problem with the video: it was

too good for a station not to do over and over and over again, and so how do you undo that,” noted the Dean campaign strategist. Dean did try to rectify the situation by delivering a self-deprecating Top Ten list on *The Late Show*, including advice to “Switch to decaf,” but the lasting power of the original video made it a great challenge in turning public perception around (Associated Press, 2004). With John Kerry and John Edwards finishing above Dean in Iowa and having geographic advantages in the next two primaries of New Hampshire and South Carolina, the Dean campaign soon came to an end.

One footnote about the Democratic primaries became more relevant in the 2016 campaign cycle. On December 6, 2003, long shot candidate Al Sharpton not only appeared on *Saturday Night Live* but actually hosted the full program, which no active presidential candidate had ever done previously. This caused problems for the network: “Several NBC affiliates refused to carry *Saturday Night Live* with Sharpton as host for fear it would activate federal ‘equal time provisions’ and compel them to offer air time to the eight other Democrats running for president” (Associated Press, 2003). The combination of a dynamic personality and financial problems drove Sharpton to use the entertainment-based platform to expose his candidacy to a wider audience, and while Sharpton ended up failing in his bid for the White House, his influence paid dividends later on: by the 2008 campaign, *Saturday Night Live* became a necessary visit for each of the four major presidential-level figures of that campaign – Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, John McCain, and Sarah Palin. However, NBC’s issues with the equal time rule led *Saturday Night Live* to become hesitant in offering a full hosting gig to an active presidential level contender. By 2016, only Donald Trump had followed Sharpton’s lead

in officially hosting an episode, which he did in November 2015, and again NBC was forced to offer equal time to candidates because of Trump's hosting gig; notably, the equal time requirement did not mandate placing the candidates on *SNL* (Johnson, 2015).

General Elections and Authenticity

With John Kerry as the Democratic Party's presidential nominee and John Edwards as his running mate, the 2004 Democratic ticket eagerly used entertainment-based venues, though the Bush-Cheney ticket mostly did not. Kerry appeared on *The Daily Show*, *The Late Show*, *Live with Regis and Kelly*, and *The Tonight Show* after his nomination in July and used his wife, Teresa Heinz Kerry, as a solo surrogate, much as the Bush campaign did with Laura Bush (Catlin, 2004). "It was a no-brainer," a senior strategist for the Kerry campaign I interviewed said, adding, "We were in a very close contest; we needed to turn out younger voters. It was just an obvious thing to do." Other than Laura Bush's appearance on *The Tonight Show*, George Bush's appearance on *Fishing with Roland Martin*, and both Bushes' appearance on *Dr. Phil*, the Kerry campaign was basically unchallenged in the use of these venues.

Bush and Kerry greatly expanded on the electoral performance of Bush and Gore in the 2000 election; Bush received over sixty-two million votes in 2004 as opposed to just over fifty million in 2000, while Kerry received over fifty-nine million votes in 2004, in contrast to Gore's nearly fifty-one million vote total (Deskins, Walton, & Puckett, 2010, pp. 518-539). Bush's narrow victory occurred partially due to the innovative use of microtargeting, a concept that would be exceeded to a tremendous degree by the Obama campaign in the next two election cycles due to rapid changes in technology. "When it was done in 2004: 'groundbreaking' and 'new' and all of that, it was true, but we just did

it for mail and phone,” said a senior Bush reelection campaign strategist, adding, “Keep in mind that there was no Facebook back then; the online advertising was done but it was very rudimentary.” In 2004, the Bush campaign used microtargeting to mail specific messages to specific types of voters, according to the senior strategist:

We didn’t want to communicate with people that were going to vote for the Democrat no matter what, of which there was a large percentage. There were plenty of people who were going to vote for George W. no matter what. They were totally solid; they were going to turn out. We didn’t want to mail them either, so what we wanted to do was send to the people who were either really for George W. but had a low propensity to turn out or were an unreliable voter and make sure that they turned out, and we wanted to find the people who were persuadable, either undecided or sort of leaning Kerry but not totally decided, leaning Bush but not open to Kerry – mail them, and that’s what we did.

By 2008 and 2012, the Obama campaign’s microtargeting efforts would not only include that targeted attempt to sway voters through digital and mailing efforts but also an embrace of specific entertainment-based outlets such as sports podcasts like *The Bill Simmons Podcast* (Simmons, 2012), specific late night programs that attracted primarily young audiences like *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* (Beard, 2012), and even specific popular video games such as *Madden NFL* (Foxnews.com, 2008). “There are lines, and I think President Obama and his team have walked up pretty close to them, but I think those lines are shifting,” contended a former veteran of the Clinton administration, adding, “Obama has been much more facile in understanding that this show will get this kind of audience, this internet site will get this sort of audience, so I think it’s a much more highly targeted, refined strategy.” It is arguable that the Bush campaign’s microtargeting efforts might have been more effective if Bush was used in entertainment-based venues to the same extent that Obama has been.

The Bush reelection effort in 2004 did not have the advantages that the Clinton 1996 reelection effort did, such as a soaring economy and an opposing campaign

hampered by internal fighting, so the campaign's reluctance to place President Bush in entertainment-based venues is more questionable. There are some competing theories among the figures I interviewed who were present during that election as to why the Bush campaign did not use these venues as eagerly as they did in 2000. "I think the nature of the campaign that he was running in 2004 was a base mobilization campaign: anti-gay marriage; a lot of energy put into polarizing the country," argued a senior strategist for the Kerry campaign, adding, "I suspect he didn't want to go on and talk about any of that because he might've been asked about that." A Bush administration official countered that the lack of appearances was part of a deliberate strategy: "He was playing on a very different characteristic, and a much more important characteristic in that 2004 race which was his strength of leadership as commander-in-chief, and that would not have squared well with going on late night comedy shows." Whatever the truth is, the heavy amount of negative advertising that the Bush campaign and related surrogates used against Kerry made Kerry's embrace of entertainment-based venues all the more urgent, according to an advisor to the Kerry campaign:

One of the things that some of the softer, less political, more cultural, personal interviews can do is, when they're really impactful is when they're very often the situation is the opposite side has created this sordid caricature, and it kind of lowers the bar, because when people see, "Hey, he's not an ogre. He seems like a pretty good guy. Like, he's certainly smart and, you know, all of these people are saying he's a traitor? He actually looks like a patriot."

"Kerry is not the stiff that the Republicans tried to caricature him as so he was fluent and good at that stuff," added a senior advisor to the Kerry campaign. In both Kerry and Gore's case, the entertainment-based venue helped, or was perceived to help, their campaigns.

According to campaign veterans I interviewed for this project, one of the key advantages George W. Bush maintained over both John Kerry and Al Gore was a concrete sense of self and a consistent projection of that self. While terrorism was the dominant issue of the 2004 campaign according to a senior strategist for the Bush reelection campaign – “People, particularly women, felt safer with George W. Bush at the helm than they did with John Kerry and that at that time had a lot to do with why he was ultimately reelected” – the strategist also noted:

I do think that Bush won in part because he was more likable. While you can't dispute the fact the Bush family has a very [rich] background and all that, he's a very relatable person. He grew up in West Texas; he very much has the vibe of somebody who grew up in a small town the way he approaches people; he's comfortable, he's relatable, and I think that had a lot to do with it.

While Kerry performed well on the late night shows, a Kerry campaign advisor agreed that the candidate suffered when he attempted to stress his populist credentials:

Kerry's the one where, to me, it highlights this whole thing of accessibility. He's not – John Kerry's a really smart guy. A really smart guy, but he's not naturally accessible to people. He talks like he's an intellectual. He has the look of an old money New Englander. He married a fabulously wealthy woman. He flies airplanes and rides a ten thousand dollar bicycle. He's not like the rest of us. Taking some steps to make him more accessible to people were essential, not to sell them as he's an everyman, because that's impossible; he's not. He's an exceptional guy, and one would hope that the president is an exceptional person, but you needed to chip away at all the patrician [ambiance]. You know, John and Elizabeth Edwards, every year on their anniversary despite a lot of wealth, would go to Wendy's because it was special for them, and John and Teresa Heinz Kerry – I wouldn't be able to predict when the last time they had been in a Wendy's. The probably better way of highlighting that particular thing was John Kerry going to Philadelphia and ordering a cheese steak and as they were getting it, he asked them to put Swiss cheese on it.

Another Bush administration official concurred with that dichotomy:

President Bush clearly, you could tell by listening to him and seeing him and the way he talked that he was a guy who grew up in West Texas. He was an everyday guy. He really liked being around people, and Kerry had to fight that in 2004 and had to try to become something that he really isn't which is really comfortable with people that way and so he had to go on the late night shows and kind of show

a different John Kerry to the public who didn't know him very well. I think he completely fumbled on the effort to try to be an everyday guy or a guy that you'd want to have a beer with, and from my perspective it was a mistake for him to even try. What people want more than anything is authenticity: If you're not the kind of guy who would actually go into a bar and have a beer with friends, don't try to be that guy. Be yourself; spend your time doing other things and play to your strengths but don't try to be that guy. Because I think, you know, if you act if it's necessary that the most important thing is to be the guy that you're comfortable having a beer with, I'd say that was always important, but it was never more important than authenticity. Authenticity is always more important than being a good guy or a guy that people enjoy or feel comfortable being around.

Two examples prove instructive in displaying the virtue of authenticity in this media environment. The first involved George W. Bush and the second involved Al Gore, and paradoxically, one example involved something Bush did not do and the other involved something Gore did do. A senior Bush administration official who also worked for the first Bush administration in the late 1980s recalled:

I can remember George H.W. Bush doing one that really did not do the trick. He went to do a quick little thing to do Christmas shopping in Maryland or someplace like that from Camp David and it was designed to say, "Hey, the president's out Christmas shopping; we should be out Christmas shopping." The mainstream media made fun of it so it had a little impact but it turned into: we were on the defensive. "Why did he decide to go?" Well, he went for good reasons; he did real Christmas shopping, and he thought it would be a good signal to send because retailers were saying across the country that people weren't shopping. So you try to do it and then people say, "Why did you do that?"

The West Wing did an episode in the late 1990s that satirized this type of move (Sorkin & Cleveland, 1999), and the second Bush administration resolved not to make that type of mistake. "The American people know that he's not going to walk into a Barnes and Noble and pick out a book for Mrs. Bush," said a Bush administration official recalling conversations he had with George W. Bush, adding, "That kind of thing was too inauthentic. It's got to be authentic."

In a similar manner, Gore displayed his authentic sense of humor when he hosted *Saturday Night Live* in December 2002. “The hot tub skit, where America collectively said, in my opinion, ‘Where was that guy? I would’ve voted for that guy!’” exclaimed a former Clinton administration speechwriter, describing one particular skit in which Gore amusingly satirized his vice presidential selection process two years earlier by presenting it like an episode of the ABC reality television program *The Bachelor*. That skit and other sketches airing during that particular *Saturday Night Live* episode were conceived by someone close to the presidential candidate, according to a senior advisor to the Gore campaign:

The driving creative force behind that was actually Vice President Gore’s daughter Kristin who was a writer, and a very talented writer in her own right, and who had several colleagues who worked in writing rooms on comedy shows. A couple of them were at *Saturday Night Live*; they were Harvard Lampoon colleagues of hers. She really took an active role in that week and I think she joined the writing staff for the week and collaborated on that stuff.

“I don’t have an answer to your question: where was that guy?” noted the Clinton administration speechwriter. Months before his *Saturday Night Live* host appearance in December 2002, Gore himself wistfully noted at a Democratic Party fundraiser, “If I had to this all over again, I’d just let it rip [...] [and] spend a lot less time going to media events and making tactical moves;” at that same fundraiser, one previous Gore donor noted, “When you’re managed by people, you’re not sincere” (Zeleny, 2002). Reflecting on Gore’s well-received *Saturday Night Live* appearance, a senior Gore advisor from that time period contended:

Look, there’s a natural sense I think after an election for people, especially this election which was so evenly divided and polarizing and tough and bitter, I think there’s a natural tendency to look wistfully at the people who didn’t make it and say, “Boy, maybe we didn’t get to know him. Maybe the campaign didn’t give us a chance to know him.” The political process and campaigns in general are pretty hard to get a sense of the human being who’s running, and the comedy show gives

you a chance to sort of be a normal person. Plus, expectations are such that they don't expect much from you comedically, so when you demonstrate a little bit of a sense of humor and an ability to laugh and to laugh at yourself, that's well received. And then the pressure's off; there's no consequence to it

Gore was not the only former presidential candidate to host *Saturday Night Live* in late 2002; John McCain, who had lost to George W. Bush in the 2000 Republican primaries, hosted the program in October 2002, two months before Gore did in December. Gore's successful hosting gig was more surprising than McCain's because McCain had displayed elements of his unique personality and caustic wit publicly throughout the election process; McCain lost to Bush because of Bush's financial advantages and because Bush's policy prescriptions and priorities appealed to the Republican primary electorate more than McCain's, not because either man's personality quirks. Gore, on the other hand, spent much of the 2000 campaign reinventing himself in various capacities and letting campaign advisors guide him in certain directions that may have felt right but were tonally different from previous incarnations, leaving voters confused. The most authentic version of Gore was one that voters really never got to see, according to another senior Gore advisor:

I felt unsuccessful because we'd be on the plane and before he'd go out there when there's no one there and he's funny, he's kind, he's generous, and all of the latter comes out. I think people see him as a very decent honorable guy, but his humor – he was just very funny. For whatever reason – either his department's focus on wanting him to face the camera substantively or just how you have to shrink the news for a vice president – I don't think we were as successful in helping him expose his innate natural talents and gifts.

Conclusion

The second Bush era was a time of rapid technological change. “A hashtag didn't even exist then; we still called a hashtag a pound sign or a number sign!” exclaimed a senior Bush administration official when talking about the 2004 election, adding, “It was

just a different world, and so the new media then looks very old media today.” By 2008, the Bush administration had largely adapted to the changing world as best it could, but there were limitations: “The Secret Service actually wouldn’t let us use social media; we had a Twitter account used sort of outside but it was kind of a non-official account,” remembered a Bush administration official, adding, “The Secret Service was still figuring out what YouTube and Twitter were. In terms of the idea of uploading they were still in those early days, it was, ‘OK, what security risk does this pose for us to do this?’” Notably, Barack Obama had to stop using his campaign Twitter account upon ascending to the presidency; while an official White House Twitter account was inaugurated in 2009 that occasionally featured personalized tweets conceived by Obama but typed out by staffers, Obama was not allowed to start a personalized Twitter account until 2015 (Shear, 2015).

Much like the previous chapter, the Bush era offers potential answers to RQ1a, RQ1b, RQ1c, RQ2a, RQ2b, and RQ5. For RQ1a, technological changes played a major role in campaign strategy, according to key figures I interviewed for this project, but so did desperation. One of the key similarities between digital campaigning and the embrace of the entertainment-based venue by candidates was that some of the key moves were made by candidates running out of options. Dan Quayle visited *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show* in 1999 because George W. Bush had monopolized the donor circuit. Howard Dean used the internet aggressively in 2003 because he did not receive significant contributions from traditional donors. John Edwards announced his run for the presidency on *The Daily Show* to gain traction in an election cycle dominated at that point by Dean, Kerry, and Dick Gephardt and to attract younger voters. Al Sharpton

hosted *Saturday Night Live* in order to do the same. George W. Bush put a video of his dog Barney on the internet because the White House was closed during the Christmas season due to security concerns and they could not welcome visitors. In each case, these innovations helped pave the way for future campaigns and incumbent presidents to utilize these venues more often and on a larger scale.

For RQ1b and RQ1c, the role of individual personality played a large role in a number of these decisions. After initially rejecting a request by the Clinton campaign to have Clinton appear on *The Tonight Show* in the opening weeks of his tenure, Jay Leno settled into a groove, organizing the program in his image and focusing on issues that appealed to him, including politics. As such, Leno became more comfortable inviting politicians onto his program, which would reap enormous benefits for *The Tonight Show* by the 2000 campaign. Likewise, David Letterman's increasing interest in politics helped shape his *Late Show* into a more politically-focused and intellectually-stimulating show, at times, than his Carson-produced NBC *Late Night* program, even though Letterman ensured that goofy comedy would remain the foundation on which *The Late Show* was built. Jon Stewart's personality played a major role in turning *The Daily Show* from a generally pop-culture focused show under Craig Kilborn's tenure to a smarter, more politically-focused show under Stewart's leadership. While candidates like John Kerry, Howard Dean, and Bill Bradley had more entertainment-based options to utilize than similar candidates in the past like Walter Mondale and Michael Dukakis, they nevertheless did not reject these opportunities but instead embraced them for their own benefit, partially answering RQ2a.

For this era, however, the most notable partial answers to RQ1a, RQ1b, RQ2a, and RQ2b come through an examination of George W. Bush. Bush used entertainment-based venues successfully during the 2000 campaign and helped turn the election partially into a referendum on personality. However, in navigating a tumultuous media environment, the Bush administration could have broken ground in embracing the entertainment-based venue, but a combination of Bush's individual personality and external factors, specifically key crises such as 9/11, Afghanistan, and Iraq made lighter venues unattractive. External factors alone do not explain Bush's decisions; his individual personality played a huge role in reacting to these external crises, and his concept of the *dignity of the presidency* was similar to his father's, according to the members of the administration who came to know him well.

Barack Obama provides an interesting contrast. Like Bush, Obama had to deal with multiple wars during his presidency, but Obama aggressively utilized entertainment-based venues in ways that Bush did not. One could argue that since Obama did not have the responsibility to act in the same ways that Bush did because Obama merely inherited the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts from Bush (and the Libya conflict of 2011 Obama initiated ended relatively quickly), Obama had more freedom to utilize entertainment-based venues than Bush during the course of those conflicts. I argue the converse: Obama ran as the candidate who would end the wars responsibly, and his use of entertainment-based venues may have convinced citizens largely unengaged from the news that normalcy was returning and that the wars were ending. If Bush had used entertainment-based venues to the extent that Obama did, he might have received negative coverage from traditional journalists partially because he was considered responsible for initiating

those wars; the reaction of the press to his White House correspondents' dinner comedy bit in 2004 suggests this may be true.

Overall, however, Bush and Obama both shared electoral success, and Bush's success came partially because of the perception of authenticity – a quality he seemed to exude and his two general election opponents did not despite their effective use of entertainment-based venues. Bush could have used the entertainment-based venue to great effect during his presidency, but his advisors would claim that it would be inauthentic of him to do so given the circumstances. The next chapter will chronicle Barack Obama's presidency and his enthusiastic embrace of the entertainment world, and the word *authentic* will be used in that context, as well.

CHAPTER 8

THE OBAMA YEARS

“What’s it like to be the last black president?” – Zach Galifianakis to Barack Obama, Between Two Ferns, March 13, 2014

While Barack Obama was the first president to visit a late night comedy program taping in March 2009, the Obama era truly began in 2007 with the inventions of the smartphone and Kindle and the popularization of Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Obama’s 2008 victories over Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primaries and John McCain in the general election developed partially because the Obama campaign was more attuned to the evolution of digital platforms and used them more effectively than its opponents. One characteristic of a race to break new ground is how previously new ground becomes commonplace. While the Clinton campaign’s use of the entertainment-based televised venue seemed otherworldly in 1992, by 2008 every major candidate running for president exploited these venues. In the entertainment field, the key development of the 2008 campaign was the establishment of *Saturday Night Live*, a sketch comedy program, as an almost mandatory cultural stop for the four major personalities of the election cycle: Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, John McCain, and Sarah Palin. While presidential candidates appeared on late night programs doing comedy bits before 2007, the Obama era will be remembered as the first time that sitting presidents subjected themselves to being the punch lines of comedy bits in order to inspire targeted audiences to support specific policy proposals.

In the interviews I conducted for this study, the veterans of the Obama administration and the major campaigns of 2008 and 2012 all said they believed that

technological change had made it necessary for candidates to utilize televised entertainment-based venues to introduce themselves to voters, but there was sharp disagreement over the risks that the Obama administration took to place a sitting president in some of these venues. The Democrats I interviewed for this project were largely supportive of President Obama's approach, even if some of them felt uncomfortable at first with specific moves, while the Republicans I interviewed for this project divided over whether Obama's riskier moves demeaned the presidency and should be discarded by future administrations or whether those moves wisely blazed new ground that future presidents should follow. Obama's individual personality also stirred debate, as some felt that the president was a perfect fit for these kinds of venues while others marveled at how well Obama performed in these hot media, as Marshall McLuhan might say, considering how cool the president comes across.

Like in the previous chapter, the concept of desperation and financial resources played a major role in my data. Despite similar electoral performances, the general campaigns of John McCain in 2008 and Mitt Romney in 2012 featured wildly divergent perspectives on the use of entertainment-based venues, and while interviewees for this project noted the differences in personality between the two men as one factor, the difference between the fiscal health of the Romney campaign and the reliance on public financing by the McCain campaign was said to be a major reason why the McCain campaign used free media opportunities, especially televised entertainment-based venues, so aggressively. The tension between using these comedic venues to promote one's candidacy so often and the desire to be taken seriously came to a climax at a key moment

of the 2008 campaign when John McCain canceled an appearance on *The Late Show* in September during the financial crisis. This chapter will chronicle that incident.

Live from New York

The 2008 campaign saw candidates maximize their exposure to lower information voters in a variety of venues, and three major candidates – Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and John McCain – did so extensively. These candidates, along with others, visited *The Tonight Show*, *The Late Show*, and *Ellen*, and other talk shows, but Obama, Clinton, and McCain also taped cameo appearances on the singing competition *American Idol* and on a professional wrestling program, *WWE Raw* (Lang, 2008; Wieselmann, 2008). One of the more significant battlegrounds of the 2008 campaign was *Saturday Night Live*, which had its most successful season of the new millennium due to its stinging critiques of implicit media bias (for Obama and against Clinton) during the 2008 primaries and Tina Fey’s remarkably accurate impersonation of Sarah Palin, McCain’s vice presidential selection. *Saturday Night Live* emerged as power broker during the cycle, and for the first time, four of the five major active presidential-level figures made key cameo appearances – only Joe Biden, Obama’s running mate, did not appear in Studio 8H during the campaign.

The timing of each candidate appearance on *Saturday Night Live* and the skits accepted by the campaigns reveal important insights about the individual personalities of each candidate and how comfortable each campaign felt financially and electorally. Barack Obama was the first candidate to appear on the program in early November 2007, appearing at a Halloween party hosted by the Clintons (Amy Poehler and Darrell Hammond) in which the major jokes were aimed at the Clinton characters rather than

Obama (Seelye, 2007). “They gave us a bunch of ideas, and we sort of helped massage them into something that seemed appropriate,” recalled an Obama campaign advisor, adding, “They controlled the whole process; it was all their stuff and we just tweaked a little bit, as much as you can with something in that medium.” The Obama campaign rejected two comedic proposals: a skit directly involving Obama “about the fact that he and Vice President Dick Cheney are cousins” (Seelye, 2007), and a skit not involving Obama “about racism and profiling” that Obama thought was funny but not quite appropriate (Miller & Shales, 2014). However, part of the reason that the program conceived of a sketch that placed Obama in the best possible light and did not mock him stemmed from the fact that Obama was not the first candidate invited to appear on the program. According to executive producer Lorne Michaels, *Saturday Night Live* was “contacted by, I think, Howard Wolfson from Hillary’s campaign, and they wanted to do the first show of the season. Obama was heating up, but they called first [...] and then, the week of, they bailed” (Miller & Shales, 2014). The Clinton campaign’s initial embrace of *Saturday Night Live* recognized the threat of Obama but their last minute cancellation reflected a cautious nature that weighed the benefits and the risks of appearing in a comedic light. Another glimpse into the cautious nature of Hillary Clinton involves the content of the comedy sketch Clinton agreed to perform once she finally visited the program in April 2008. In that sketch, Clinton appeared opposite her doppelganger, Amy Poehler, and any appearance in which a candidate meets their parody counterpart will feature self-deprecating humor on the part of the candidate. “They proposed it; as always there’s a back and forth but I think she kind of just put herself in *SNL*’s hands and I don’t really think there was anything that was ever really outright

rejected,” recalled a Clinton campaign speechwriter, adding, “She rehearsed it once and then they did it.” Tellingly, when Clinton appeared on the program in 2015, she agreed to a similar sketch premise (Chozick, 2015).

While the Democratic Party candidates appeared on *Saturday Night Live* before the general election campaign, the Republican Party candidates’ appearances came during the last few weeks of the general election campaign and revealed a desperation apparent to members of the campaign. Sarah Palin’s visit to the program in late October 2008, after a devastating few weeks of *Saturday Night Live* parodies of her, was similar in tone to Clinton’s: a mixture of self-deprecation and celebration, unlike the Obama appearance that was pure celebration. An advisor to Governor Palin during the 2008 campaign recalled the process:

There were a number of concerns about, expressed by the vice presidential candidate to her staff. She was concerned about being mocked and ridiculed and embarrassed, and I think all the things that someone in her position would be concerned about, for the most part. I’m not going to divulge a whole lot of private conversations in regards to this, but I’ll just say that I spoke directly with the executive producer and founder of the show, Lorne Michaels, and gained his assurances that guests are made to feel welcome at *SNL* before the show and during the show and therefore after the show, in terms of that appearance. He made no promises about how they would handle her as a subject of parody, but I don’t think we ever expected promises in that regard. We were realistic about that. I haven’t ever really discussed it in much detail and so I’m not going to do it now, but I would say that they had some ideas we rejected, and yeah, there were discussions about advancing ideas, and I think there could’ve been some interaction with them, but I’ve got to say, you don’t go on *SNL* to do your own skits. They have staffs of writers who are pros, and we had some great writers, don’t get me wrong, including some very funny writers, but this is their show and I think we had to recognize that.

One of the reasons that Palin was willing to make her *SNL* cameo was because the program “certainly had a history of, whether it’s “Dukakis After Dark” or mocking Bill Clinton, showing some willingness to be an equal opportunity offender,” remembered the Palin advisor. In particular, a skit dealing with the financial crisis that aired two weeks

prior to the Palin appearance attacked Nancy Pelosi, Barney Frank, and George Soros, giving the advisor an assurance that the program could be evenhanded. One of the key comedic reasons that Palin's appearance worked so well was the use of Alec Baldwin as a comedic foil. Lorne Michaels described Baldwin as "the most emblematic liberal at that point" (Miller & Shales, 2014), but the jokes had extra resonance because of Baldwin's work with Fey on *30 Rock*.

Even Palin's appearance was not enough for the campaign, however, due to the major financial and polling advantages that the Obama campaign had accrued over the McCain campaign, so the Saturday before Election Day, John McCain appeared in a cold open for *Saturday Night Live* with Tina Fey portraying Palin. McCain had hosted *Saturday Night Live* in 2002 and as a former advisor to McCain noted, "From a very young age he's always been comfortable in the communications arena. Every year I worked for him and years after I've seen him be very forward leaning, willing to engage, willing to try new things." The 2008 version of McCain was open to trying new things and also in a desperate situation, remembered an advisor to the campaign:

Obama had so much money and we had so little money that they were able to overwhelmingly do very unique and interesting things. I have a good friend who's a Democrat in my business and he did that thirty minute TV show for Obama, and they bought national broadcast television for thirty minutes on every network. Nobody had done that before but you did it because you had the money to do it. I remember real well: we were so poor that we had to take matching funds from the government. Well, if you take federal matching funds, you can't run a normal political ad. You have to have: it's something like twenty-five percent of it has to talk about Congress. "Vote for John McCain and the Republican leaders in Congress!" That's not the best way to do an ad. So we're having to do that at the same time somebody came into my office and was just dumbfounded and threw a video game down, and the Obama campaign was sponsoring a video game that you would pay for in the store! They had money to burn; we had no money, so you do things differently.

Notably, the McCain *SNL* cold open parodied his campaign's financial woes in comparison to Obama's half-hour ad buy, with McCain (flanked by Fey) opening the skit by saying, "We can only afford QVC" and being forced to sell satirical items as part of the deal (Cooper, 2008). While McCain and Palin performed well on the program, the 2012 Republican candidates avoided the show entirely and largely eschewed entertainment-based outlets in their campaign against Obama partially due to the more conservative personalities of candidates Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan and partially due to the tremendous financial resources of the Romney campaign and various pro-Republican SuperPACs, organizations legalized by the *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision of 2010.

One of the dangers of using the entertainment-based venue was illustrated by McCain's retreat from *The Late Show* in September 2008 during the financial crisis. Senator McCain temporarily suspended his campaign with the intention of working with President Bush, Senator Obama, and congressional leaders on a legislative package to halt the momentum of the financial meltdown, and in doing so, McCain canceled an appearance on *The Late Show*. A *Late Show* producer recalled:

We taped at 4:30 in the afternoon that day, and I got the call like an hour before; it was like three o'clock, so there was not much time at all, but at that point, and I think Dave actually said this at one point, "We're a comedy show. We're a late night show. You are dealing with far more important matters: world events, national events. If something major's going on and you need to go handle something, go ahead and cancel! We're not going to harbor a grudge. Come back when you can and good luck." And that was kind of the attitude and then it was quickly like, "Well, it stinks that we're going to lose him," but immediately it was like, "What can we do to fill that spot?" Because at that point, you've got forty-five minutes or an hour left, there's a pool of applicants there that's pretty small. It's got to be somebody not only locally but somebody who literally can physically get to the studio, and luckily, Keith (Olbermann)'s been a tremendous friend to the show and stepped in valiantly.

Unfortunately for McCain, Letterman discovered that the senator had not canceled all media appearances as the campaign had announced; instead, McCain decided to proceed with a scheduled appearance on the *CBS Evening News* concurrent with the taping of *The Late Show*. “McCain had always been a great guest, and especially at that point in the campaign, those are one of those bookings that you really hope to obtain,” recalled the *Late Show* producer, “and then when we found out that he was stopping up to talk to Katie (Couric), that’s when you saw the dynamic of our thinking change; it was the fact that we were told one thing and another thing transpired.” In response to that betrayal, Letterman made McCain an extended target of his wit and even “ordered his director to put a live feed [...] which showed Mr. McCain getting made up to go on with Mrs. Couric” (Carter, 2008). Over the course of multiple episodes, Letterman attacked McCain repeatedly until McCain returned to *The Late Show* a few weeks later, although perhaps coincidentally, that episode’s musical guest, Ne-Yo, wore a Barack Obama logo on his jacket during his performance.

The First Obama Term

Less than two months after his inauguration, Barack Obama became the first sitting president to visit a late night comedy show when he appeared on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. From the beginning, the incoming Obama administration recognized that the value of entertainment-based venues to reach less politically inclined audiences was increasing due to the effects of technological change. An Obama administration veteran contended:

As the way that people get their information and news becomes more and more fragmented, as there are more and more websites and channels and avenues to find out about the news, I think it’s become harder and harder to reach a big audience and to get to people who might not be always paying attention to the

news and so over the years shows like *The Tonight Show*; *Ellen*; even you'll see that President Obama has spoken to YouTube stars more frequently – these are always getting beyond the typical news gathering sites, whatever, your traditional cable news, nightly news, network news, what have you, so you can reach people who aren't necessarily getting their information from those sources anymore.

Barack Obama voiced a similar technologically determinist argument in a 2015 interview with *GQ*, noting that one of the core tenets of his communication strategy is, “How do we tell a story about issues to constituencies that are completely splintered, who don't watch television in the same way, who don't watch the news in the same way?” (Simmons, 2015). The Obama campaign of 2008 had employed a similar approach. “Our view internally was that the campaign had gone pretty well,” noted an Obama administration veteran, “and the strategy that we had used to communicate with the American people there was the same one that we should use in the White House.” A producer for *The Late Show*, which Obama would visit in September 2009, remembered:

I had a good relationship with his staff when he was a candidate. He had come on several times when he was a candidate; we always had a really good relationship, so when those people moved into the White House to run communications in the White House, it was dealing with the same people. For the most part, as they took office, I remember even the transition team was like, “Let us get settled; we'll figure this out and we see no reason why he couldn't come on.”

Beginning with Leno and then moving to Letterman and Stewart, the Obama administration “used those shows to keep the president engaged with the American people and have them give him an opportunity to go and be in America's living room,” according to an Obama administration official. The administration was not only more proactive than previous administrations in utilizing entertainment-based platforms to keep the president engaged with the American people but also in recognizing the inherent power of those programs on a daily to weekly basis:

In the White House a (very) small army of (very) underpaid and (very) overqualified young staffers track the news [...] but starting in 2011, White

House aides started receiving a new daily update: one that included a daily synopsis of *The Daily Show*, Colbert, Leno, Letterman, and the rest. People's opinions are being shaped on these platforms, so you better know what is being said about you. (Pfeiffer, 2015)

In 2015, it was revealed that the Obama administration actually organized occasional confidential meetings with Jon Stewart to understand what was on the mind of *The Daily Show* host and his influential audience (Samuelsohn, 2015).

Freie (2011) argued that the Obama administration originally employed a more conventional strategy aimed at influencing Washington journalists and only embraced postmodern tenets after the Republican midterm victory in November 2010. One key member of the Obama administration who advanced a position on media strategy that seemed to validate Freie's argument was Barack Obama:

You can't separate good policy from the need to bring the American people along and make sure that they know why you're doing what you're doing and that's particularly true now in this new communications era. I think that we were ahead of the curve in 2008 in social media and the Internet and digital communications. When we came into office, instead of taking some of those lessons, we suddenly adapted ourselves to the White House press room and structures that had been built back in the 1940s and '50s. As a consequence of those missteps early, we got the policies right [...] but there was a lot of political pain along the way that might not have been necessary. (Simmons, 2015)

The first entertainment-based appearance the new president made, the March 2009 visit to *The Tonight Show*, adds important context to the frustration Obama expressed in that 2015 interview. During a generalized conversation with Leno, Obama made an off-the-cuff self-deprecating remark about his bowling ability comparing himself to disabled athletes competing in the Special Olympics that generated negative reactions on social media and among journalists. "That first Jay Leno show was where he made the Special Olympics crack? Sometimes that sort of thing happens when you don't have a specific policy goal," noted an Obama administration official, adding, "You just find yourself

riffing and saying something stupid.” An Obama administration speechwriter also recalled the incident and said:

Leno, it was early in the administration and it was a general conversation about a lot of different priorities. In more recent years he’s had more specific things he’s wanted to talk about. I think it’s probably more valuable to know exactly why you’re doing it but it doesn’t really change the calculus of why you’re doing it. I don’t really think it affects anything.

“A bad joke can happen under any conditions,” the speechwriter cautioned.

With the recognition of the power of influential comedic hosts, the Obama administration began to recognize the shift in digital trends and entertainment-based venues and embraced pushing specific policies through the use of short, humorous clips. A key moment in the 2012 campaign in this regard was Barack Obama’s appearance on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* in April 2012, in which Obama not only talked with Fallon but performed in a comedic skit, “Slow Jam the News,” to promote a student loan reform bill being debated in Congress. This appearance not only marked the first time that Obama participated in a *Saturday Night Live*-style comedic skit as president but also the first time that any president did so in a televised entertainment-based venue to push for specific action on the part of the audience – in this case, calling senators and congressmen to urge them to pass the student loan reform bill. Bill Clinton’s “Last Days” video was intended primarily to entertain the insular White House correspondents’ dinner audience, and George W. Bush’s appearance in the Barney Cam videos was similarly non-political.

The Romney Campaign

Challenging the Obama campaign in 2012, the campaign of Mitt Romney did not engage with entertainment-based venues to a significant degree and crucially avoided using their full ticket in these venues during the final stretch of the campaign. Romney

was an outlier in the 2008 Republican field in avoiding *The Late Show* and *The Tonight Show* but occasionally used these venues during the first Obama term. Interestingly, Romney ended up using these venues more frequently after his 2012 defeat than he did during the 2012 election cycle. For example, Romney appeared in advertisements for *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* in August 2015 and read mean tweets about himself on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* in March 2016. An advisor to both Romney campaigns said that Romney's individual personality and view of the presidency played a key role in his evolution:

By 2011, I think that with having one presidential campaign under his belt, he was more comfortable with the idea of going into some of those places that maybe wouldn't have been seen as very safe before and give it a shot. I do think that he wanted to be mindful of maintaining some level of decorum and seriousness since he was running for a very serious office in a way that now (since 2012) I think he's willing to kind of do anything.

Romney appeared on *The Tonight Show* only in March 2012, his only late night talk show appearance of the campaign, and his vice presidential nominee was absent from the entire talk show circuit. "We never got Paul Ryan when he was added to the ticket," remembered a producer of *The Late Show*, adding, "Then at the end, I was talking with Romney's people a lot in that October window, but it never happened." In 2016, the Romney campaign's avoidance of the entertainment-based venue during the crucial last few weeks of the campaign was heavily criticized by Donald Trump:

I'm not going to disappear like the last group did four years ago because that last month I kept saying, "Where is he? Why isn't he on television?" I called his people: "Why isn't he doing Jay Leno? Why isn't he doing, you know, Letterman and these shows?" And every night you'd see that Obama was on television and I'd call and say, "He has to do Jay Leno; he has to do David Letterman. Why isn't he?" I don't know what happened; they took a vacation the last month of the campaign! (Trump, 2016a)

The few appearances in these venues that Romney made during the home stretch of the campaign – on *Live with Kelly* and in Oprah Winfrey’s magazine – he made concurrently with his wife Ann, who also made solo appearances on *The Tonight Show* and *The Rachel Ray Show*. “She was a very natural in interviews like that,” remembered a Romney campaign advisor, “and those were sort of nice, soft landings for her.” Ann Romney’s warm personality made her a natural surrogate for the campaign, but Ann Romney was contrasted by an aggressive use of entertainment-based media by three key administration figures – Barack Obama, Michelle Obama, and Joe Biden.

Other factors played a role in the Romney campaign’s avoidance of these venues. The Romney campaign accrued far more money than the McCain campaign had in the previous election cycle, though Republicans bemoaned a fiscal disadvantage the Romney campaign had due to the timing of the party’s convention and the rules for raising money for the general election (Tau, 2014). However, a core tenet of the Romney campaign was to frame the election as a referendum on the sitting president, according to a Romney campaign advisor:

This was not a campaign about Mitt Romney. This was a campaign about Barack Obama and whether he had failed us as a country or not. If you believed that Barack Obama had done a great job, you weren’t going to come vote for Mitt Romney. If you believed that he had done a terrible job, you probably were, but the first hurdle to get over was to convince people that he hadn’t done a good job for our country, and that’s how you unseat an incumbent president. That’s the strategic direction the campaign went. It’s not fair to look back and say, “Well, if we had changed this one thing or changed that one thing” – that was a wholesale strategic decision made by the campaign. We own it as a campaign; it didn’t turn out to be the right strategy, but I’m not sure that taking everything else we did and then trying to paint Mitt Romney as a nice guy because all these people that he knows think highly of him – that would’ve required a whole different strategy. It’s not enough to just change that one thing.

Part of the reason that the Romney campaign made this decision was to offer voters a deliberate choice between a steady candidate and a “celebrity president that had enjoyed

a lot of support from younger people and from folks in the entertainment industry,” recalled the Romney campaign advisor, adding, “We knew that [the entertainment-based venue] would be a tool that he would utilize.” However, this strategy, along with the Republican National Convention’s September date keeping the Romney campaign from using general election funding until then, allowed the Obama reelection campaign to define Romney early on through a series of negative advertisements.

In accordance with this aggressive use of negative ads, Obama aggressively used social media and entertainment-based venues to press his case to likely Democratic voters that a Romney presidency would be disastrous. A senior Bush administration official argued that the Obama campaign had to do so to maintain a sense of authenticity:

In terms of volume, there’s much more volume of messaging in social media than there is in popular media, and there’s much more volume in popular media than there was in the kind of intellectual, political activist media. It’s very, very different today. So President Obama deserves credit for acknowledging that and playing it, but I think there was almost a greater obligation for him to do it, even more than the challenger Romney because he was a party to it when he first got elected, so he couldn’t *not* do it. At first he was defining a generational difference. He was defining it in the primary against Hillary Clinton; he was defining it as a contrast to the Republicans, so I think it was generationally an obligation for him to be engaged there, and he was. I think non-engagement would have caused him to be seen as just an opportunist when he first got elected, rather than a sustainer during his presidency, so he actually worked to maintain a relationship with social media during his presidency that no other president even had the invitation to do.

The Romney campaign strategy was flawed because they did not understand Obama’s relationship with social media and the entertainment-based venue allowed him to encompass the advantages of an incumbent running for reelection while simultaneously enjoying the freedom of a challenger. While Jimmy Carter was the first presidential candidate to successfully run as a Washington outsider, Barack Obama was the first incumbent president to essentially do the same, potentially expanding the presidency under role theory to encompass the *Washington outsider* – or at least the *critic of*

Washington culture – as a sixth presidential role. Incumbent presidents have often tried to frame reelection campaigns as referenda on unqualified or dangerous challengers – Lyndon Johnson in 1964, Richard Nixon in 1972, and George W. Bush in 2004 presented stark visions of an American governed by Barry Goldwater, George McGovern, and John Kerry, respectively – but fully embodied the five presidential roles in doing so, specifically that of commander in chief. Johnson questioned Goldwater’s comfort with nuclear weapons; Nixon attacked McGovern’s supporters for demanding an irresponsible end to the Vietnam War; and Bush attacked Kerry’s unsteadiness in times of turmoil. In addition to attacking Romney’s business record and effectively tying Romney to the Republican-led House of Representatives, Obama attacked Romney for being culturally out of touch and used entertainment-based venues to show that he was connected to current American trends and concerns, which was important for key demographic voting blocs. For twenty-one percent of voters in the 2012 exit polls, the most important question of the election was “Does this candidate care about people like me?” Of those twenty-one percent, eighty-one percent voted for Obama (Klein, 2013). Part of Obama’s enormous advantage with this subset of voters came from his aggressive use of entertainment-based venues to reach out to as many potential voters as possible, from *Late Night* to *The Daily Show* to ESPN – appearing on the *Bill Simmons Podcast* in 2012 and appearing annually on ESPN to select his NCAA March Madness bracket (Geraghty, 2014; Simmons, 2012). In largely avoiding these entertainment-based venues Romney acted more like Bob Dole in 1996 than like John Kerry in 2004; Kerry used the entertainment-based venue to humanize himself and blunt some of the sharpest attacks of the Bush campaign. Thanks to his aggressive use of the entertainment-based venue and

early negative advertising blitz against Romney, Obama made Romney the defining candidate of the campaign for a small but important subset of voters.

Between Two Ferns

Throughout his second term, Barack Obama attempted to use as many outlets as possible, including digital outlets, to establish an intense connection with ordinary Americans. Obama visited podcasts such as *WTF with Marc Maron*, participated in exhausting physical feats on *Running Wild with Bear Grylls*, acted as a comedic pundit in guest hosting “The Word” segment of *The Colbert Report*, and did one-on-one interviews with individuals famous only for their YouTube channels. The defining moment of the second term in this regard was the Obama administration’s decision in February 2014 to make the president a subject of mockery on the internet web series *Between Two Ferns* in the hopes that the video would raise awareness of Healthcare.gov among younger citizens. As part of a multi-level approach to pitch the new website to as many audiences as possible, the Obama administration took the risk of demeaning the presidency to reach as many young people it could to drive signups on the website. In an interview I did not conduct, the director of the video, Scott Aukerman, noted:

The most important thing was that it didn’t come across as an advertisement. I really wanted it to be a funny, normal *Between Two Ferns* video and the great part about it was that the White House was very accommodating of that and didn’t want to get in the way of our process. [...] They were laughing just as much at what was going down. They couldn’t have been easier to work with. We kept expecting them to say “No, no, no, you can’t have that joke,” or “No, no, no, you can’t be funny, it has to all be about the Affordable Care Act,” but to their credit they really wanted it to be what it was and got out of our way. (Fox, 2014)

The question of how *Between Two Ferns* will affect presidential authority in the long term remains to be decided, but the short term benefit of the initiative was undeniable: traffic on Healthcare.gov rose forty percent after *Between Two Ferns* was posted online,

which makes the appearance an enormous success in terms of what the administration set out to do (Lee, 2014).

I specifically asked a number of respondents about their reactions to Barack Obama's appearance on *Between Two Ferns* and similar initiatives. It should come as no surprise that Obama administration officials praised the moves and some Republicans derided them, but others unaffiliated with the administration on both sides of the political aisle offered intriguing responses. "My first reaction to both of those was, 'What are they doing? It makes him look foolish,'" said a senior Democratic strategist, "but the results are unmistakable. If you look at the results, on the numbers, it's an unmistakable success." A Republican strategist of past campaigns called the *Between Two Ferns* appearance "ill-advised" but said, "I don't know that it did any damage." A senior advisor to the Gore campaign stated:

I suspect that whoever first brought up the idea up to him and played him a couple of clips from that show got a very puzzled look from the leader of the free world, but I think if you asked the president now, 'Was that a good thing to do?' he would wholeheartedly agree.

Looking at things from a financial perspective, a Republican strategist who worked on the 2008 McCain campaign concurred with the positive assessment: "It probably got a few million young people to go ahead and sign up and what did it cost him financially? Zero – that is a good move."

One of the reasons that the *Between Two Ferns* appearance succeeded was due to the fact that nothing significant geopolitically occurred when the video finally was posted on the internet. In some cases since the *Ferns* taping, the Obama administration has not been quite as lucky. In July 2014, President Obama was forced to cancel an appearance on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* due to volatile conflicts occurring between Russia and Ukraine in

the Donbass and also between Israel and Hamas in Gaza; part of the motivation for cancelling the appearance stemmed from the famous gossip website TMZ framing his upcoming appearance in this manner: “President Obama is juggling at least two world crises, but it’s not cramping his pop culture style” (TMZ Staff, 2014). In late 2015, however, Obama taped an appearance on the Jerry Seinfeld-helmed *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* only hours after giving a nationally televised speech from the Oval Office reacting to a terrorist attack in California; Obama could get away with this because while he taped the episode on December 7, the episode would not air until December 30 (Zak, 2015). I asked a former Clinton administration official about the *Comedians in Cars* taping and he noted that a taped program like *Ferns* or *Comedians* offers some advantages that a typical late night program might not:

I don’t think there’s something inherently wrong with the president taping *Comedians in Cars* the day after San Bernadino because the scheduling process is such that it might have been the only open day on the president’s schedule for a long time. I do think that if that episode was airing that same week they would have had a problem, and I think that’s one of the reasons they did: obviously the season wasn’t starting until a few months later. But I think people are pretty forgiving about the fact that there are multiple parts of anybody’s life and sometimes scheduling works and sometimes it doesn’t.

In the future, digital entertainment-based platforms may become more preferable to television entertainment-based outlets not only because of the increasing popularity of these digital platforms but also because these appearances do not have as much of a time-based component as the television programs.

I asked interviewees for this study about how much of a role President Obama’s individual personality might have played in the conceptualization of *Between Two Ferns* and similarly digital entertainment-based videos. A senior strategist on the Bush 2004

reelection effort who “did not disapprove of the decision” to tape *Between Two Ferns* argued:

There are risks to doing these shows; they can go very badly, and I suspect there are several people over the years that have looked at this and said, “I’m not the right personality for this format.” There is an age difference between the two men if you’re comparing Bush and Obama, of course, and that has something to do with it: cultural difference in terms of age and just sort of comfort with this stuff, but I just don’t see President Bush getting on YouTube with a YouTube star or an internet star with crazy green lips and letting her interview him. I just don’t see that ever happening and I don’t think many Republicans would, but the Obama team clearly sees value in all of these and believes they’re reaching an audience that is otherwise difficult to reach.

Both Obama administration advisors that I spoke to for this project noted the president’s healthy sense of humor and believed that this factor of his personality made him a natural in a setting like *Between Two Ferns*. One Obama administration advisor believed that individual personality played a major role in whether these types of projects could be successful and pointed to the same quality that Bush administration officials referred to as the key to political success: authenticity:

I think people are concerned that having more fun in office diminishes the presidency in some way, but I think President Obama has shown that’s not really the case. The only thing that would diminish you in office is if you go and do those things and are not genuine and come off as pretty inauthentic in a medium where you’re not comfortable. If Mitt Romney were elected president and I was advising him, I think I might not advise him to all the same things that President Obama did because he probably wouldn’t have been funny on *Between Two Ferns* because he’s so hammy the way he tries to force himself to be funny, and that’s not necessarily helpful for the cause.

However, one Democratic strategist unaffiliated with the Obama administration disagreed partially, noting Romney’s potential struggles with a format like *Between Two Ferns* but adding:

Barack Obama, in addition to being one of the foremost smartest people to ever come into politics, is not warm and fuzzy. If anything, he feels – you know, if you watch him, and I don’t know him well, so I’m a good focus group on this – when you see him, I’m always confident in what he says but I don’t get a sense of

warmth from it; I don't get a "feel good." I'm persuaded by his intellect rather than his persona. So the fact that you've got Barack Obama doing this stuff: I think there are going to be presidents elected who have better entertainment genes that are going to do even more.

A senior strategist on the Bush 2004 reelection campaign argued that one reason that Obama could succeed on *Between Two Ferns* was a matter of partisanship; to this strategist, Democratic presidents are freer to experiment than Republican presidents:

I think the Democrats will probably continue to do the things Obama has done and Republicans will be slower to do them. I think these mainstream shows like *Ellen* and *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, I think you'll continue to see candidates of both parties and all ilks do those shows because they have such a wide viewership. Some of the niche things, though: there may be different strategies for who you're communicating with and what you're trying to present as you go into office.

Also, a Clinton administration speechwriter defended the *Ferns* visit by saying, "People tut-tut about 'beneath the dignity of the president', but you know what? As president these days your dignity is under constant assault; if you can assert your humanity and sense of humor, you are uplifting your own dignity."

The two most interesting responses I received on this subject came from strategists working for competing Republican presidential campaigns in the 2016 election cycle. One strategist noted that the president's decision to speak to YouTube-based celebrities was particularly ill-advised because he had previously refused to publicly meet with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu earlier in that year, arguing:

It just feeds into the Republican view of him as a narcissist that he's sitting at the White House with selfie sticks. Do young people think that's clever? I'm certain some of them do and that's why he's doing that, clearly, but any single thing like that does potentially have downsides, and I think there's definitely a major difference doing it as a candidate who is looking to get attention and to win an election and a sitting incumbent president who should be a president for all people and should be focused on serious policy and should spend their time not on meeting with Glozell the woman in the bath set that ate all cereal.

To expand the administration's outreach to non-political audiences, President Obama met with a handful of YouTube personalities following his State of the Union address in 2015 (and again in 2016); one of the personalities Obama met with became famous for filming segments in a bathtub full of cereal (Schwab, 2015). Obama also followed up his *Ferns* appearance in 2014 in 2015 with a new digital effort, produced by BuzzFeed, designed to drive largely non-politically-motivated young people to sign up for health insurance at Healthcare.gov: a short video in which Obama makes silly faces while taking selfies (Gauthier et al., 2015). Another Republican advisor to a 2016 campaign mentioned that video while providing an alternate take:

I'm sure you saw that when Obama did the BuzzFeed thing. You see pictures of him with a selfie stick and people say, "Well that's not presidential." Maybe so, but he's still president and he didn't lose the office; they didn't say, "Well, you know what, never mind: that was un-presidential, you're not president anymore." So he has something that he can kind of fall back on in that he is president, but if you're – I don't know what a good example is – maybe you're Martin O'Malley, it's conceivable you could do something where people would say, "Well that's not presidential" and that would actually hurt you, because they would say, "Well we don't have to choose this guy to be president. There are other people who are presidential, and I don't want someone who's not presidential." So that's the balancing act that a candidate has to find is, "How do I be –" not to sound like a *Saturday Night Live* skit about Hillary, but – "How do I be relatable without being un-presidential?"

In this argumentative frame, a sitting president enjoys more freedom to reach out to citizens in experimental ways than a mere presidential candidate might. This has largely been a minority view among political veterans, including in most of my interviews, but it does raise intriguing questions. In the same way that the Obama 2012 reelection campaign successfully convinced enough voters that the election was a referendum on the character and proposed policies of Mitt Romney, rather than on Barack Obama, the Obama administration's embrace of entertainment-based platforms beginning in 2011 allowed the president to act more freely than conventional wisdom allowed.

Conclusion

The Obama administration saw a remarkable break with tradition by a sitting president that capitalized on the fragmentation of audience driven by technological changes. The Obama era can be separated into two distinct parts: the first encompasses the 2008 campaign and the Obama administration's use of entertainment-based venues to keep the president engaged with citizens on a general level, while the second begins in late 2011 and early 2012, when the Obama administration began aggressively pursuing entertainment-based venues to advocate for specific policies in a more postmodern style. Technological changes played a role in the shift even then, as digital outlets became more prevalent in 2011 and 2012, but individual personality also played a crucial role in the shift. The Obama administration's communications department has been populated by twenty- and thirty-somethings more comfortable with the digital world than previous administrations, and a number of key figures there helped push Obama to experiment with entertainment-based digital venues like *Between Two Ferns* and BuzzFeed. Obama's willingness to experiment also reflected the hip persona he first displayed on the national scene in 2007.

The McCain campaign and the Romney campaign lost to Obama in different ways. The McCain campaign was hamstrung by a poor financial condition and featured a candidate willing to experiment with entertainment-based venues partly due to his personality and partly due to fiscal necessity. The Romney campaign was healthier financially, though not as strong as initially thought due to laws governing the financing of elections related to the parties' national conventions, but the Romney campaign was significantly outmatched by the Obama campaign in the entertainment arena. This deficit

stemmed partially from Romney's individual personality and partially from a campaign decision to make the election a referendum on Obama. However, the Obama campaign shrewdly managed to make the election a referendum on Romney for small but key voting blocs and managed to become the first incumbent president to effectively campaign for reelection partially as a Washington outsider, redefining the presidential role.

The success of President Obama's appearance on *Between Two Ferns* marks a watershed moment in the marriage of politics and sketch comedy that first climaxed during the 2008 election cycle and will continue to play a major role in presidential politics for years to come. As an advisor to multiple Republican presidential campaigns remarked:

I do think the president's success in carrying his message or messages to the American people via these different popular culture channels probably has showed that it's something that candidates can do as well, and I think that as a candidate you are in a far more difficult position to get that kind of attention and to get that kind of time to get across your message than the president does. When you're the president, anything you say essentially is going to be picked up by the media. For some of these candidates – in fact, for all of these candidates, basically – they're all fighting for any kind of time or word count at all that they can get, so anything like that's extraordinarily valuable to them. It gives them a chance to balance off what may appear to be a rather dour personality with a little bit of humor and that sort of thing and so from that point of view I think it's very logical for them to do that.

Economic changes to the 2016 late night landscape have made it more necessary for presidential candidates to follow in Obama's footsteps; these changes and the 2016 cycle will be discussed in the next chapter. Specifically referencing 2016, the Republican advisor quoted above added one important caveat: "I don't know that I think the president has influenced Donald Trump to do what he's done in this campaign at all; I think Trump would've done that anyway."

CHAPTER 9

THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES

The 2016 presidential primaries played out in a television environment featuring a late night talk show atmosphere that looks less like *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and more like *Saturday Night Live*. One of the key changes during the second half of the Obama era, the fluctuation of the late night scene, occurred partially due to technological changes driving economic competition and partially due to the individual personalities of the hosts of these programs. During Obama's second term, Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Jon Stewart all exited the late night landscape, and the emergence of Jimmy Fallon and Jimmy Kimmel as major figures represented a new era in which television content and digital content were interconnected. The transition of Stephen Colbert from Stewart's basic cable partner to Letterman's network television replacement particularly inspired discussion among a number of my interviewees about the interplay of individual personality and economic competition. Digital content, on the other hand, has expanded dramatically, and many of the candidates followed in Barack Obama's footsteps by engaging with digital entertainment-based outlets. Nearly all of the candidates used televised entertainment-based venues to promote their candidacies and nearly all of the candidates appeared in digital videos focused on the softer, and in some cases sillier, sides of their personalities.

The major story of the 2016 primary cycle was the rise of Donald Trump on the Republican side. As a successful businessman with no government experience who spent over a decade as a reality television persona, Trump decided to plot a 2016 election course relying heavily on earned media, particularly interviews with journalists on cable

news channels such as CNN and Fox News (Politico staff, 2016). With his expertise in playing a bombastic character on television, Trump made himself the center of attention for months and eagerly courted entertainment-based outlets such as *The Tonight Show*, *The Late Show*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, and even *Saturday Night Live*, which Trump hosted in November 2015. Veterans of presidential administrations and campaigns who I asked about Trump were split on what factors caused his rise, but a cautionary tale from the 2008 campaign illustrates what happens when a campaign focuses on celebrity and neglects or actively thwarts the fundamentals of organizational discipline: the doomed attempt by Fred Thompson to win the Republican nomination.

The Late Night Environment

Barack Obama's appearance on *Between Two Ferns* featured the president as the punch line of an extended comedy bit that satirized the modern talk show, and his use of comedy for political benefit reflected a larger shift occurring on the actual talk shows that *Between Two Ferns* operates as a parody of. Because of technological changes led by the internet and the merging of internet connectivity and mobility through smartphones citizens have shifted towards platforms that allow them to get information and entertainment quickly and move on to something else, while content viewed initially once can be viewed repeatedly at the user's convenience on an almost permanent basis. In the 1990s VHS tapes were prevalent, but the enduring nature of the internet as a storage space has made entertainment-based venues more attractive to presidential level figures "when you look at the return on investment of time," according to a former Clinton administration official, who continued:

Because back then you didn't have the way to promote it yourself, if you did *Politically Incorrect* and someone missed it you were relying on any other

residual news accounts capturing exactly what you wanted to get across and then sometime in a rerun later they'd catch it again.

Tools such as the White House website and official White House social media accounts today allow for appearances in entertainment-based venues to be circulated more widely and quickly, but also to last more permanently, than appearances stored on VHS tapes or DVDs which can deteriorate over time.

The most effective and popular tool, according to an advisor to a 2016 campaign, has been YouTube, and YouTube has affected the way content is constructed:

The one thing that seems to be consistent in all of this is that as you're getting further and further away from big corporate structures –there's three big networks and they disseminate the information– to a place where people are able to be a lot more selective about where they want to get their information from, it ends up coming in a lot smaller bites. YouTube is now more popular than cable television – and they're different media. For YouTube videos, people are not sitting down watching twenty-three minutes of a YouTube video with ads interspersed for seven minutes. Campaigns are beyond hour long newscasts where we complain that there's only an eight second sound bite. We literally are posting six second videos on our own platforms, and it's because the platform is limited to six seconds, or a fifteen second ad, or a thirty second ad or whatever, but we're trying to get them directly to the people.

When Jay Leno replaced Johnny Carson on *The Tonight Show*, he extended the opening segment of quick jokes to reflect his background as a standup comedian. “Whenever anyone came on, we would always try and think of interesting things for them to do,” recalled a *Tonight Show* veteran, adding, “It wasn't nearly as involved as it is today because our show was more monologue driven and a little less bit and gag driven.” Leno's exits from *The Tonight Show* – initially, Leno was forced out in favor of Conan O'Brien; after returning, Leno was eventually forced out permanently in favor of Jimmy Fallon – were primarily driven by an evaluation by NBC executives that, because O'Brien's and Fallon's programs employed more sketch comedy, their material could be more easily disseminated on digital platforms such as YouTube. This widespread sharing

would in turn draw increased numbers for the program in key demographics that are traditionally difficult for advertisers to reach, such as men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine. This increase in younger viewers would allow NBC to charge advertisers more money, with YouTube being the primary “gateway drug,” to speak colloquially (Bark, 2013). “People are no longer watching the entire Tonight Show; [...] today's late night hosts are deliberately doing comedy bits and performances they know will be watched in segments on YouTube,” argued Leno era *Tonight Show* producer Dave Berg in an interview separate from this project (Joseph, 2014). Because of that digital focus, the longer format parts of *The Tonight Show* and other late night programs, such as the monologues and even the interviews, have been shrunk down. “[Jimmy] Fallon and to a lesser extent [Jimmy] Kimmel really don't even do actual interviews any more. It's mostly performance and schtick. I like to see people tell actual stories once in a while,” said Berg (Joseph, 2014). The departures of David Letterman and Jon Stewart and shift of Stephen Colbert from basic cable to network television in 2015 also signaled a changing of the guard that began with ABC’s decision to have Kimmel compete directly with *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show* in August 2012 and NBC’s decision to remove Leno and elevate Fallon, a decision made only a few months after Kimmel’s transfer to 11:35 (Rose, 2012; Silverman, 2013).

Still, the sheer number of cable and satellite television channels and the forces of economic competition inevitably provide contrasting visions to the YouTube-oriented visions of *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* and *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, which has led to a more diverse array of choices for presidential candidates to use to exploit their strengths and hide their weaknesses. A current advisor to President Clinton noted:

You know Jimmy Fallon does something different than Jon Stewart, so you know that if you want to have a lengthy in-depth discussion about climate that can be engaging and entertaining, too, Jon's a better choice than Fallon, but if you were a candidate who's new on the scene, and you're trying to introduce yourself to voters, and a big part of introducing yourself to voters is almost like anything else: they have to like you to be open to hearing your ideas, then Fallon's a better choice. It's going to be a little bit more about more pedestrian kinds of things not because Fallon's maybe not interested but because he knows what his audience is looking for is a little bit different than what Jon's audience is looking for, so that all plays into the prep of the shows, too. Because Jimmy Fallon, for example, a huge success of his show is the viral video or the sketches; he will try to pitch his guests on participating in something like that, even politicians. Sometimes they do agree to it; sometimes they don't, but you know for Jon Stewart's show never was doing a sketch or something like that ever part of the negotiation.

When Stewart's protégé, Stephen Colbert, replaced Letterman on *The Late Show*, he immediately won plaudits for conducting an emotional interview with Vice President Joe Biden shortly after the death of Biden's son. Because of the programs' formats, that interview simply could not have turned out the same way on *The Tonight Show* or *Jimmy Kimmel Live*. A former advisor to President Clinton specifically pointed to the Biden interview as something different from the majority of the format:

What's so intriguing about Colbert, though, is that I don't think he's like any of the others. It will be very interesting to see his time now, because we know what he's done. He started as a standup comedian; he's an entertainer, but his questioning – look at the Biden interview. It's a very different treatment: respectful.

In today's diverse media environment, candidates can appear in respectful venues such as Colbert's *Late Show* or in its polar opposite: *Real Time with Bill Maher*, which combines an opinionated host and the freedom of a premium cable channel not monitored by the Federal Communications Commission for indecent or obscene content. In January 2016, Maher created a petition addressed to the White House inviting Obama onto *Real Time* – because Obama had “so honored the viewers of so many other TV shows and media outlets” – that garnered so many signatures that the White House was forced to issue an

ambiguous statement in response (Christopher, 2016). A current advisor to President Clinton noted a reason why an incumbent president might reject a program like Maher's:

I think politicians feel safer on a mainstream show; you're pretty sure that the audience on NBC or CBS is going to be more middle of the road than HBO or Comedy Central, so I do feel that they feel safer, by and large. Some don't; if you're Nancy Pelosi, you might feel like Bill Maher's show is going to deliver a more sympathetic audience than *The Tonight Show* will to you.

Many Republican candidates might feel that a program like *Real Time with Bill Maher* would be unfair to them, but a member of both Bush administrations argued that, depending on the circumstance, challenging a seemingly unfriendly host could be beneficial:

There are some shows, there are some personalities where there's just zero chance of return on investment and sometimes there is someone, an interviewer, that you know just completely disagrees with your boss or with your candidate but it's worth doing because you can demonstrate his or her willingness to go into the lion's den and deal with the tough questions. That's one category; you should definitely find those and embrace those. Then there are some where there is absolutely nothing to be gained and there's not return on investment so you shouldn't do it.

An Obama administration veteran agreed, noting, "The president did go and do *The O'Reilly Factor* a couple of times because it gave the president the opportunity to confront one of his toughest critics." He added:

Sometimes it's important for voters to see that you're capable of getting outside of your comfort zone. Sometimes there's a specific demographic purpose to that, but it's not necessarily the demographic that you're talking to. For example: in 2008, Oprah interviewed Obama and McCain. I don't think that there's a person on earth who thought that McCain was going to pick up new supporters because they're *Oprah* viewers who saw him and thought he was great. I think the play there was: he was going to go on *Oprah* to show that he could go into the lion's den and perform well and play the part of being the president to all Americans, not just the ones who support him.

During the 2016 cycle, a number of candidates utilized the Obama approach to entertainment-based venues, including digital outlets, though Rick Santorum and Bernie Sanders were the only ones to visit *Real Time with Bill Maher*.

By 2016, digital outlets such as Independent Journal Review and BuzzFeed became important creators of digital content, and a number of candidates with low polling numbers felt that their best chance of gaining virality was not to try and schedule an appearance on late night programs but to instead produce a short comedy bit with these digital venues; examples of this include Carly Fiorina's BuzzFeed-produced video highlighting differences in gender representation in the workplace, Rand Paul's obliteration of the current tax code in variously brutal ways, and Lindsey Graham's destruction of his cell phone (Allahpundit, 2015a; 2015b; 2015c). All candidates who made digital videos and lasted to the Iowa caucus, with the exception of Dr. Ben Carson, used a combination of these venues, appearing on a televised entertainment-based program while also starring in a viral video produced by a digital outlet.

The Democratic Candidates

During the 2016 campaign, the candidate most enthusiastic towards embracing softer venues was Hillary Clinton, which is unsurprising in one sense, because she hired a number of veterans from the Obama administration to help her shape her message more effectively, but surprising considering her cautious use of these venues during the 2008 campaign. Clinton used these venues throughout her political career, embracing *The Late Show with David Letterman* during her tenure representing New York in the Senate, and during the 2016 primary season, Clinton largely eschewed traditional press conferences with national journalists but made time to visit *Saturday Night Live*, *The Tonight Show*,

The Late Show, and *Jimmy Kimmel Live*; tape a long-form television interview on the Lifetime network; and host YouTube celebrities for an open dialogue in the way that Obama did after his State of the Union addresses in 2015 and 2016. A veteran of the Clinton administration noted:

Hillary's not a natural at this, but she's done really well. Her repartee with Letterman is as good as any politician's who's ever gone on because she prepares. She has the persona of, "I'm the good student. I've come and we're going to be funny," and does really well.

Another member of the administration of Bill Clinton praised Hillary Clinton's appearances in softer settings like *The Late Show* and *Jimmy Kimmel Live* because they "expose her humor and self-deprecation and things that those of us who've worked with her have seen but it doesn't always present." That sentiment was somewhat bipartisan, as a former Bush administration veteran confessed: "I think she comes off well in them. She came off very well on that [*SNL* bartender skit], and I think they recognize that and I'd be surprised if she didn't do more of them."

However, various Democratic strategists who noted her successful use of these entertainment-based venues questioned her commitment to using them based on her history. "I don't know if somebody would say, 'Madame President Clinton, we want to keep this very controlled; it's too unpredictable' or whether they'd say, 'It's good for you to go on there,'" noted a senior Democratic strategist comparing Secretary Clinton to Bernie Sanders, adding, "If some advisor told [Sanders], 'We want to just control you and keep you in a tight box,' I think that person would be an ex-advisor." Another senior Democratic strategist believed that the influence of Obama staffers was a major factor in the 2016 version of Clinton but that the candidate is the final arbiter of campaign decisions:

I think they're going to be more careful about it than the Obama campaign. That's in the DNA of Hillary, but I don't think there's any question that she understands that she's got to be across platforms and risk showing that natural side of her. In fact, in the 2008 campaign, I thought when she did that like in New Hampshire, every time she did she did great, and then as soon as she started doing great, you could sort of see them pull back. You'd see them win a couple states and then you'd see them almost freeze up again, so I think they've learned that lesson.

A former Clinton administration advisor argued that in the end, when it came to President Obama's use of these kinds of venues, "she would continue it, actually. It may not be her instinct," adding:

There's a demographic reality; she'll be one of the older presidents, and all of those questions will be surrounding her, particularly if it's [Marco] Rubio or [Ted] Cruz, they'd be the third youngest president, so you may have these generational tugs that I think she'd have to attend to. She well knows so much of the president's role as the communicator in chief and how do you do that? It's not always behind a podium in the East Room. I would imagine that it would have a certain kind of decorum that she would be comfortable with. So I think the way you've seen it in the current context of the campaign would continue because she's got a good laugh – I thought she was great on *SNL*. She got it; it's kind of the Hillary Clinton that we've liked and known. So yeah, I would think it would continue. The reality is there's a political imperative for it to continue now.

The direct quote from that advisor appears in a slightly edited form. In the original quote, taken during an interview in November 2015, the advisor said something that would have been considered inconceivable even one election cycle ago: "I guess technically Trump would be her opponent."

The Entertainer

In July 2008, Barack Obama had just completed a successful tour of certain European countries when the McCain campaign, desperate to gain momentum, found a way to attack Obama, according to a McCain campaign strategist:

We had a planning meeting in Phoenix on Sunday after he spoke on Saturday to two hundred thousand people in Germany. Let's just say it wasn't an uplifting meeting that we had! He's probably going to come home to a ticker tape parade; he's going to win August; he's going to win the conventions. Things weren't right; we had to do something major to upset his apple cart. So there were five of

us in the room and we spent the day talking about what is it? “Why is this guy considered qualified to be president of the United States? He’s done nothing. He’s a great speaker; he’s young; he’s energetic; all those things, but president?” And somewhere in that group we started talking about what he’s qualified to be is a great celebrity; that’s why people came to see him in Germany, and as a matter of fact, he is the greatest celebrity in the world. And we kind of went, “Hmm,” and who do you contrast it with? Amazingly enough and I don’t know if people know this, but we had several choices to contrast with, and one of them was Donald Trump.

In the end, the campaign produced a successful negative campaign ad comparing Obama primarily with reality television star Paris Hilton, but it is telling that just two election cycles ago, Donald Trump was considered the epitome of a vacuous celebrity.

What explains the success of Donald Trump in 2016? I asked a number of veterans of political campaigns if Barack Obama’s use of the entertainment-based venue brought the presidency dangerously close to entertainment, blurring the lines enough that an entertainer with no government experience could be considered presidential. The responses to this assertion were mixed, but the alternative theories espoused by these campaign veterans raise important questions about our media environment. “We now live in a heightened political society where people are simultaneously delusioned, cynical, and fascinated by politics,” argued a senior Democratic veteran of multiple presidential campaigns who contended that these factors made it more likely for television programs, including not only news programs but also entertainment-based venues, to use presidential-level figures to increase ratings. “Trump is exploiting what I call the ‘dancing bear’ phenomenon,” asserted a senior advisor to the first Bush administration forcefully opposed to Trump, adding, “He has understood the thirst that media has for audience and that audience is created by outlandish statements and so he has fed the media’s need for expanding audience and therefore garnered for himself a lot of visibility.” An Obama administration speechwriter agreed in part:

You know it's funny: I think that has less to do with politicians seeking entertainment venues than it does with news venues becoming more like entertainment. Donald Trump's ability to succeed in the way that news is covered, to me, has very little to do with comedy shows like *The Daily Show*, *The Tonight Show* and politicians going on. It has to do with the other thing: it's the way in which our news channels have treated politics more and more like a form of entertainment. Their efforts to treat everything like a horse race, to cover everything in terms of kind of almost like a reality show, has made it very easy for somebody who succeeds as a reality show host to know how to press the buttons in this environment.

Obama speechwriter Jon Favreau agreed with this assessment in a 2016 podcast, claiming that Trump was “basically what you'd get if you had someone who just watched cable news all day,” adding, “It's all surface level; it's all bad news. It's all about how like everyone in Washington in both parties is a bunch of crooks and liars. It's all punditry; it's all poll numbers” (Simmons, 2016). One of the key contributions of *The Daily Show* under Jon Stewart's tenure was a critical focus not only on politicians but even more so on the practices of journalism, especially cable news channels like Fox News and CNN. “*The Daily Show* has put on a clinic in how to use humor to talk about politics, and people are much more aware, informed, involved, and educated about humor and sophisticated about its practice than they ever were before,” contended a former Clinton administration speechwriter. However, there was a negative impact of *The Daily Show* that is ironic: a program shaped partially to criticize news practices became so successful that news networks tried to co-opt the format, according to a former Clinton administration official with experience in producing comedic television:

It used to be: *Meet the Press* was all the way over here on one side of the scale as a serious, thoughtful debate about issues and you knew you had *Politically Incorrect*, which was really pioneering in the comedy space but all the way on the other side, which was a raucous kind of environment. Then things came increasingly closer to resembling each other. About four to five years ago all of the news networks were trying to do their own comedy shows. Fox News had *Red Eye* and CNN had hired a comic named Pete Dominick and they tried to develop their own Daily Show. You'd see entertainers on the Sunday shows more, like

Will.I.Am on *Meet the Press*, and by the same token you had *The Daily Show* and Colbert doing a more thoughtful take on news and current events that you never really saw before.

The profit incentive does not just apply to network executives but also to individual journalists and especially political figures behind the scenes, according to one senior Republican strategist:

People like James Carville and Karl Rove: they've gone from political consultants to stars. Much better life: you get paid a whole lot of money for giving a speech. Carville is as colorful as can be now. He doesn't really say much of substance but he wears these wild socks and they're mismatched and that's part of his schtick. He's a comedian. Not a politician, not a political consultant anymore: he's a comedian. I just think that has made for a better life for these guys. I think that one of the best lives that America can provide is being a star of some sort. People used to belittle TV stars; now everybody wants the TV game. They want the TV gigs because it's a steady job; it's steady money; it's X number of months a year and then you get the rest of the year off. Jennifer Aniston and whatever her husband's name is, after their big fancy wedding and their twenty-two or twenty-four million dollar home, they chartered a Gulfstream 600 and took their best friends Courtney Cox and her boyfriend and all those people to somewhere like Fiji or something. You don't do that if you have a job – I couldn't do that and I do pretty well as a political consultant. James Carville could do that. Mary Matalin could do that. Karl Rove could do that in a heartbeat because they're stars, and you're given extra leeway as stars. Stardom is the best job in America, I think, and that's exactly what you're really looking at.

Donald Trump benefitted from a shift in traditional journalism that prized economic success over its own standards. In the 1950s and 1960s, the news operations of the broadcast networks actually lost money for the networks; *60 Minutes*, as a primetime news magazine that featured a mix of hard news and softer celebrity-based content, was the first news program to turn a profit (Hewitt, 2002, pp. 226-227). With the introduction of the profit motive and the expansion of platforms due to the rise of cable television and the internet, television news organizations altered their approach to journalism. Trump leveraged his previous stardom into a situation where the major power figures wished to have the kind of stardom that he had and exploited the economic incentives of today's

journalism environment to his own political advantage. Of course, entertainment-based venues feel similar pressures: “If somebody for Donald Trump called up Jimmy Kimmel and said, ‘Mr. Trump’ – because that’s all they call him – ‘would like to be on your show,’ they would throw off the Queen of England to make space for him,” amusingly noted an advisor to another 2016 campaign.

One cautionary allegory to the Trump phenomenon: the brief rise and sad fall of Fred Thompson’s presidential campaign in 2008, which was based on a level of star power similar to Trump but tethered to a figure with significant government experience. Thompson began stirring interest in a potential candidacy during the summer of 2007 by getting into a social media conflict with director Michael Moore over the director’s pro-Cuban health care documentary *Sicko*. The former senator and Hollywood actor achieved virality with a brief video in which he combined the more brash sides of his persona (beginning the video by slowly swiveling in a mahogany leather chair towards the camera while smoking a big cigar) with an attack on Cuba’s human rights record (noting that the Castro regime had tortured and imprisoned a documentary filmmaker critical of its policy in a mental institution); and it ended with, “Mental institution, Michael – might be something you ought to think about” (*The Economist*, 2007). As Thompson’s name became mentioned in mid-2007 “among grassroots Republicans, [a] flattered Mr. Thompson tested the waters for a while; he gave radio commentaries on red-meat topics such as terrorism, border security and gun rights [and] the transcripts went viral on the internet” (*The Economist*, 2007). In September, when finally ready to commit to the presidential race, Thompson followed Arnold Schwarzenegger’s example and officially announced his run on *The Tonight Show*. However, Thompson’s momentum never rose

above the initial level of excitement once his campaign officially began, and after that *Tonight Show* announcement, Thompson largely eschewed entertainment-based venues, at least compared to competitors John McCain, Mike Huckabee, and Ron Paul. “We were getting tons of requests to do those things, [but] Fred was very, very picky about what he did, and there have been a lot of people who I think very unfairly characterized him as not being very energetic,” noted a Thompson campaign advisor, adding:

The original set of guys involved in Fred’s campaign was on to something very important. They were onto the notion that social media and the internet were going to be huge in politics. What they did, where they made a mistake, was they, not knowing the mechanics of putting together a traditional presidential campaign, they basically sold Fred on the notion that you could do it this way. The Obama campaign had figured out the exact same thing, that the internet, that social media, was going to be huge in politics, but they were smart enough to understand: you don’t throw out the rest of a traditional campaign. What they did is they essentially grafted that new element of politics that became so powerful for the president in both his campaigns – they grafted that onto a more traditional campaign and did that from the beginning. You don’t, in one election cycle, go from slogging through the trenches in Iowa and New Hampshire in the snow to doing everything by internet and social media. And they understood that and it paid huge dividends for them.

The Obama campaign began organizing in key states over a year before the Iowa caucuses in January 2007 while Thompson’s campaign did not begin covertly organizing on the ground in key states until August and Thompson did not officially announce his candidacy until September. Like Thompson, Trump’s organizational strength was uneven throughout the 2016 primary cycle; with some exceptions, Trump tended to win open primaries and lose closed primaries and caucuses.

Nevertheless, Trump maintained three key advantages over Fred Thompson. The first advantage involved a confluence of external factors that aided Trump and hurt Thompson, including a more crowded Republican field, a two term incumbent president of the opposing party rather than of the same party, and Trump’s use of the issues of

immigration and trade to separate himself from his rivals. The second advantage that Trump maintained over Thompson was a more compliant Washington press concerned with drawing eyeballs, according to a Thompson campaign advisor:

I think any comparisons with Fred Thompson's campaign are ridiculous. Fred Thompson took a variety of very serious and very responsible positions on most issues. It's clear in many ways that Trump has gone out and purposely said outrageous things and done some outrageous things to attract attention, to attract media coverage. It's worked very well for him. While the biggest reason for Trump's success is there are a lot of people fed up with politics as usual and what he is offering is something that is very different from politics as usual, it is true that all of the media is spending far less time and far less money covering politics and issues and far more time covering celebrities and covering things that people will watch and will appeal to people, and Trump is driving ratings.

The most interesting aspect of Trump's run involved Trump's third advantage over Thompson, which involved the characters Trump and Thompson got famous playing, according to the senior Thompson advisor:

We found *Law & Order* actually was a problem for Fred Thompson because Fred Thompson wasn't the character he played: Arthur Branch. People used to say about Fred, "Oh, he doesn't have the energy that Arthur Branch does. He's not like Arthur Branch." You used to hear that kind of crap all the time! And I'm like, "He's running for president of the United States! He's not a TV character; he's a real person." Well, Trump doesn't have that problem because he played himself, so what you see is what you get, and as best I can tell, on the stump that's exactly what people are getting and they're, at least for now, buying into it a little bit.

As a reality television star and producer of content – Trump was an executive producer and the creative visionary of *The Apprentice* – Trump shaped his own persona and tailored it as closely to his authentic personality as necessary.

Trump was also wary of spending large amounts of money to advertise, but many of the advertisements he did create were perfectly geared towards social media. "You used to try to cut through the clutter; now I think you have to embrace the clutter," noted an Obama administration official, adding, "There are a lot of different mediums that people are using and you can't just pick one or two or else you'll fall victim to missing

huge blocks of voters who are getting their information in some other way.” In March 2016, Trump tweeted out, “How do you fight millions of dollars of fraudulent commercials pushing for crooked politicians? I will be using Facebook & Twitter” (Trump, 2016b). “I suggested fifteen second second Instagram shorts,” said Trump’s digital media producer, Justin McConney, in an interview conducted outside of this project, adding, “With so much media competing for people’s attention it is important to be short and direct if you want to be successful at getting your message across” (Edelsburg, 2015). A senior strategist of multiple Democratic presidential campaigns recalled:

In the old days, putting spots together physically was actually rather an arduous task; you needed a lot of machines and big editing studios. Now you can do it with a relatively reasonable amount of computer equipment and you still need the skill of the editor but you don’t need a big multi-million dollar bank of machines to do this right.

McConney conceded in the interview that “the political Instagram shorts have also had huge crossover into traditional media. Not only do they pick up tons of earned media online, you go home at night and they’re running them all over TV” (Edelsburg, 2015). It remains to be seen whether Donald Trump will become president, but technological and economic changes in the traditional media environment have led to a certain confluence of factors that allowed Trump to become the Republican nominee and made a professional entertainer with no governing experience more viable as a presidential contender than at any point in American history.

Conclusion

The 2016 election cycle was fundamentally transformed by the marriage of traditional television and digital video outlets, leading to economic competition that redefined the late night talk show scene. At the same time, the rise of digital video outlets

and the aggressive embrace of these venues by President Obama led most 2016 presidential candidates to follow in his footsteps. Digital outlets such as BuzzFeed and IJR produced dozens of entertaining videos starring current presidential candidates, and Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders filmed conversations with YouTube-based content producers. All told, the 2016 cycle saw candidates engage with entertainment-based venues more often than in any cycle to date, and the general election will surely continue the trend, partially because of Hillary Clinton's need to reach out to a younger voter base that does not actively follow politics as much as other voting blocs and partially due to Donald Trump's comfort with these venues. Trump's successful media strategy and marriage of entertainment with politics will be studied by candidates of both parties for many years to come.

One aspect of this use of the entertainment-based platform that has become tradition is the embrace of the late night talk show, according to a bipartisan consensus of experts. An Obama administration advisor wrote that in the current environment, "late-night shows are as much a part of the political circuit as *Meet the Press*, and they may be more important given the number of viewers and the potential to have a particularly funny moment go viral" (Pfeiffer, 2015). Another Obama administration advisor agreed:

In the same way that even though there's all these news sources now, the broadcast news is still important, I think there will be a lot of ways for candidates to show their human side besides Jimmy Fallon and Jimmy Kimmel, but Jimmy Fallon and Jimmy Kimmel are still going to be important.

"I'm certainly a proponent of getting presidents, politicians, and policy makers out there outside of the normal," contended a *Late Show* producer, adding, "It informs the electorate, it gets people excited or at least interested about politics at a very basic level that maybe wouldn't have thought about it, and it allowed us to tell some stories that

most people didn't think of." However, the marriage of the digital world and the late night comedic talk show scene has placed an enormous incentive on Fallon and Kimmel to produce shorter, more entertaining segments. Thanks to media fragmentation and economic competition, there are other places where politicians can tell stories in a longer format outside of the normal, but *The Tonight Show* and *Jimmy Kimmel Live* may not be those places. Nevertheless, most candidates will have to reach out to venues such as these to reach audiences, as an Obama administration speechwriter noted:

Obviously if the president weren't good at or wasn't successful at going on these late night shows he wouldn't do it as much but I think every president – look, all the GOP candidates, Hillary Clinton, they're all now going to the late night talk shows, to the entertainment venues to get their message across because everybody recognizes that to reach a big audience you have to go to a lot of different kinds of outlets and not just news outlets. I think increasingly it's a necessary part of the job.

The diversity of entertainment-based venues gives candidates numerous options but it can also be in the campaign's interest to choose one that might make the candidate somewhat uncomfortable, so long as the campaign is confident that the candidate would perform well in the venue and as long as the traditional press corps does not react as negatively as it did to Richard Nixon's *Tonight Show* visit in 1960 and Bill Clinton's "boxers or briefs" answer on MTV's *Enough is Enough* special in 1994. However, a Bush administration official urged a word of warning to Obama's potential successors about a key constituency – the traditional Washington established press:

"What will future administrations take from these eight years?" That, I think, is going to be one thing that you're going to hear about from the press: "Go do *The View* but don't forget about us," and I think that's a very fair point. It's "added to," not "in place of." These entertainment interviews should be in addition to being available on a reasonable basis.

A Clinton administration official also urged future presidents to use these outlets but not to overdo it:

The downside is probably overexposure and overexposure diluting why you're doing it. I don't think President Obama's reached that yet but there was an interesting piece – I want to say in the *New York Post* but it might have been a syndicated column – talking about this last week, I think, saying that President Obama, for awhile there was a lot of specialness to when he would do something that wasn't straight news: the first president to go on *The Tonight Show*, or the first sitting president to do an internet show like *Between Two Ferns*. And now he's done so much of it, that part of it is less important which puts more pressure on the actual content and the show, so people might've tuned into *Comedians in Cars* if that was a year ago, the specialness of seeing President Obama in a comedy venue might have been enough for a draw, but now that he's done a lot of them the audience had a higher expectation for that to be funny because just the specialness of just merely doing it isn't relevant anymore. And that's the danger: you start diluting your message by doing too much or potentially turning off an audience.

The Obama administration maintained a delicate balance in catering to non-political audiences through entertainment-based venues while not completely shutting out the Washington press corps. The next president may attempt to strike that balance but may suddenly find a more reactive Washington press corps wary of losing prestige.

CHAPTER 10

SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

Over the last five chapters, I have chronicled a history of presidential candidates and presidents engaging with entertainment-based venues since the Reagan era. I have also analyzed major changes in the media environment that have made the entertainment-based venue more appealing for presidential candidates and presidents to utilize to connect with citizens. Through interviews with twenty-four veterans of presidential campaigns, presidential administrations, and televised late night comedic talk shows, I have provided an insider's view of some of the individual personalities and external factors that have shaped this evolution of presidential communication strategy.

In Chapter 2, I outlined three theories which have applications that can partially explain this shift in presidential communication strategy: role theory, postmodern presidency theory, and technological determinism. At the end of that chapter, I wrote that a synthesis of these theories that accounts for the role of individual personality would prove instructive in explaining this phenomenon.

Towards a Theoretical Framework

Before outlining a theoretical synthesis, let me restate the sets of research questions and reveal to what extent these questions have been answered.

RQ1a: What are the major factors that have led to presidential campaigning in traditionally non-political entertainment-based venues?

RQ1b: How much of an impact does the individual personality of the president or presidential candidate play in guiding these decisions?

RQ1c: How much of an impact does the individual personality of the host of a program play in guiding these decisions?

According to the data collected for this project, the biggest factor that has led to presidential campaigning in traditionally non-political entertainment-based venues has been technological change, and the multitude of changes have led to a fragmentation of audiences away from a common space. Without having to rely on three national television content providers, audiences have used technological advances, first with the popularization of cable and satellite television and then with the internet, to create their own worlds of entertainment and news. The successful presidential candidate or sitting president, in order to reach citizens in their own created spaces, must move away from traditional channels at times and take risks to engage with citizens who might otherwise ignore the political process.

It is striking how closely some of the literature I detailed in Chapter 2, particularly the literature I placed in the section on technological determinism, was echoed, unprompted, by a number of the individuals I interviewed for this study. One Democratic strategist's thoughts mirrored the scholarly contention that people can also choose not to be engaged in the political process at all, choosing to focus only on entertainment (Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Prior, 2005):

Campaigns always have a problem. The problem is: it's easy to reach high-information voters. People who watch CNN every day, I mean, they get home from work and the first thing they do is turn on CNN or turn on their favorite cable network news channel. Back then, there was only one: CNN. People who are watching *Meet the Press*: they're high information voters. You can find them a whole bunch of different ways and get messages to them. People are hard to reach, and there's literally a massive chunk of the electorate that are low-information voters, they almost try to stay away from – they don't watch the news. They don't care about the news. They're bored by it, or whatever their reasons are, but they're going to vote in presidential elections because it's their

duty, their civic responsibility, or whatever, or they get caught up in the excitement of it, and there's almost no way to reach them. I mean, obviously there's a reason campaigns spend millions of dollars on TV ads reaching all those people, but the only way you can really reach them is to go where they are. Back then they were watching *Arsenio Hall*; they're watching Letterman; they're watching *American Idol*, I mean millions of them. So campaigns as they became more sophisticated and understanding that started to try and figure out: how do we get our candidate in front of those voters? I think somewhere late in the '80s, early in the '90s as campaigns started to figure out, "Wait" – it used to be a fight over the high-information voters, and we'll just buy TV in all those other shows, and then people realized, "Wait, you can actually reach them" and actually show another side of your personality. You know, you don't have to be a wonk who just sits there and talks foreign policy or deep in the trench tax policy on those shows. You can actually reach them and they sort of see you in a more natural environment, so it became more prominent by, like I said, obviously the first one everybody can point to is Clinton, but then it became clear that there was some benefit, enough benefit to, yeah, be selective, but have a strategy to do that.

Another Democratic strategist reflected other scholarly contentions from that literature review about voters who are more well-informed than the citizens described above but who do not have the complete picture (Coe et al., 2008; Jerit & Barabas, 2012):

The bully pulpit has become a bully lectern because everything is fragmented. Today we don't have a common knowledge base; Pat Moynihan's suggestion that "Everybody's entitled to their own opinions but not their own facts" is now wrong. People can get their own facts from a media outlet that agrees with them.

With these insights, as well as the thoughts of my other interviewees detailed in the previous five chapters, aspects of technological determinism must form the backbone of any synthesized theory.

One of the two theories examined in the literature review, the postmodern presidency theory, does not explain the shift towards entertainment-based venues to the extent that technological determinism does. The three core tenets of the postmodern presidency theory – appealing to emotion rather than reason, appealing to niche constituencies using smaller issues, and strong executive action – either have been apparent to some degree prior to the fracturing of audiences due to rapid technological

change or were caused by that technological change. Freie's platonic ideal of the modern president, using Neustadt (1980) as an influence, is Franklin Roosevelt, but his argument that the "modern president does not attempt to manipulate public opinion through the use of communication technologies" and instead relies on "rational explanation rather than emotional manipulation" is undercut by the format of Roosevelt's fireside chats (2011, p. 13). By speaking in a soft, conversational tone, Roosevelt defied the trends of conventional political oratory, and that change in tone, in and of itself, was designed to appeal to the emotions of the audience. One can easily draw a parallel between Roosevelt's fireside chats and Reagan's appearance on *The Merv Griffin Show* in 1983, or Clinton's appearance on MTV's *Enough is Enough* town hall special in 1994, in terms of conversational vibe. However, the more accurate contemporary comparison to the fireside chats, given that Roosevelt used a relatively new technology to progress beyond the traditional ways of communicating with citizens at times to appeal to their emotional instincts, is Barack Obama drinking tea made from catkins in the Alaskan wilderness on *Running Wild with Bear Grylls* in 2015, which was intended to raise awareness of climate disruption. The difference between Roosevelt's fireside chats and Obama's entertainment-based venue appearances is the conception of audience: Roosevelt hoped to speak to the entire citizenry, while Obama recognized that only a small audience would view *Running Wild*. While niche constituencies have existed in the past, technological change and subsequent economic competition have fragmented audiences to such an extent that few aspects of our news and entertainment are shared experiences. Presidential campaigns and administrations would prefer not to chase niche constituencies but instead to appeal to the entire citizenry; they cannot because of

technological change. The strongest argument in favor of a postmodern approach to governing has been the Obama administration's evolution on the utility and legality of executive action, but the entertainment-based venue has not been used to promote the major moves the administration has made in this regard, specifically on immigration and energy policy.

The other theory examined in the literature review, role theory, also does not explain the presidential embrace of the entertainment-based venue in its current form, but an updated version of role theory which encompasses the *Washington outsider* does add value to the discussion. Jimmy Carter's use of *Playboy* during the 1976 election to focus on aspects of his character enhanced the contrast he was seeking to make with a corrupted Washington, D.C. culture, and since then, presidential candidates have used entertainment-based venues to focus on character more than policy, though some programs (particularly David Letterman's interview of George W. Bush in October 2000) featured a healthy mix of both. As a candidate with the most Washington experience on her resume of any candidate in decades, Hillary Clinton's use of these entertainment-based venues during the 2016 primaries proves instructive in illustrating how necessary it has become for a candidate to separate her or himself from the Washington establishment. While her *Saturday Night Live* cameo satirized her high unfavorable ratings, and her appearance on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* produced actual news regarding her opinion on breaking up Wall Street banks that acted inappropriately (Strauss, 2015), Clinton's appearances on *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, *The Tonight Show*, and the Lifetime network primarily focused on her role as a new grandmother and on her proficiency with social media. In particular, "The Conversation," the *Lifetime* special,

saw Clinton put “politics aside for an hour-long gabfest in which she [discussed] date night with Bill Clinton, girls night out with her friends, as well as figuring out how much emotion to show as a woman candidate” (Karni, 2016). There is no doubt that technological determinism has been the main factor behind the shift towards entertainment-based venues, and Clinton’s 2016 campaign has gravitated towards these venues, while George H. W. Bush’s 1988 campaign did not, partially because there are so many more options for consumers and fewer individuals watching specific programs. Keeping in mind that the Founding Fathers designed the federal government to proceed slowly and for change to be difficult to arrive at, if the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 is correct about the relationship between fragmented media consumption and increasing partisanship (Coe et al., 2008; Jerit & Barabas, 2012; Miller & Krosnick, 2000), then it has and will become increasingly necessary for presidential candidates to separate themselves rhetorically from Washington, D.C. and use entertainment-based venues to do so because voters will inevitably harbor negative feelings towards the current Washington, D.C. culture. However, it is not difficult to imagine a forward-leaning and gregarious politician, such as Bill Clinton, using entertainment-based venues to a certain degree in the old media environment, especially given how he successfully stabilized his image using *The Tonight Show* in 1988 after his disastrous speech at the Democratic National Convention.

With the Clinton example in mind, the role of individual personality must play a role in the formation of a new theory to fully explain the presidential embrace of entertainment-based venues. The recollections of presidential advisors, particularly those who worked in both Bush administrations, have pointedly illustrated that the concept of

the *dignity of the presidency or respect for the office* shapes presidential decision making. Both President George H. W. Bush and President George W. Bush did not take advantage of entertainment-based outlets to the extent that Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama did. External factors clearly play a role in the decision making process as well, as President Clinton largely declined to utilize televised entertainment-based venues after the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995 and President Bush largely stayed away from taking actions that would make his decision to send troops into Iraq and Afghanistan look trivial.

Notably, the defining role of individual personality is not limited to those figures either residing in the White House or aspiring to live there. After Johnny Carson's largely apolitical tenure on *The Tonight Show*, Jay Leno and David Letterman brought politics to the late night scene. This evolution occurred partially due to the strong competition between the two programs, especially at first, but Leno's lifelong interest in politics, and Letterman's gradual evolution into a public figure willing to speak out on certain political issues, helped make the late night scene a popular landing spot for presidential candidates. Jon Stewart also redefined a pop culture-based comedy program under Craig Kilborn's tenure into a politically focused *Daily Show* that challenged politicians and journalists. Again, the example of Hillary Clinton in 2016 proves instructive: Stephen Colbert's *Late Show* conversation with Clinton focused partially on policy and featured actual news value because Colbert is interested in the minutiae of politics; Colbert has deliberately targeted political and governmental figures as guests, including lesser known cabinet secretaries like Attorney General Loretta Lynch and Energy Secretary Ernst Moniz, because of his individual preferences. However, it is clear that economic factors

also play a major role in the decision-making process of entertainment-based shows. Jimmy Fallon's *Tonight Show* has hosted political newsmakers partially due to the Nielsen ratings figures like Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump might bring to the program and partially in deference to the successful formula instituted by Leno. The economic pressure on Fallon to find a balance between bringing in newer, younger viewers while keeping a significant portion of Leno's previous audience has led Fallon to make certain innovations of Leno's into *Tonight Show* traditions. To offer two examples: Fallon has made sure that his opening monologues always include political content, which Carson's often excluded, and Fallon has also scheduled certain comedy bits to air on certain nights – placing “Hashtags” on Thursdays and “Thank You Notes” on Fridays follows Leno's example of placing “Headlines” on Mondays and “Jaywalking” on Fridays. In short, both individual personality and economic factors play major roles in the decision-making process of entertainment-based venues, and even shows that may wish to avoid political content might be tempted to offer guest spots on their programs to notable figures like Bush, Obama, Clinton, and Trump to score a high Nielsen rating or drive traffic to their YouTube channels or Twitter feeds.

RQ2a: What are the benefits and costs of presidential candidates appearing in traditionally non-political programs?

RQ2b: What are the benefits and costs of sitting presidents appearing in traditionally non-political programs? How do they differ from those for candidates?

The benefits and costs of presidential candidates appearing in traditionally non-political settings are similar to those of sitting presidents. A presidential candidate and a sitting

president can both use entertainment-based venues to appeal to citizens not normally engaged in the political process. A presidential candidate and a sitting president can be pretty sure that an entertainment-based venue will feature softer, friendlier, and less accusatory questioning than a one-on-one interview with a traditional journalist or a press conference featuring questions from multiple journalists, and entertainment-based venues allow a presidential candidate and a sitting president to focus more on character and less on policy specifics. Both presidential candidates and sitting presidents can risk being caught in a suboptimal optic situation if they proceed in using an entertainment-based venue during a geopolitical crisis. President Obama's cancellation of a visit to *Jimmy Kimmel Live* in July 2014 due to a Russian incursion into Ukraine illustrated a keen awareness of the perceived risks of a president appearing inattentive to a crisis, while John McCain's cancellation of a visit to *The Late Show* in September 2008 during the financial crisis would have done the same if McCain had not foolishly continued to do interviews with other television programs.

One of the key differences between a sitting president and a presidential candidate is the nature of the audience, according to a senior official in the second Bush administration:

There's always a difference between a challenger and a sitting president, because a sitting president has to be presidential; a challenger does not. Because a sitting president has an audience far beyond the domestic audience of the United States, while a challenger has very little audience beyond the United States. They may have celebrity beyond the United States, but the audience usually isn't there. A sitting president has an audience that includes Moscow and Paris and London and Tokyo and Beijing and wherever. A sitting president can't be as available as a challenger; can't be as, I'm going to say, casual, flippant. A sitting president has to be not necessarily more contrived but has to be more careful and can't just be a populist because populists don't speak well to international public diplomacy. And so I do think there's a difference: even a President Clinton was different than a candidate Clinton.

With that said, while a sitting president has less room to experiment than a presidential candidate because of the international audience, a sitting president in his or her second term might have more room to experiment than a presidential candidate because of the 22nd Amendment's limitation on presidential terms. When a political figure no longer has to worry about facing voters in an election, that figure has a freedom to take more risks, as President Clinton did with the "Last Days" correspondents' dinner video and President Obama has done numerous times, beginning with *Between Two Ferns*.

RQ3: What factors determine whether a president or presidential candidate chooses to participate in comedic sketches or merely agrees to be interviewed on a late night comedic talk show?

The major factor that determines whether a president or presidential candidate chooses to participate in comedic sketches is the format of the program. If a candidate chooses to make a cameo appearance on *Saturday Night Live* or accept an invitation onto *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, they understand beforehand that those programs lean heavily towards sketch comedy and that the writers are going to ask the candidates if they would like to participate. A current advisor to President Clinton noted that the former president has not appeared on *The Tonight Show* even though Hillary Clinton has:

We've spent time gaming out with Fallon how we could do it and the president's open to a sketch but we haven't hit on the right sketch idea with them yet that would be comfortable. You saw Hillary on *SNL* recently; she did a sketch and she was good. President Obama and Secretary Clinton might both be adept at doing sketches but they both wouldn't be adept at doing the same sketch.

There is no requirement that a candidate participate in a sketch when appearing on a comedic program once the campaign has decided that the candidate would be best served appearing on that program; for example, Marco Rubio visited *The Tonight Show* in January 2016 for an interview with Jimmy Fallon but did not participate in a sketch.

Notably, however, Sarah Silverman, the comedian who did participate in a sketch that night with Fallon, received top billing over Rubio and more time on air (Grove, 2016). However, certain programs might wish to have political figures on the programs exclusively for interviews and not want them to participate in comedic sketches. Due to the diversity of programming available thanks to cable and satellite television and the internet, each candidate can choose a format in which they might feel more comfortable.

RQ4: Will future presidents expand upon President Obama's embrace of these formats, continue President Obama's trajectory, or retreat from his approach?

RQ5: Has the concept of the *dignity of the presidency* or *respect for the office* changed?

The answer to RQ4 question varied depending on the interviewee I spoke to and the hypothetical president being considered, but overall, most participants in this study agreed that future presidents would continue upon President Obama's trajectory or expand upon it. The individual personality of each potential president would certainly play a role in the decision-making process, but the fragmentation of audiences brought about by significant technological changes was seen as a decisive and largely unavoidable factor that seemed to require future presidents to remain engaged with citizens in innovative ways. The specific voter foundations of each party, specifically the importance of younger voters to the Democratic Party, made interviewees largely agree that Democratic candidates were under more pressure to either continue President Obama's trajectory or expand upon it, while Republican candidates would either continue President Obama's trajectory or slightly pull back from it. The use of the entertainment-based venue as candidates by George W. Bush, John McCain, and Dan Quayle in 2000

showed that Republicans would eventually fill the space that Democrats of previous election cycles trail blazed, and so in the future, Republican presidents will eventually attempt to match or even go further than Barack Obama has in attempting to communicate with citizens in ways that might not be considered *dignified*. However, if a specific type of Republican with a more reserved personality, such as Paul Ryan or Ted Cruz, had become Obama's immediate successor in 2017, that individual might have hesitated to follow Obama's example, and Obama might have been seen as an outlier for a period of time. Certain respondents argued this very point, and I agree with them to some degree. Ronald Reagan's reinstatement of ceremonial formality and presidential distance, in contrast to Jimmy Carter's more accessible persona, might provide a historical parallel.

Regarding RQ5, participants in this study argued the concept of the *dignity of the presidency* or *respect for the office* changes partially based on the individual personality of the president holding the office and partially based on the progression of history. Innovation does not always lead to new tradition immediately, but the fragmentation of the media environment will inevitably lead some presidential candidates and sitting presidents to employ novel approaches. Consider the 1970s: Richard Nixon used the entertainment-based venue during the 1968 election cycle but ceased doing so during his presidency, though he allowed Spiro Agnew to appear in some of those venues. Throughout the 1970s, the entertainment-based venue was not utilized by the Ford or Carter administrations. By 1992, Bill Clinton's use of the entertainment-based venue was considered an innovation, even though multiple presidential candidates during the 1960s utilized similar approaches.

RQ6: Has the growth of the federal government's reach made it necessary for presidents to take risks that threaten the *dignity of the presidency*?

The political veterans I interviewed for this project did not necessarily connect the entertainment-based venue strategy that the Obama administration used to the growth of the federal government, so this question remains largely unanswered. The Obama administration's boldest ventures into entertainment-based venues – *Between Two Ferns* and the selfie stick video produced by BuzzFeed – were intended to reach younger citizens and inspire them to sign up for Healthcare.gov, the federal government's official health care website. In that case, there was a political and economic imperative for the administration to make as many people sign up for health care plans as possible. However, the president has not appeared in entertainment-based venues to promote subsequent legislative or executive moves on immigration, gun control, or climate disruption. Obama's appearance on *Running Wild with Bear Grylls* in 2015 attempted to raise awareness of climate disruption but did not advocate for a specific policy. Nevertheless, if a new president signs legislation in other areas that require individual citizens to do something, as enforced by the federal government, there will be an increased incentive for future presidents to inspire citizens to do so by reaching them in the places that they frequent, which may be increasingly digital. As of now, that is merely speculative.

RQ7a: Has the embrace of entertainment-based venues by presidential candidates and sitting presidents led in any way to an entertainer with no government experience like Donald Trump being considered a viable presidential contender?

RQ7b: What changes in the media environment have led to Trump's rise?

None of the interviewees for this project necessarily pointed to Barack Obama's use of the entertainment-based venue as president as being culpable for Trump's rise. The major factor behind Trump's ascension to the Republican nomination for president, besides the American people's frustration with the Washington establishment over immigration policy, trade policy, and campaign finance laws, was a televised and digital media environment that had drifted towards entertainment due to technological changes and economic competition. Cable and satellite television produced a wealth of options for viewers, and twenty-four hour cable news stations such as CNN and Fox News must find content appealing enough to keep viewers watching their networks. This has led networks like CNN and Fox News to abandon a news-based approach in favor of emphasizing personality, entertainment, and excitement. The focus of the presidential race on these networks during the 2016 presidential primaries was not the specific policy prescriptions of candidates but their standing in head-to-head polling and their quick reactions to news events. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook only exacerbated this trend, speeding up the news cycle and shortening the attention span. An entertainer like Donald Trump understood the rhythms of the news cycle and generated content to keep consumers interested.

With all of this in mind, a theoretical framework for considering the presidential embrace of the entertainment-based venue must encompass two parts: presidential candidates and sitting presidents.

T₁: A presidential candidate must utilize entertainment-based venues as often as possible to promote their candidacy to as many niche audiences as possible and to promote themselves as outsiders separate from the current Washington, D.C.

culture. Entertainment-based venues must be chosen based on a combination of the demographics of the audience of the program, the comfort level of the candidate with the format of the program, and the skill level of the candidate in connecting with the audience of the program, though some sacrifices might need to be made in terms of comfort and skill level based on the candidate's electoral position.

T₂: A sitting president must utilize entertainment-based venues at appropriate times to promote specific policies, especially to audiences that would be active in pressuring their congressional leaders to pass favorable legislation.

Entertainment-based venues must be chosen based on a combination of the demographics of the audience of the program, the comfort level of the president with the format of the program, and the skill level of the president in connecting with the audience of the program, but second term presidents may take more risks than first term presidents. If possible, presidents running in a reelection year should utilize these venues to humanize themselves and attempt to portray themselves as separate from the current Washington, D.C. culture.

This project has offered an important theoretical contribution to scholarship by focusing on the phenomenon of presidential-level figures using entertainment-based venues, providing a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon featuring insights from individuals present over four decades for the major decisions involving that phenomenon, and offering the first clear and concrete theoretical explanation for why and how this process has developed and will continue to evolve. A former advisor to multiple Democratic campaigns sums up the dilemma the next president will face:

There's part of this that makes me uncomfortable having been in the White House and having sat through things that are life and death, where there's literally the future of the world is at stake, it is an incredibly serious place and decisions really matter, and the president goes from a national security meeting and then starts taking selfies, there's just something that doesn't feel right. On the other hand, as a communicator, you have to adapt, and I don't think it's going to undermine the presidency and ultimately, a president who can use all the different channels that exist now should result in a better informed electorate, and that is the thing that solves all problems. So I do have mixed feelings about it, but the traditionalist in me always loses to the practical one.

Yet this project also offers a practical contribution by including a blueprint for potential presidential candidates and presidents to follow. If Hillary Clinton becomes the 45th president of the United States, a key portion of that success will have come because Clinton was more willing to engage with a variety of entertainment-based venues on their terms than she had been during the 2008 primaries. Like her husband and Barack Obama, Clinton should not be afraid to continue that engagement with entertainment-based venues during a potential presidency. If Donald Trump becomes the 45th president of the United States, a key portion of that success will have come because Trump knew how to navigate the entertainment world and was more willing to engage with a variety of entertainment-based venues on their terms than Mitt Romney was in 2012. Yet while Trump would undoubtedly progress even farther as president than even Obama in using entertainment-based venues to engage with audiences that are not engaged with politics on a daily or weekly basis, he should save a potential WhiteHouse.gov-hosted version of *The Apprentice*, deciding the fate of the heads of various superfluous government agencies that Republican activists would like to eliminate, until his second term.

Future Research

There are many opportunities for future research to further understand the phenomenon of presidential level figures utilizing entertainment-based media for political

benefit. This project at its core is primarily about the production of media messages, but the consumption of media messages offers tantalizing possibilities. A study of younger voters consuming only digital outlets such as YouTube, BuzzFeed, and Independent Journal Review could reveal if, or under what circumstances, particular types of audiovisual presentations – and particular types of entertainment-based videos – are more effective than others. A study comparing and contrasting generational differences in the reaction to certain messages on certain entertainment-based platforms also raises important questions. Are older citizens becoming more digitally conscious and more likely to consume the messages of presidential figures in entertainment-based venues? Are older citizens more comfortable with presidential figures utilizing entertainment-based venues, or are they more likely to see a separation between the political world and the entertainment world?

Another area for potential future research involves a focus on a particular election cycle or a particular campaign. The Hillary Clinton campaign of 2016 offers important opportunities for research. The Clinton campaign has attempted to copy many elements of the successful Obama campaigns, but the results have not been equivalent. Is this due to changes in the media environment over the course of four to eight years, or does the individual figure, and the individual's personality, have a more profound effect than even this study suggests?

The Donald Trump campaign of 2016 especially inspires important questions about our media environment and mixture of politics and entertainment. A senior advisor to the first Bush administration asserted:

Roosevelt discovered radio with the fireside chats and really learned how to use radio well. Kennedy discovered TV so to speak and how to use TV well. Bill

Clinton discovered cable TV; that was an evolution in television and he used that well. Obama was the first one I think to aggressively use social media; and now you've got Trump recognizing that the broad TV is no longer just television and drama or comedy but there were reality show aspects to television and he's using the reality show syndrome in television to pretty good effect, so it's been that kind of an evolution.

A member of the second Bush administration made a cogent point, though, in response:

When you trace the history of presidential communication frequently the second guy gets the credit because the technology is more adapted by more people. More people were on Yahoo now than they were in 2007 or 2008 when President Bush did a couple things. Hoover did radio addresses before FDR but nobody really remembers that.

For the social media era, the Bush administration helped set a platform for the Obama administration to dramatically expand upon. However, the specific use of entertainment-based venues was largely eschewed by the Clinton and Bush administrations, making Obama a pioneer. Perhaps the 45th president will go even further than Obama and become that *second president* that becomes synonymous with the entertainment-based venue and turns an innovation into a tradition. If the 45th president is Donald Trump, a number of important questions about the mixture of politics and entertainment will be raised and deserve answers.

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