

EVAN CORNOG

THE POWER AND THE STORY

HOW THE CRAFTED
PRESIDENTIAL NARRATIVE HAS
DETERMINED POLITICAL SUCCESS
FROM GEORGE WASHINGTON
TO GEORGE W. BUSH

EVAN CORNOG

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INTRODUCTION

“I SHALL GO TO KOREA,” SAID DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER ON OCTOBER 24, 1952, with the presidential election just eleven days away. The Korean War had been under way for more than two years and peace negotiations for more than a year when he made the statement. The Republican nominee’s promise had impact because of Ike’s stature as a military leader—the great architect of victory in Europe, the first commander of NATO. The statement invoked both past stories—about his wartime leadership and his skill as warrior and diplomatist—and the prospective story of the promised trip. It appealed to voters because Americans, weary of the war, believed that Ike’s very presence in Korea would lead more quickly to peace. His Democratic opponent, Adlai Stevenson, had considered issuing such a statement himself but dismissed it as grandstanding. The truth is that such a promise from Stevenson would have meant far less than it did coming from Eisenhower. Ike’s statement mobilized a powerful set of stories in aid of his candidacy and helped ensure his decisive victory in that year’s race.¹

The essence of American presidential leadership, and the secret of presidential success, is storytelling. From the earliest days of the Amer-

ican republic to the present, those seeking the nation's highest office have had to tell persuasive stories—about the nation, about its problems, and, most of all, about themselves—to those who have the power to elect them. Once a president is in office, the ability to tell the right story, and to change the story as necessary, is crucial to the success of his administration. And once a president has left office, through either defeat or retirement, he often spends his remaining years working to ensure that the story as he sees it is the one accepted by history. Without a good story, there is no power, and no glory.

From George Washington on, the success of every president has depended on his ability to build consensus for his narrative, and to persuade the press and the people to accept his story line. It is through such narratives that presidents capture the public imagination and build the support they need in order to govern. Such stories have meaning, they have lessons and morals. They connect a politician with both the issues of his time and with the hearts and minds of the voters. And a successful presidential life story connects with people as people, on a very human and emotional level, creating a link that makes voters care about what happens to a distant politician, just as we care what happens to a sympathetic character in a movie. These crafted narratives are the principal medium of exchange of our public life, the currency of American politics.

There are all kinds of presidential life stories, because there are all kinds of stories. The word “story” can refer to the course of a person's entire life or a single moment in that life, to factual narratives and fictitious ones, and can even suggest a lie (or a “tall story”). In the political arena stories may be advanced by a presidential candidate or by his opponent, or might first appear in a journalistic account such as a newspaper article. Presidential narratives can be lengthy and complex (as when expressed in a campaign biography) or quick and crude (Herbert Hoover caused the Great Depression). Stories can be promulgated through many media and can be told in a variety of forms, from

straightforward exposition to the highly economical and emotionally charged form of a symbol (William Henry Harrison's log cabin, William McKinley's full dinner pail, the mug shot of Willie Horton).

Stories work and stories matter because they are fundamental to the way we understand the world. As children we hear stories that teach us where we came from, what our family duties are, how we fit into a larger society, what our place is in the cosmos. Religions explain the will of God principally through stories, not through laws and rules (although these, too, are important). Stories, we discover, have morals, lessons that we can incorporate into our understanding of life. The tale of Moses underlines the importance of ancestry, and that of David Copperfield helps us to navigate the hazards of youth. The example of Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet shows how to select a mate, and Henry James's Isabel Archer demonstrates how not to. Prince Hal's growth into Henry V is a guidebook for those who would wield power, and Lear's end provides a tragic lesson on the difficulties of relinquishing it. A president's life story is laid out against a background that contains all these struggles and countless others. By connecting his own story to these ready-made points of reference from literature and history, a presidential candidate can add depth and context to his own life story, magnifying his own stature in the process.

Stories not only help us comprehend the world, they help us remember what we have learned. Life itself is too complex to comprehend without being reduced to more manageable dimensions. Stories are the tools we all use to bring order to chaos. Stories are where facts gain meaning. We all instinctively appreciate the power of stories. Religion, literature, cinema, and advertising exploit this power, and so do politicians. Journalists, too, appreciate this power—indeed, for many it is the reward that compensates them for long workdays and poor pay.

Although the power of stories is present in politics around the world, it is particularly strong in the United States. As a nation, the

United States has always lacked the sort of linguistic or geographical rationale that helped create older nations. Its sense of nationhood, and of individual citizenship, was founded on a set of political ideals, ideals that are communicated through stories—stories about first settlement and religious freedom, stories about the struggle for independence and political freedom, stories about the overthrow of slavery and other forms of oppression that limited personal freedom. Also, because the Founding Fathers chose a presidential rather than a parliamentary system, the choice of the head of government has been subject to a national vote of the people rather than the choice of a leader by a political party in parliament. So candidates for the presidency had to find ways to make themselves appealing to large numbers of voters. They had to create and circulate stories that would attract the attention and engage the affections of the entire nation.

Over time, the kinds of stories that are politically acceptable, the ways those stories can be told, and the role and power of the press have changed. Presidential storytelling is more important than ever in today's media-driven political world, where presidential campaigns have come to be focused upon personality and the contest itself, rather than upon issues and ideology. But even though presidential life stories have come to be more and more carefully edited and presented, the core of the story has to be true or it will not work. The public can tolerate artifice—it's part of our daily media diet—but it cannot abide deception. The successful president is one who best understands the rules under which the game proceeds in his time and who advances his life story most effectively.

Politicians' life stories are played out on a stage that contains the same kinds of characters that populate great works of fiction and drama. These stories take advantage of the public fascination with the doings of the powerful, and of how presidential politics has helped to fashion our current cult of celebrity. Looking at presidential politics as a contest of narratives has a tremendous explanatory power—it ex-

plains why Ronald Reagan succeeded at being the “Teflon president,” why the Monica Lewinsky affair did not shatter the Clinton presidency, and why a humble background helps some candidates (Lincoln, Truman) and a privileged one helps others (Madison, FDR, George W. Bush).

It also demonstrates the relative unimportance of truth. A good story trumps a true story almost any day, and so Washington’s hacked cherry tree and William Henry Harrison’s log cabin remain part of the national lore, though they never existed. The press, by showing conclusively that a story is false, can destroy its effectiveness. This is the source of the press’s power. But candidates have learned to harness the power of narrative and have found ways to take their stories to the electorate without the intermediation of the press.

For all the campaign talk about résumés and experience, issues and qualifications, it is the battle of stories, not the debate on issues, that determines how Americans respond to a presidential contender. Candidates’ stories can predispose the press to trouble a contender over every error or give him great indulgence, to anatomize his personal life or leave privacy intact, to probe motives or unquestioningly report actions. The play’s the thing that advances the agenda of the king.

The presidential scholar Richard Neustadt argued that the essence of presidential power is the power to persuade. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and stories are the vessels of rhetoric. Presidential life stories are the most important tools of persuasion in American political life. Crucial to the success of any rhetorical strategy is the creation of a sense of identification between the protagonist and his audience. This can be done crudely—a candidate visiting Chicago mentions that he studied at a college there, or that his wife was born there—or more subtly, through how a candidate dresses, how he speaks, how he acts. Jimmy Carter tried to create a bond with the American people by carrying his own luggage and by wearing a cardigan to demonstrate that he was turning down the thermostat to save energy in the White

House, just as he was asking all Americans to do. It was not a very effective gambit, but it has become part of presidential lore. Long after a president is dead and buried, the stories he animated live on. They are incorporated over and over into new narratives of persuasion by the final arbiters of presidential careers, historians.

Historians and journalists are rhetoricians, too, and seek to establish a bond with their readers, to forge ways for the reader to identify with the writer—to see what he or she has seen, and then to trust the judgments arrived at and the conclusions reached. Of course, historians and journalists are supposed to be dedicated to the discovery of the truth, not to the dissemination of propaganda, and just because there are elements of persuasion embedded in historical and journalistic writing does not mean that their objective is false. After all, once a writer has discovered the truth as he or she sees it, it is natural to try to persuade others of the rightness of those views. As long as the evidence is not tampered with and the desire to tell a good story does not interfere with telling a true story, no harm is done. But the tug of narrative is strong, and many an untrue story survives simply because it is entertaining.

When writing stories about politics, journalists are subject to the suasion of politicians and their handlers. After the 1988 election, many in the press felt they had been manipulated by the well-choreographed activities of George H. W. Bush's campaign, hoodwinked by Lee Atwater and Roger Ailes, Bush's strategy and communications gurus. The press plays a vital role in determining the efficacy of different rhetorical strategies. It hardly matters, after all, whether a candidate and his team have devised a persuasive story line if nobody ever hears it. And it is largely the press that determines that. This is why much of the energy of a modern campaign, or of a presidential administration, is dedicated to ensuring that one's own stories make it into the press and that opposing narratives are relegated to the sidelines. The more effectively a politician can define the terms of a debate, the more likely

his success. When Richard Nixon spoke of the “silent majority” in a 1969 address to the nation, he was explicitly contrasting the many Americans who did not protest with a vocal minority that appeared with regularity on the nightly news and in the morning papers. Nixon defined the situation in a way that delivered victory to himself—because those who were silent were anointed as the majority. The speech both used the press to deliver its message and undermined the press (whose practitioners were the ones, after all, devoting headlines to the protesters). The term “silent majority” successfully established itself in public discourse, doing its master’s bidding faithfully.

But the very power of stories can also pose grave problems for candidates. Presidents become trapped in the stories they have told (or that have been told about them); the logic of the narrative eclipses other realities. Nobody stands outside this process. Stories shape not only our reactions to what presidents do but the courses of action presidents themselves decide to pursue. Franklin Roosevelt looked at the story of his distant cousin Teddy’s rise to the presidency—from election to the New York State legislature to service as assistant secretary of the navy, then on to the governor’s mansion in Albany and eventually the White House—and chose to pursue the same path. He managed to touch every base. George W. Bush’s stance toward Iraq was shaped by his own relationship with his presidential father and his father’s experience of making war on Saddam Hussein. How strong was his desire to rewrite the ending of his father’s narrative? In recent years, some politicians seem to have lived their entire lives calculating how each choice they make might affect their ultimate electability—Bill Clinton and Al Gore come to mind.

For journalists (and voters), well-crafted or familiar narratives often provide convenient substitutes for thought. Rather than trying to understand the complex vectors of a new scandal, one may simply add “-gate” to a convenient word and all political chicanery is leveled, whether it involves a fundamental perversion of the Constitution or a

petty exercise of patronage power. And the attention of both press and public can be diverted; too many times, the power of a gesture or a joke outweighs the power of truth.

Stories are not, of course, the whole story. It matters how much money a campaign has to spend—not least because it principally spends that money to disseminate its most important stories. It matters what a candidate's positions on the issues are, even if a campaign mostly stresses just a few issues that have tested well in surveys of likely voters. It matters whether the candidate is handsome or ugly, thin or fat, black or white. But it is the power of stories that determines how much these things matter.

The Power and the Story traces the history of presidential storytelling by following the trajectory of an archetypal career of a man of power. My intention is to explore the role of stories in the interplay of politicians, the press, and the public as a career evolves from the politician's first emergence as a public figure through his rise to national prominence, the presidential campaign, the exercise of power, reelection or defeat, and then his efforts to reinterpret and redefine the story until his death.

American politicians have been crafting narratives for more than two centuries. But the power of stories has been taken for granted, something recognized but not explained, acknowledged but not explored. This book attempts to explore and explain this central fact of American political life, ranging over the entire life span of the American presidency, and ending with an examination of the various stories that have shaped the career of President George W. Bush—including his own Ike-like journey to a war zone, the surprise trip to Baghdad for Thanksgiving 2003, which gave Bush a brief, but real, bump in popularity. Along the way, I hope to show how more than two centuries of practice have refined the level of presidential storytelling into a political art of the greatest sophistication and importance.

CHAPTER ONE

AMERICAN HEROES, AMERICAN MYTHS

BADLY BURNED IN THE FIRE THAT HAD RESULTED FROM THE RAMMING of his boat by a Japanese destroyer, Pat McMahon had been in the water for four hours. The sea was warm, but McMahon was afraid of sharks—he'd seen plenty of them in his patrols in these waters—and he was in great pain. He wore a kapok life jacket, the straps of which were held in the clenched teeth of the officer who was towing him toward shore. After more than four hours of swimming, Lieutenant John F. Kennedy was spent, so tired he could hardly pull his shipmate. As he finally reached the shore of Plum Pudding Island, he collapsed with his feet still in the water and his face in the sand. Despite the burns on his hands and arms, McMahon tried to drag Kennedy ashore, pleading with his commander to hide himself behind the bushes that would conceal them from any passing Japanese patrol boats. Kennedy managed to crawl forward, and soon the rest of his crew, who had followed in his wake as he towed McMahon, struggled ashore and took cover. A few minutes later, a Japanese patrol boat did cruise by, but its crew failed to spot the exhausted American sailors.¹

In the pre-dawn hours of August 1, 1943, the Japanese destroyer *Amagiri* (Heavenly Mist) had rammed PT-109, the patrol torpedo boat Kennedy commanded in the Solomon Islands during the Second World War. Two members of Kennedy's crew had been crushed to death instantly, and the *Amagiri's* prow had sliced through the boat only a few feet away from Kennedy's spot in the cockpit. The lieutenant gathered the surviving members of his crew on the still-floating prow of PT-109, but it was apparent that the hulk would either sink or, failing that, attract the attention of the Japanese. So Kennedy had decided to lead his men to Plum Pudding Island, a tiny speck a hundred yards long by seventy wide. JFK hastily chose it as the destination because it was both large enough to conceal his ten surviving men and small enough not to have a Japanese garrison stationed there.²

But relief from the immediate peril of drowning or capture by the Japanese did not end the plight of the crew. Kennedy soon decided that the island was too far away from the normal path of American PT boats in the area to be able to signal for rescue, so he led his men on another, shorter swim to the larger island of Naru (or, as Kennedy thought, Nauro). There they were fortunate to encounter two natives who were providing the allies with intelligence about Japanese activities. On the husk of a coconut Kennedy carved the message NAURO ISL NATIVE KNOWS POSIT HE CAN PILOT 11 ALIVE NEED SMALL BOAT KENNEDY and asked the natives to take it to their Allied contact. His message worked: rescuers were dispatched, and on August 8, a week after the sinking of PT-109, Kennedy and his crew returned to their base on Rendova Island in the Solomons.³

The story of Kennedy's heroism formed a crucial chapter of his biography when he ran for president in 1960. Survivors of the action appeared with Kennedy during the fall campaign, and then rode on a PT-109 float in the inaugural parade. Kennedy's story had become widely known long before the campaign, because he came from a prominent family (his father, the Boston businessman Joseph P.

Kennedy, had been chosen by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1937 to be ambassador to Great Britain).

After the rescue was complete the story appeared in papers such as the *Boston Herald* and the *New York Times*, and in 1944 John Hersey chronicled Kennedy's PT-109 exploits in *The New Yorker*. Hersey's piece opened casually, saying that Kennedy (identified as "the ex-Ambassador's son") "came through town the other day and told me the story of his survival in the South Pacific. I asked Kennedy if I might write the story down." Not surprisingly, his answer was yes. He urged Hersey to talk to his crew, which the reporter did. The resulting article portrayed Kennedy in heroic terms, describing his physical sufferings and making clear his leadership qualities. When his men despaired of ever being rescued, "Kennedy was still unwilling to admit that things were hopeless." It was a glowing portrait, a useful asset for a young man headed toward a career in politics.⁴

THE LEADING MAN ENTERS

The stories we like best contain heroes. Heroes' stories have many elements, but there is almost always a moment of emergence, an event that sets them apart from others and marks them as extraordinary—Hercules strangling the serpents in his crib, or Einstein revolutionizing the world of physics from his post in the Bern patent office. Such events establish a sort of origin myth for the protagonist, defining the person's character and marking him as a person to be watched. For a politician, such a story provides an invaluable head start over the competition, rendering him both admirable and memorable at the same time.

Having found their stories, such men advance in politics because they understand how to build on them, to burnish their existing reputations, presenting themselves to the world in a flattering light, and

allowing that which is best about them to be seen. There's great power in this, because stories are fundamental to how we perceive the world. "Stories," after all, are what newspaper reporters write and television news broadcasts. And voters, awash in the complexity of current events, use stories as their means of boiling down complicated realities to simple choices. Our minds just naturally organize information in the form of stories, sorting the disparate data that reach our senses and constructing stories as a way to retain and make sense of it all. Out of the swirl of events and issues, we find good guys and bad guys, winners and losers, and make our choices accordingly.

American heroes such as George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and John F. Kennedy have had stories of emergence to set them apart. Their stories demonstrated enough appeal and staying power to become part of the national myth—not myths as stories that are fabulous or untrue, but rather as tales that embody popular ideas on social phenomena. Just as Greek myths taught their audience lessons about the importance of filial duty or the hazards of vanity, and the stories in the New Testament encourage acceptance of Christianity, American political myths portray the nation's history in ways that promote loyalty to the nation and reverence for its highest principles.

To work, stories need heroes, individuals whose experiences reveal truths about life, whose sufferings make us feel pain and sorrow, whose victories fill us with happiness and pride. Any person aspiring to be president of the United States must to some extent fulfill these narrative expectations. A person to whose fate we are indifferent, or even hostile, will scarcely inspire us to follow his lead. But the character who inspires trust and admiration will find it easier to capture the voters' interest and steer a nation through hard times.

For the presidential aspirant to have a chance, he must first be noticed. He requires a point of entry onto the national stage, an event that separates him from others and brings him to prominence. Such