

The Symbolic Presidency



How Presidents Portray Themselves

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Introduction

Symbolism forms a large and important part of political activity. It supports governments, selects leaders, and defines the terms of debate. Symbols can be used politically to shape attitudes, build support, persuade to action, or in one widely accepted definition of political power, to help A get B to do what A wants done. Writers point out that the central battle in a political conflict is often "the struggle over whose symbolic definition of a situation will prevail."¹ Control of the symbolic actions of government is as important as the control of its tangible effects.² Some writers go further. One calls the central political activity the symbolic manipulation of words to define situations.³ Another says that "the theatrical staging of oneself and the situation" is "the politician's trade."⁴

All human beings use symbols, of course. Kenneth Burke calls humans "symbol-using animals," and Sheldon Messinger refers to life as theater in which a show is staged.⁵ Political symbolism, then, is merely one part of this larger human activity, although an important part because its communication has an impact that is societywide.

If symbolism is central to politics, it is clearly also central to the office of President as we understand it. People speak of packaging the candidates, creating an image, managing the news. Jimmy Carter, critics say, went too far in divesting the office of its symbolic support. Ronald Reagan had talent and training from his past career that the ordinary politician does not possess. The outcome of the 1988 election, it could be said, depended on whose symbolic structuring of the situation would prevail. Consider one analysis of a "politician" for its direct, line-by-line relevance to the presidency:

The politician is potentially always on stage. Every aspect of his behavior can become part of a public performance which must be managed and controlled to mobilize support. Many of his activities will be essentially symbolic, i.e., for the purpose of creating the desired identity in order

to draw the audience into *his* drama. It is also true that he may not be able to control the situation because he cannot be assured of audience support . . . because other performers will be competing with him and offering negative impressions of his performance, and because he may have to respond to situations not of his making.⁶

Here is the president arranging photo opportunities and meeting the Boy Scouts in the Rose Garden. The media, however, can offer negative impressions of the performance, while economic ills or foreign terrorists interfere with the action on stage.

The importance of this symbolism is well recognized. Nevertheless, what seems obvious at one level of thinking is not acknowledged at another. People compartmentalize the presidency—separating out the symbolic from all the other things the president supposedly is or does. So we speak of a president's successful image at the same time we speak of him managing the economy. The second point is as much a symbolic projection as the first. Presidents, factually speaking, do not manage the economy, but it is part of the symbolism of the office that they are singularly responsible for the nation's well-being. We speak of the president's foreign policy or economic policy, collapsing a long and complex policy-making process into the work of a single individual. We use the singular—the president—in describing what all presidents do, thereby creating the impression of specialness and incomparability. Symbolically speaking, presidents cannot even be compared with their predecessors. In short, what is recognized at one level is kept separate from what people want to believe at another level.

The same compartmentalization is seen in political science writing. Looking at two literatures—one on symbolic politics and one on the presidency—can make the point clearly. Pioneered by Harold Lasswell and associated with the work of Murray Edelman, Kenneth Burke, and others, the symbolic politics literature analyzes the use of symbols, whether in language or ritualized behavior, in giving meaning and structure to political reality. Presidential examples are used along with other examples, but they do not lead to any full investigation. The presidency is used to illustrate leadership myths, the staging of political drama, and the importance of symbols of benevolence and control.⁷ In each case follow-up studies are strongly suggested, but they have not been forthcoming. Other political subjects have been studied: interest groups in the American political process, the history of the temperance movement, the symbolism of newsmaking, the theater of courts.⁸ Congressional scholar Richard Fenno draws on Erving Goffman to show how House members

present themselves in their districts.⁹ The presidency, too, like the courts and Congress, needs a symbolic analysis.

In contrast, the presidency literature rarely cites the studies of symbolic politics, appearing for the most part unaware of their existence. Indeed, at times the literature presents as factual descriptions the same statements the other literature would use as symbolic examples. Thus, the well-known scholar Louis Koenig remarks "that the Presidency . . . has served us well is not in question. It has waged and won wars, checked depressions, spread social justice and spurred the nation's growth."¹⁰ Note the pronoun "it" in the description. Now, of course, the presidency did not wage and win any war—the nation did. This identification of the president with the nation, chapter 2 points out, is one of the major symbolic components of the office.

The disjunction between the two approaches can be illustrated by the treatments of the concept of *leadership*. In a book published in 1964, Edelman devotes an entire chapter to the symbolism of leadership.¹¹ At about the same time, two other influential books discuss presidential leadership, treating it as a given and addressing the practicalities of how presidents can increase the potential implicit in the office. James MacGregor Burns's book is subtitled *The Crucible of Leadership* and Richard Neustadt's *The Politics of Leadership*.¹² Neustadt's definition of a leader's power, in persuading others to do what the leader wants done, is paralleled in the symbolic descriptions, but presidential leadership is not treated as a problem in symbolism. When Burns returns to the subject at the end of the 1970s, the symbolic politics literature is still not cited.¹³ Two literatures interested in the same political subject are not meeting up with each other.

Compartmentalization is found within the presidency field as well. A growing number of writers study presidential rhetoric and the symbolism of election campaigns.¹⁴ Many of these writers point out the symbolic implications. Elsewhere, people study presidential decision making, White House staffing, and relations with Congress. The rhetoric is kept separate from the decision making, and the symbolism from the staffing. The symbolism becomes one component of the institution that, by implication, includes other nonsymbolic components. The institution, as an example of symbolism, is not studied.

The situation can be summarized as follows: The symbolic politics literature suggests that various work on presidential symbolism is needed, but does not provide it. The presidency literature largely ignores the symbolic literature, typically taking the office at face value with its mix of symbolic and factual components. This book attempts to extend both literatures to meet up with one another. In the process, it seeks to identify

key features of the institution of the presidency and trace the implications for democratic government.

Defining Symbolism

Symbol is used in its literary, not linguistic, meaning in which the object referred to has a *range of meaning beyond itself*.¹⁵ Considered linguistically, all words are symbols—that is, the series of sounds or letters formed evoke an idea of what the word “means.” In the more conventional literary usage, however, words (gestures or any series of actions) are symbols only when they call forth a larger and usually more complex set of ideas than the literal meaning of the object. As a literary symbol, the American flag evokes a range of meaning beyond that of the three-colored rectangle of silk. This larger meaning typically involves emotional, psychological, or moral content. Indeed the usefulness of symbols is that they convey the kind of meaning not easily put into words. Advertising symbols are an obvious example in which the host of good things suggested go far beyond the particular concrete image shown. Symbols are a kind of shorthand communication for a large and powerful part of human experience not otherwise easily evoked.

Symbols, further, are *socially based*: They depend on an interaction, or communication, between those giving and those receiving them. Writers point out that an object becomes a symbol when “people endow it with meaning, value, or significance.”¹⁶ Although there may be purely private symbols, with meaning only to the person using them, symbols are studied primarily, whether in art, literature, or politics, when their meaning can be shared. Thus Gusfield defines a symbol as the “multiplicity of meanings which the same object or act can have for the observer and which, in a society, are often fixed, shared, and standardized.”¹⁷ The sharing may be partial, and people may differ in the content of the symbolic messages received. Nevertheless, some common context of meaning is assumed. The society supplies the context of meaning. The American flag would symbolize different things to conventional patriots and to war protesters in the late 1960s, but the symbol may be used by either one of the groups because a shared social context exists.

Symbols also are studied primarily when they are *purposive*—that is, intended.¹⁸ The purpose may be partly or primarily unconscious, and there need not be a perfect match between the meaning intended and the meaning communicated to others. Nevertheless, viewing symbols as communication between people, we assume some participation on the part of both the givers and receivers of the communication. Just as purely private symbols are excluded—those of interest only to the individual

creating them—so are the unintended symbols excluded—those received as perceptions where no intended transmission occurred.

It is important to see that a symbolic communication *need not bear any relation to what is factually true or to what people, independently of the communication, might agree to be true*. It may bear such a relationship, but it need not do so. Sheldon Messinger refers to a symbolically “projected” self, and Erving Goffman talks of a “performance” to influence others to the way the individual would like to be perceived.¹⁹ Other writers speak of a “presentation of the actual in terms of the ideal” or, more simply, “what people want to be true.”²⁰ A successful communication typically evokes *what people already agree to or what they would like to think of as true*. The bottle of brandy in the advertising picture may not bring the good life that it promises. The story of George Washington’s cherry tree was apparently invented by a nineteenth-century biographer by the name of Mason Weems.²¹ Nevertheless, symbols have power because people would like to believe in the possibility of the good life and the honesty of American presidents.

For the society as a whole, the symbolic meaning typically evokes ideas already in the public philosophy, with the term understood as a set of beliefs characterizing the identity and history of a people, often in idealized terms.²² Symbols evoke ideas the society wants to believe are true. The term *symbolic*, then, should not be opposed to *real*. Symbols have reality, clearly, as a projected self is seen and perceived by others and as patriotic slogans can move an entire crowd to action. They can be distinguished, however, from the literal or factual situation people might agree to in the absence of the symbolic communication. As a matter of fact the emperor was naked, but his parade was—really—a grand and glorious affair.

Hence symbols can *substitute for* something that does not exist otherwise. A wielder of symbols offers the substitute, not the wished-for independent condition: the brandy—not the good life. It is a kind of magic trick. A symbol can help produce the independent condition it stands for: so, flag-waving could be a call to action in war. But more commonly flag-waving, as one occupant of the White House seems particularly fond of, produces no further action. It is a substitute for other activity. Later chapters will show how far this symbolism-as-substitute can be carried. Presidents who are acting most powerfully are least likely to say they are one with the nation and its powers. Those who lead in the use of religious symbols—Eisenhower, Nixon—do not appear from biographers to be the most religious in private life. Those who state the nation’s mission most grandly are least likely to expand its activity in the world. It follows that students of politics need to be astute symbol watchers: not only to

see what the symbolic meanings are, but to judge how well the symbols correspond to the conditions they stand for.

Symbols are communicated—both given and received. In a book on George Washington, subtitled *The Making of an American Symbol*, Barry Schwartz seeks to explain how and why the legend was created. Washington was honored not only for his victories in war and politics, but for his modesty, piety, and love of country. He did not seek power for himself, so the story goes, but renounced it—twice, returning to private life after the Revolutionary War and again after service as president. Schwartz shows how Washington's virtues were well matched to the needs of the emerging republic. For a people in the throes of revolution, Washington provided a new kind of unkingly king, a democratic hero. He embodied virtues that were already prized in the country.²³ Only one component needs more emphasis in this excellent account: Washington's own role in building the legend: *i.e.*, his self presentation.

Consider the first inaugural address, the first words spoken by an American president. The speech is very short, a little over two pages in length, and almost entirely personal. Washington does not talk about the country or the very great problems it faces or what he thinks the role of a president should be. Instead, he speaks immediately about the retirement he had chosen before, explaining that the only thing that could force him to leave his retreat is duty to his country. The word *retreat* is used twice. He is aware, he says, that he inherited inferior endowments from nature. Just as he had little military ability, he feels he has few qualifications for office: so, Divine Providence, which guided the nation to victory in war, must continue to guide the nation. His piety in the speech is as pronounced as his modesty. In the one recommendation he makes to Congress, he asks the House not to pay him for his service as president. He reminds people that he had also asked not to be paid for his service in the war.

The Farewell Address is longer and more concerned with policy. Washington apparently had Madison's help in preparing it, while other portions may have been written by Alexander Hamilton and John Jay.²⁴ Nevertheless, Washington includes points he has made before: about his duty to his country, his inferior qualifications, and the retirement from which he had been reluctantly drawn. He returns to these themes at the conclusion of the address:

I am nevertheless too sensible of my defects not to think it probable that I may have committed many errors. Whatever they may be, I fervently beseech the Almighty to avert or mitigate the evils to which they may tend. I shall also carry with me the hope that my country will never cease to view them with indulgence, and that, after forty-five

years of my life dedicated to its service with upright zeal, the faults of incompetent abilities will be consigned to oblivion.

With one more reference to the retreat he is looking forward to, Washington says farewell.

Washington becomes the nation's first democratic hero: literally, a legend in his own time. A practical man, highly successful, yet modest and religious, he accepts his country's honors, all the while pointing out how much he dislikes power and only desires a humble private life. People know Washington embodies these traits because he has told them he does. A symbolic communication has been given and received.

A political symbol, then, can be defined as follows:

The communication by political actors to others for a purpose, in which the specific object referred to conveys a larger range of meaning, typically with emotional, moral, or psychological impact. This larger meaning need not be independently or factually true, but will tap ideas people want to believe in as true.

The symbols used in this communication can take many different forms: They can be words or gestures or elaborately staged events. In the drama of politics, actors, setting, dialogue, and themes of action all contribute to the total symbolic effect.

Presidents, for example, do many things to show they are president of all the people. They quote from selected letters by individual citizens, implying that they read the letters of all citizens. They avoid references to elections or voters, which might remind people that their support is partial or their mandate unclear. They fill their schedule with meetings of hundreds of carefully selected groups. They say explicitly, "I will be the President of black, brown, red, and white Americans." The symbolism is purposive: presidents want to rally as much public support as possible. It is factually incorrect. A minority of citizens, counting all eligible voters, actually voted for the person, while many voted against him. Presidents do not take time to read the letters from citizens, nor are Native Americans frequently invited to conferences at the White House. Yet, the idea is appealing not only because it gives the nation a momentary sense of community, but because it would really be quite unpleasant to think that some groups were more important to the president than others were.

To explain an appeal, however, is not to justify it. Symbols, once selected, carry on a life of their own, often outliving their original purpose. Symbols, also, can give false comfort and distract attention from problems that need to be faced. If people would like a government where red Americans have as much access to the president as white ones do,

the symbolic substitute needs to be recognized and rejected. Symbols are purposive: hence we need to evaluate the intent of the symbol-givers. Symbols need to be accepted: therefore people have some control over which symbols will be the most effective ones.

We live in an age of symbolism. Magicians are at work not only in politics or advertising, but in news, entertainment, business, religion. The craft is highly regarded and rewarded, at times approaching an art form. Survival techniques are needed both by the individual and society in developing skills of symbol-identification. So, skills developed through this account of one political institution can be applied more broadly.

Symbols and Institutional Change

This symbolism has obvious importance for a study of institutions. Institutions are shaped by the perceptions and expectations of people, both those working within the institution and those working with it. Institutions, by definition, are patterns of actions and expectations that carry on over time, independent of the particular individuals or circumstances. Expectations can be shaped by organization rules and charter documents or by informal processes. Thus, if people are expected to act in certain ways—and expected to present themselves as possessing certain traits—these expectations become part of the institution, whether or not they are realistic or factually true. In the extreme case, where very few guiding rules or formal documents exist, the institution can be changed by the informal perceptions. This is especially so if the perceptions evoke strong emotional, moral, or psychological impact and are what people would like to believe to be true.

The institution of the presidency is an example of such an extreme case. The office was left open, by the writers of the Constitution, to grow with the developing nation. While the powers of Congress are carefully enumerated, no such list is provided for the presidency. The president is to “see that the laws are faithfully executed,” but how this is to be done is left for presidents and others to determine. Article II of the Constitution begins: “The executive power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America.” Interpreted one way, the sentence is little more than a declaration that someone called a president will head the executive branch. The president could be a figurehead. Read another way, in what has become the accepted interpretation, the sentence gives a broad, undefined authority to the office; it becomes a source of presidential power. The office is undefined; thus presidents become what people want them to be.

Congress, too, would evolve and change over the course of American history. But the changes would occur within the boundaries set by the

charter document and its own substantial rules. In contrast, there are few formal rules for the president, and fewer still that carry from one administration to the next. The presidency becomes what people say it is—Supreme Court justices, teachers of the presidency, the presidents themselves.

The process becomes a dynamic one as these symbols are communicated over time. Expectations shape action; action leads to further expectations. Children learn about the president, and grow up to teach others about the office or to become president themselves. Presidents look at the public record to see what past presidents have done. It is true that public expectations can change, as points in American history call for one kind of symbol as opposed to others. Individual presidents make a difference, selecting the symbols that they find most congruous or effective. Perhaps more commonly, however, the change is more gradual and subtle. By degrees almost imperceptible, as one kind of symbol replaces another, the office is transformed.

At one point in the twentieth century, presidents were expected to say in their first inaugural what the election meant for the party and policies selected by the voters. Democrat or Republican, internationalist or isolationist, each president set forth his mandate in turn. "There has been a change of government," Wilson announced in words that would shock a modern audience. Coolidge explained, for one policy after another, what the verdict of the people was. Contemporary presidents, however, do not mention elections, much less say what an election means. When was it decided that elections were not one of the things celebrated on inauguration day? It was probably never decided, but the office—and a link between the president and the voters—had been changed.

Symbols change gradually, as new communications are given and received. So, if the office of president becomes what people say it is, we need to see what these symbolic communications are.

What the President Means to Americans

From this perspective, we can look at how people view the presidency and how they present it to others. The focus is limited to the office of president and not particular individuals in office. While these views can be contradicted at other points and by other statements, common features do emerge clearly.

Fred Greenstein explains "what the president means to Americans." The president is (1) a symbol of the nation; (2) an outlet for affect—a way of feeling good about one's country; (3) a cognitive aid, allowing a single individual to symbolize and substitute for the complexity and confusion of government; and (4) a means of vicarious participation

through which people identify with the president and feel more a part of events occurring around them.²⁵ These perceptions are found in studies of children and adults. For the young child, the president is the government, with other figures viewed in relation to that basic orientation point. Congress becomes the group of people who "help the president." In other words, the president is the initial point of contact, general symbol of government, and orientation point from which the rest of the government is perceived. The president is also perceived to be both powerful and benevolent—something like the children's parents, or God. Presidents are symbols of authority and power, and they are good. Adults, like children, see the president as the primary symbol of government, give support to the incumbent in office, and see the president as the predominant political decision maker to whom others—Congress and the public in particular—are subordinate. In a study published after Watergate, most persons agreed that the president "stands for our country" and that they sleep better when a president they trust is watching over the country.²⁶ As children sleep better when a trusted parent is watching over them, adults, in childlike fashion, place the president in a parental role. John F. Kennedy received barely 50 percent of the vote in 1960, but by inauguration day he had the job approval of 69 percent. Gerald Ford had a similar percentage of people who approved of his job performance before he had a chance to do anything. The office, in short, is supplying support for the individual occupants.

These attitudes span years of recent American history and widely varying presidential performance. After the Watergate crisis, people wondered if the office would be permanently damaged by the scandal and resignation. In the short term, support for the presidency did drop sharply during the Watergate crisis. But support also fell for other governmental institutions, including the Supreme Court and Congress, who were in the process of checking the president in line with their constitutional responsibilities. In accord with the earlier socialization studies, the president appeared to be serving as the orientation point from which wider perceptions of government were derived. In addition, people distinguish positive views about the presidency in general from negative views about any one incumbent. People could agree that Watergate "reduced [their] confidences in the presidency," but when they were asked more general questions, no sign of that reduced confidence appeared. People said they would support the president in time of foreign or domestic crisis and think favorably of the office and its incumbents.²⁷ It is the office of Washington and Lincoln, not of Grant or Harding or Nixon, that the new president comes to occupy.

So when Gerald Ford assumed the presidency in August 1974, 71 percent of the public approved of the way the president was doing his

job—a percentage strikingly similar to the support given presidents a decade before. After his first one hundred days in office, Carter's approval stood at 64 percent, while Nixon's had stood at a similar 61 percent after his first one hundred days. In 1976 the Associated Press reported the responses of first-graders in Salem, Oregon, when their teachers asked: "What should a President do for the people?" President should, among other things: Help ducks. Sign papers. Give poor people money. Tell people where to go. Keep people from stealing. Help a lost puppy. Help us not die. Two years after the Nixon resignation, the next generation of citizens begins to form ideas about the president's job. The president is seen as powerful and benevolent: like parents, supplying clothing, food, and shelter; and like God, watching over birds and lost puppies.

It is a very short jump indeed from these responses to adult expectations that presidents should "control the energy crisis" or manage the economy and "give us jobs." Yet these expectations follow automatically from the assumptions of power and benevolence. Studies of public attitudes show that a president's popularity rises and falls with economic conditions and with the "good news" and "bad news" reported by the press. Overall, presidential popularity (1) rises at a time of international crisis as people rally around the flag and the president; (2) declines in economic hard times and during prolonged unsuccessful wars; and (3) declines through the term from a high point in the first few months in office.²⁸ These findings make sense in terms of the expectations held. As symbols of the nation, presidents are supported when the national interest is threatened. But as cognitive symbol and orientation point, they are held responsible for the fortunes of government, as in the case of the economy, even when the problems are beyond their control. The same rationale helps explain the decline in support throughout the term. Since presidents do not have the power to do the things expected of them, the polls drop as the expectations are not met and the ills continue. They will rise again with the hopes and promise of a new inauguration and beginning.

These public attitudes do not develop in vacuum. Journalists, too, equate the president with the government, translating national news into "the White House story."²⁹ Headlines proclaim when a president makes a proposal—they do not say when Congress takes apart the proposal or substitutes a few ideas of its own. As one observer commented, "If there is a balance of powers within the government, it rarely shows on television."³⁰ Journalists ask candidates what they will do about inflation or the budget deficit, implying that they can do something to solve these problems. The process is circular and reinforcing. Because the president can symbolize the nation and the government, the news media concen-

trate on this individual in reporting the national news, thereby strengthening the symbolic connection.

Academic writers contribute to the symbolism, too. Political scientist Thomas Cronin identifies a "textbook presidency," that emphasizes the power and virtue intrinsic to the office.³¹ Presidents are assumed to be powerful, frequently "the most powerful individual in the world." They are assumed to be good—indeed, to be a kind of secular high priest and moral leader for the nation. One writer describes the president as father and head of the political family, assuaging the deep-seated longings of his children. Another attributes to the president the following characteristics: humility, courage, sagacity, imagination and vision, moral convictions, nobility of spirit, and an understanding heart. A study updating Cronin's textbook presidency to the 1980s found less emphasis on power, but even more on moral leadership than was seen before.³²

Again, the power of the nation is identified with the power of the president. If the nation is one of the most powerful in the world, then its symbol must possess the same degree of power, even though as a matter of fact the American president is more limited than most national chief executives. While many texts do not present the president in these ways, Cronin's point remains important. A substantial number of college students—and the future teachers and news reporters—are given a highly illusory view of the office.

Presidents and their advisers are subject to the same socialization. Jack Valenti, an old friend of Lyndon Johnson, describes his first view of the new president on Air Force One:

He was in a strange way another man, not the same man I had known. I believe with others who have an intimate notion of what the presidency is all about that something inexplicable and possibly mystical takes place when a man is transported across an infinite flight of time and duty . . . to that place called the presidency.³³

He goes on to speak of a transmutation and an alchemy. Yes, he says, he called his old friend "Mr. President," himself caught up in the mystical transformation.

An additional theme is implicit in much of the description already presented. As a single human individual who symbolizes the nation and the government, the president is alone. This aloneness leads to a curiously ahistorical view in which the current incumbent is seen apart from any recent predecessors and past events. Presidents are associated with the great figures of American history—Washington, Lincoln, and a very few others—but apart from this association they are alone. *There is only one*