

**Stars and Stripes:
How the American President Became the Celebrity-in-Chief**

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July 15, 2013

To my late father, Alvin Wapia,

To the moon and back a million and one times. This one's for you, with love.

ABSTRACT

The 20th century saw a considerable shift in the definition and status the concept of “celebrity.” With the development of new communications technologies and the rise of the modern celebrity in the 1920s, American politics began to change, with the commander-in-chief increasingly becoming a celebrity-in-chief. The three case studies chosen to explore this idea of the American president as celebrity are John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are certain individuals without whom this project could not have been completed. Firstly, thank you to the Center for American Studies and the American Studies program for granting me the opportunity to complete a project that I am so passionate about. Secondly, thank you to my supervisor, Dr. Alison Meek, for providing me with support and guidance throughout this entire process. Thank you to Christine Wall, for your reassurance and encouragement over that past year. To my American Studies colleagues, I am honored to have been able to work alongside every one of you; you have taught me so much and provided me with so much support and encouragement, and for that I thank you. Finally, to my mom, Sylvia, and my best friend, Sara Michelle, thank you for being the best cheerleaders anyone could ask for.

INTRODUCTION

There is a desire for the President of the United States to embody many things including leadership, integrity, and diplomacy. Yet an often overlooked characteristic of the president is that of celebrity. The rise of the concept of the commander-in-chief as “celebrity-in-chief”¹ is due to a number of developments, both political and technological, over the course of the late 19th and 20th century. One of these major developments is the ever-growing sense of entitlement the press feels concerning their right to know about the private lives of presidents and presidential candidates. A good example of this is the case of President Grover Cleveland’s marriage to a much younger woman in 1886. While precautions were taken to keep the affair private, a press entourage showed up on the day of the ceremony, and even followed the couple on their honeymoon.² Many, including some members the media, felt the coverage went too far, with one magazine describing it as “press espionage,” arguing that the press does have the right to pry into the private lives of public officials.³ Newspapers adamantly responded to the criticism, with the *New York World*⁴ arguing that the president is “public property” and that reporters have a duty to report on what they deem newsworthy.⁵ According to Katina R. Stapleton, newspapers and tabloids have played a crucial role in shaping presidential images and mythologies and have helped

¹ The term “celebrity-in-chief” is borrowed from Alan Schroeder’s book *Celebrity-in-Chief: How Show Business Took Over the White House*.

² Elliot King, “Newspapers,” in *The American President in Popular Culture*, ed. John W. Matviko (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 2005), 103.

³ Joseph B. Bishop, “Newspaper Espionage,” *Forum*, Vol. 1 (Summer 1886): 529.

⁴ While the *New York World* is largely known as one of the first examples of Yellow Journalism (tabloid), it was only in the early stages of its transformation from newspaper to tabloid at the time of Cleveland’s marriage.

⁵ King, “Newspapers,” 104.

transform the president into a celebrity.⁶ Such coverage suggests a changing role of the president within American popular perception and highlights the difference between being well known and being a celebrity. According to Neil Postman, part of the differentiation rests with the coverage of things other than politics, most notably the private lives of presidents.⁷ Therefore some presidents are bigger celebrities than others, as their private lives receive greater press coverage. This trend is a staple of Hollywood and the entertainment industry, with the media constantly reporting on the private lives of movie stars, musicians and individuals who are famous for simply being famous.

However, despite connections such as this one between the world of celebrity and politics, few presidential scholars ever discuss the president within the framework of celebrity. Thus, there is a gap within the scholarship that must be filled. The development of the modern celebrity in the 1920s, in conjunction with the rise of television in the 1940s and the Internet in the 1990s as political media, have not only changed our understanding of celebrity, but also consequentially the role of the American president. The visual and intimate nature of television has caused image to take increasing precedence over substance, and the Internet has only heightened this new political reality, in addition to creating new avenues through which to bypass traditional political media. As a result, not only has the way Americans elect their politicians changed, but it has also changed the way presidential administrations function at a structural level.

⁶ Katina R. Stapleton, "Magazines and Tabloids," in *The American President in Popular Culture*, ed. John W. Matviko (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 2005), 122.

⁷ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 132.

It is important to acknowledge that presidents prior to the invention and use of television did possess celebrity-like qualities and were celebrities of their time. For example, George Washington can undoubtedly be classified as an American superstar. However, not only has the definition of celebrity changed since the nation's founding, but the concept of the president as celebrity has been heightened and intensified by way of television, and now the Internet.

This paper is composed of four major sections. The first explores the development and rise of the modern celebrity and its relation to American politics, and more specifically, the presidency. This chapter is followed by three presidential case studies.⁸ The first is John F. Kennedy, as he was the first president to launch an effective full-scale television election campaign, which changed presidential elections forever. In addition, he is still remembered today as one of the most glamorous commander-in-chiefs and is still ranked within the top ten American presidents by numerous public polls.⁹ While Kennedy had many famous friends and mistresses, he was a celebrity in his own right; he was always conscious of his image and understood the power and benefit of television and the press in shaping this image.

Ronald Reagan is another strong example of a celebrity-in-chief. Reagan is not only an interesting case study because he was a former Hollywood actor, but also

⁸ If space allowed, there are numerous other presidents who could have been dealt with, including Franklin Roosevelt and Bill Clinton. However, for the purposes of this paper, the case studies chosen provide a good cross-section for looking at the evolution of technology in conjunction with celebrity within the American presidency.

⁹ Kennedy ranked number one in 2000 and tied in 2003 with Lincoln. The latest poll, conducted in 2011, ranked Kennedy fourth. See "American's say Reagan is the Greatest U.S. President," *Gallup*, Feb 18, 2011; "JFK Ranked as Greatest U.S. President," *Gallup*, Feb 21, 2000; "Americans: Kennedy Assassination a Conspiracy," *Gallup*, Nov 21, 2003.

because many aspects of his presidency were run like a Hollywood production. Much of Reagan's presidency was scripted and generated by a team of handlers and specialists, turning his presidency into one of the greatest American productions. In addition, his presidency also set a precedent for how a president should comport himself on the public stage.

The final case study is current president Barack Obama. Obama is often compared to Kennedy, because of his charisma and his revolutionary use of the Internet in the 2008 presidential campaign, which is reminiscent of Kennedy's use of television in 1960. In many ways, Obama has learned from his Democratic predecessor, Bill Clinton. However it can be argued that Obama has taken many of Clinton's techniques and celebrity and pushed them further through his utilization of the Internet and his strong branding. Thus he is a very important president to consider when studying the American presidency within a framework of celebrity.

The study of the concept of celebrity-in-chief is important because the continual convergence between politics and entertainment is so often overlooked by academics, and yet is so crucial to understanding American politics. While technological innovations have intensified the role of the president as celebrity, the connection between politicians and celebrity culture is rooted much deeper. As the former chairman of the Motion Picture Association, and former assistant of Lyndon Johnson, Jack Valenti once stated: "Politicians and movie stars spring from the same DNA. Both hope for applause, read from a script, and hope to persuade audiences."¹⁰

¹⁰ Alan Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief: How Show Business Took Over the White House* (Bolder, CO.: Westview Press, 2004), 299.

This statement suggests that the relationship between politicians and voters can be viewed through the same lens as celebrities and fans; they develop nothing more than abstract relationships. In other words, just like actors, politicians are “intimate strangers,” both familiar and remote to their fans and citizens.¹¹ These relationships are nonetheless important for getting elected and maintaining popular support once in office. Thus, it is important for the president to assume the significant role of celebrity-in-chief.

¹¹ Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief*, 300.

CELEBRITY AND THE WORLD OF POLITICAL ENTERTAINMENT

The rise of the modern celebrity, where celebrity means being surrounded and supported by an entire industry, is a relatively new phenomenon. There is a general consensus that the rise of the modern celebrity, which took place in the 1920s, was largely due to developments within the film industry at the time.¹ New social relations developed around the production and use of film as an entertainment medium, and this established the potential of the star to have power and influence outside of production and created a seemingly more direct connection with the audience.² Hollywood discovered that many people liked to hear about the scandalous lives of these new 'stars', leading popular magazines to feature a greater number of stories about celebrities and their personal affairs.³ According to John Langer, audiences wanted to know about the actors who played their favorite characters "as people," and wanted access to their "real lives."⁴ This led to the proliferation of fan magazines and a system of image-makers, creating a culture of celebrating movie stars and their private lives. This insiders view into the lifestyles of these individuals created a sense of "knowing" these stars, thereby enabling a feeling of personal identification between the performer and the audience.

¹ See Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (London: SAGE Publications, 2004), 10-12; David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997) 8-9; Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs, *Mediated Political Realities* (New York: Longman, 1990), 91.

² Marshall, *Celebrity and Power*, 13.

³ Nimmo and Combs, *Mediated Political Realities*, 91.

⁴ John Langer, "Television's 'Personality System'," *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol. 3 (1981): 354.

According to Richard Schickel, the concept of celebrity did not exist prior to the 20th century. He argues that before this time, people were successful and therefore famous.⁵ These individuals are considered idols of production, or heroes, and are hardworking individuals who are recognized for their achievements and earn their hero status through merit.⁶ Throughout the 19th century, Americans chose idols of production as their presidents, including army generals such as George Washington and Ulysses Grant. However, the development of the film star in the early 20th century marked a shift towards the admiration of what are known as idols of consumption, or celebrities. These persons rise to fame through good fortune and are generally salesmen, often selling themselves.⁷ These individuals become celebrities by differentiating their personality, rather than their achievements, from their competitors.⁸ These new idols are often considered more appealing and interesting than idols of production and, as a result, politicians have increasingly needed to take on some characteristics of an idol of consumption, or entertainers, in order to remain engaging to the American public.

The new celebrities who emerged in the 1920s were to epitomize the potential of everyone in society; they were supposed to be relatable.⁹ This is a quality that celebrities share with the American president, as the projection of a strong and relatable character has always been important for the presidency, and in some ways

⁵ Richard Schickel, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity in America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 23.

⁶ Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, The Movie: And Other Episodes of Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 8.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, 5.

⁹ Marshall, *Celebrity and Power*, 9.

reflects the American character more generally.¹⁰ For example, in the presidential election campaign of 1840 between William Henry Harrison and Martin Van Buren, Harrison was seen as a man of simple taste compared to his aristocratic opponent, and the belief was that a simple man was better suited to lead the common people of the United States.¹¹ The importance of relatability was also crucial during the last election in 2012. Republican nominee Mitt Romney struggled to attain the support of the lower and lower-middle class, as they found it difficult to relate to a candidate who was clearly part of what became known as the 1% and who didn't make an effort to hide it.¹² Conversely, Ronald Reagan, did a much better job of creating a relatable all-American image, stating as early as the 1940s in a movie magazine: "Mr. Norm is my alias."¹³ Notably, Reagan remains one of the most favored presidents in American history according to public polls. Therefore this characteristic of relatability is something shared by both celebrities and politicians alike, indicating an overlap between the worlds of entertainment and politics. As David Marshall argues in *Celebrity and Power*, celebrity provides a bridge between the powerful and the powerless,¹⁴ and this bridge is thus partially founded upon a sense of relatability.

Linked to the idea of relatability is a notion of proximity. The development of the close-up shot in film by D. W. Griffith helped to differentiate the film industry from the theatre and created a new kind of intimacy between the audience and the actors. The fact that the audience could see the actor's face in such detail created a

¹⁰ Elliot King, "Newspapers," in *The American President in Popular Culture*, ed. John W. Matviko (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 2005), 106.

¹¹ King, "Newspapers," 106.

¹² "Behind the Results," *USA Today*.

¹³ Rogin, *Ronald Reagan*, 12.

¹⁴ Marshall, *Celebrity and Power*, 49.

sense of familiarity that did not exist in the same way prior to Griffith's development.¹⁵ It was this intimacy that helped produce the star, and a similar sense of intimacy created by television would do the same for politicians. Not only did television bring the moving image into American living rooms, but the act of watching television is also "embedded within the intimate setting that circumscribes the routine of everyday life."¹⁶ This means that when presidential candidates and president-elects appear on television, they are entering the homes of American families, causing voters to feel within greater proximity of these individuals, thereby creating a greater sense of intimacy. Just as the close-up shot led the audience to feel a greater connection with the film actor, television did the same for politicians, allowing for greater emotional involvement on behalf of the viewer. As John Langer argues: "Through direct address, television personalities appear actively to be taking their viewers 'into account'. The spectator becomes the constant focus of television's attention."¹⁷ This aspect of television is especially important during presidential elections, when the candidates need to come across as relatable, and during times of disaster, when presidents must reach out to the people: Americans need to *feel* like these individuals care, regardless of whether they truly do or not. This new level of intimacy differentiates those "celebrity" presidents who came before the widespread use of television in presidential politics prior to 1960, and creates a clear divide

¹⁵ Marshall, *Celebrity and Power*, 13.

¹⁶ Langer, "Television's Personality System," 355.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 362.

between political celebrities of the 18th and 19th century and the modern presidential celebrity.¹⁸

However, the creation of this sense of intimacy puts significant emphasis on personality, image and persona. According to Marshall, political leaders are supposed to embody “the party, the people and the state.” This is important to consider when thinking about the president as celebrity, because it acknowledges that politicians, and especially the president, have an affective function to play.¹⁹ According to David Schultz, television needs to tell a story, personalize lives and define good versus evil.²⁰ Thus television is a perfect medium for conveying affect to the American people. Within the framework of the presidential campaign, an avenue by which candidates can fulfill this affective function is through campaign advertisements. Neil Postman argues: “The fundamental metaphor for political discourse is the television commercial.”²¹ This statement is very telling, as campaign advertisements most often favor image and emotion over issues and information.²² According to Tony Schwartz, who began making commercials in the early 1960s, it is about striking a responsive

¹⁸ Franklin Roosevelt’s use of radio with his fireside chats is also a good example of creating intimacy between the president and the people. However, the dimension of image that television allows for creates another level of intimacy not afforded by radio.

¹⁹ Marshall, *Celebrity and Power*, 203-204.

²⁰ David A. Schultz, “Introduction: Selling Candidates and Soap,” in *Lights, Camera, Campaign: Media, Politics, and Political Advertising*, ed. David A. Schultz (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004), x.

²¹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 126.

²² See Linda Lee Kaid and Mike Chanslor, “Changing Candidate Images: The Effects of Political Advertising,” in *Candidate Images in Presidential Elections*, ed. Kenneth L. Hacker (Westport, CT.: Preager, 1995), 83; Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 4; Elvin T. Lim, *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency: The Decline of Presidential Rhetoric from George Washington to George W. Bush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 71.

chord with the viewer, not getting a message across.²³ Even more telling is that many media consultants argue that issues are only important because they help sell an image.²⁴ Therefore style *becomes* substance by using emotional and rationally presented irrational images. As a result, television as a primarily visual medium allows for greater dissemination of these images.

This focus on the irrational and emotional can be linked to Gustav Le Bon's version of crowd theory. Le Bon argues that society is irrational and emotional by nature and therefore intellect must be pushed aside to some extent out of necessity in order to have a message understood by the lowest common denominator in a mass society.²⁵ For the health of democracy, the hope is that trading political ideas for a more basic message to appeal to the 'lowest common denominator' does not occur. However, Le Bon's theory helps to explain the shift towards the president as celebrity. Increasingly in the 1920s, advertisers accepted the notion of an irrational public by relying more on emotion and affect rather than reason and logic, and this coincided with the rise and subsequent explosion the modern celebrity.²⁶ As the presidential image-making machine grew throughout the early 20th century, the same techniques used in advertising were applied to campaigns, resulting in intellect losing

²³ Stephen K. Medvic, "Developing 'Paid Media' Strategies: Media Consultants and Political Advertising," in *Lights, Camera, Campaign: Media, Politics, and Political Advertising*, ed. David A. Schultz (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004), 33.

²⁴ Despite the fact that this is the case for those producing campaigns, voters are less likely to see it this way. Lynda Lee Kaid and Dorothy K. Davidson, "Elements of Videostyle: Candidate Presentation through Television Advertising," in *New Perspective on Political Advertising*, eds. Lynda Lee Kaid, Dan Nimmo and Keith R. Sanders (Carbondale, IL.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 187.

²⁵ Gustav Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Viking, 1960), 184.

²⁶ Marshall, *Celebrity and Power*, 32.

some of its political potency. This is not to say that rationality and political knowledge no longer matter; it simply implies that it is no longer the most important factor when appealing to a mass audience or large electorate.

Ultimately, such an emphasis on emotion and image forces many politicians to fashion performances instead of focusing on ideas. As Dan Nimmo and Robert Savage argue: “The contender for elective office is an actor playing a political role which voters perceive as leader and/or as politician.”²⁷ Therefore running for office and maintaining popular support while in office is less about politics and more about the politics of image. In large part, this is because, as Postman notes, American culture no longer requires that we talk to each other, but instead that we entertain each other.²⁸ This can be attributed to the fact that entertainment based media, such as mock-news programs like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, are becoming more prevalent and the preference among many Americans. While these outlets do discuss political ideas and issues, and part of a presidential candidate’s appeal is based on their stance on issues, the ideas are part of a larger package rooted in image and performance.

During America’s infancy, American politics was itself a form of entertainment, as many people would travel long distances to hear political oratory and participate in rallies.²⁹ However, in more recent years, American politics has been *overtaken* by entertainment. Not only has the 20th century seen traditional news sources, such as daily television news programs and newspapers increasingly cover

²⁷ Kaid and Davidson, “Elements of Videostyle,” 186.

²⁸ Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 92.

²⁹ William Greider, *Who Will Tell the People: The Betrayal of American Democracy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 307.

entertainment and celebrity-based stories as hard news, but voters are also progressively turning to alternative news sources for their political information.³⁰ Because more mainstream news organizations are for profit, they must compete with other, more popular sources of entertainment for audience attention.³¹ As a result, this has led to a slow erosion of the divide between politics and celebrity culture.

The place where this shrinking divide is most evident is with the ever-increasing influence and popularity of mock-news and late night television programs. While cable news networks are still the most popular source of political information, this is beginning to change for the under-30 demographic. According to a 2012 Pew Research Center study, after cable news and the Internet, late night comedy shows are the most popular outlets for obtaining campaign information and political news.³² This means that these traditionally celebrity and entertainment-based venues are becoming increasingly favored by politicians for getting their message out to the younger segment of the population. Even though many politicians use these shows as another forum through which to get their platforms heard, the juxtaposition created by their participation on these programs further blurs the lines between the worlds of politics and celebrity. The image created is one of a personality marketing themselves by telling jokes and sitting next to famous musicians and actors.

³⁰ See Dan Nimmo, "The Formation of Candidates Images During Presidential Campaigns," in *Candidates Images in Presidential Elections*, ed. Kenneth L. Hacker (Westport, CT.: Preager, 1995), 58.

³¹ David A. Schultz, "From Saxophones to Schwarzenegger: Entertainment Politics on Late-Night Television," in *Light, Camera, Campaign!: Media, Politics and Political Advertising*, ed. David A. Schultz (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004), 218.

³² "Cable Leads the Pack as Campaign News Source," *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, Feb 7, 2012.

Nonetheless, appearances on these types of shows are not new. Since the debut of programs such as *The Jack Paar Tonight Show* in 1957, talk shows have offered presidential candidates an outlet to show off their more personal side, including their sense of humor.³³ Richard Nixon, for example, appeared on *The Tonight Show* in 1963 and even played the piano during his appearance.³⁴ The personal nature of these appearances help foster the intimacy television allows for between politicians and the electorate, and enables them to appear more relatable. However, even though these outlets allow candidates and presidents to reach a larger segment of the population, which includes individuals who are less likely to turn to traditional news sources for political information, it causes these politicians put a greater emphasis put on their image and personality, leading them to further emphasize their celebrity personas.

While the celebrity title has helped numerous individuals advance their careers, it is not always a positive designation to have. The title of celebrity, especially for a politician, can lead to accusation of simply being a puppet, “all glitz and no substance.”³⁵ Jeffrey Alexander argues that Americans are generally deeply suspicious of celebrity, especially within the realm of politics. He asserts that liberals

³³ Melissa Crawley, “Television,” in *The American President in Popular Culture*, ed. John W. Matviko (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 2005), 193.

³⁴ This appearance is often overlooked, as most people remember Bill Clinton’s saxophone performance on *The Arsenio Hall Show* in 1992. However Nixon’s appearance shows just how far back this tradition of candidates appearing on these shows goes. Nixon also appeared on *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In*, which was a counter-culture sketch comedy show. Nixon’s appearance on the program was an effort to reach out to a demographic who gravitated towards figures like Kennedy. Schultz, “From Saxophones to Schwarzenegger,” 219; Dan Fastenberg, “Top 10 Presidential Pop Culture Moments,” *TIME*, Jul 29, 2010.

³⁵ Christopher Beam, “The Fame Game,” *Slate*, Dec 11, 2007.

see celebrity as a dangerous and unchecked product of capitalism, while conservatives view celebrity as a degeneration of “America’s stoic traditional culture.”³⁶ Therefore while the moniker of celebrity has its benefits, it can also be hurtful, a topic which will be discussed through this paper. This means that in order for a presidential candidate to be successful as a celebrity-in-chief, they must find a careful balance between celebrity and politics; it is not simply one or the other.

One of the ways to deal with this delicate title of celebrity is through the use of political consulting. As a result of heightened attention to image and personality of presidents and presidential candidates, powerful political public relations machines have developed in an effort to control what image is conveyed to the people. Just as entertainment celebrities have publicity agents and stylists who refine their image, press agents, public relations departments and campaign consultants have become permanent fixtures of American politics since the 1930s.³⁷ These individuals are not only responsible for creating an image but also for disseminating it to the press and the public in a fashion conducive to their ultimate agenda. Even though the industry of marketing political candidates through official firms can be traced back to the early 1900s, the industry really only took off in the 1960s.³⁸ Arguably, this was due to the increased use of television in presidential campaigns and the possibilities this medium provides.

³⁶ Jeffrey Alexander, “Barack Obama Meets Celebrity Metaphor,” *Society*, Vol. 47, No. 5 (2010): 415.

³⁷ Clem Whittaker and Leone Baxter opened the first political consulting company, Campaigns, Inc. in 1933. They truly revolutionized the political consulting industry, as they developed campaign tactics such as direct mail, which are still used today. Michael Kilian and Arnold Sawislak, *Who Runs Washington?* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), 237.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Since the arrival of television as a political medium, the presidential marketing industry has changed significantly. Market and product research, as well as the increasing use of filmmaking techniques in political advertisements, have progressively blurred the lines between Hollywood and political production. The rise of new technology, such as radio and television, led to a greater need for press relations consultants and departments, whose influence became increasingly evident with Franklin Roosevelt and Dwight Eisenhower. By the 1950s, these departments were permanent fixtures of American politics.³⁹ Today, the teams who produce campaigns and maintain a president's image are known as "spin doctors."⁴⁰ Like entertainment celebrities, these spin doctors make sure that their politicians are coached, wardrobe, handled, made-up and well lit; the ultimate goal of these individuals is to "control the public's access to the information upon which a democratic politics depends."⁴¹ John Street argues that this control of access is what defines celebrity status: the control of who gets the interview, in addition to trying to control information output to help create a positive brand and image.⁴² This ever-growing importance and manipulation of image is not only changing the message being projected, but it is also changing the way voters make their decisions.

³⁹ Marshall, *Celebrity and Power*, 209.

⁴⁰ This is the term often used to refer to those individuals and groups who control the image that is portrayed to the public of politicians at every level of government. See Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, 130-135; John Street, "The Celebrity Politician: Political Style and Popular Culture," in *Media and the Restyling of Politics*, eds. John Corner and Dick Pels (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 90-94.

⁴¹ Spin doctors, however, are losing some of their control because of the increasingly and unique nature of the Internet. Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, 130.

⁴² Street, "The Celebrity Politician," 92.

According to Bill Greener, a Republican media consultant during the 1970s and 1980s, the increasing focus on image and the creation of candidate centered messages is part of an attempt to reach out to the growing segment of the voter population who vote for the person instead of the party.⁴³ While issues are still an important factor in elections, voters are less likely to make their decisions based on such matters, and are more likely to pick a candidate who they feel can best deal with the issues.⁴⁴ This is reliant on the image the candidate gives off, making the political image machine that much more important. The impression of being able to handle political matters is even more crucial when trying to convince swing voters, who Greener argues tend to possess lower levels of information.⁴⁵ Therefore mass-mediated communication, and by association spin doctors, are paramount to winning an election and maintaining a positive image while in office, just as public relations firms are crucial for keeping Hollywood celebrities in the spotlight.

Because of how heavily saturated our society is with information from various media outlets, our expectations concerning the information we receive has changed. This has also arguably changed the way we think about politics. While calling the American electorate apathetic may not be quite accurate, they have definitely grown increasingly cynical about the process and America's political institutions. This can

⁴³ Candidate centered messages refers to campaign advertisements and information which are focused more on the candidate themselves rather than the party they belong to. This is from an interview done by Stephen K. Medvic for his article "Developing 'Paid Media' Strategies: Media Consultants and Political Advertising," therefore the original interview is not accessible. Medvic, "Developing 'Paid Media' Strategies," 27.

⁴⁴ Kenneth L. Hacker, "Introduction: The Importance of Candidate Imaged in Presidential Elections," in *Candidate Images in Presidential Elections*, ed. Kenneth L. Hacker (Westport, CT.: Praeger, 1995), xiii, xiv.

⁴⁵ Medvic, "Developing 'Paid Media' Strategies," 27.

be attributed to the fact that America is a nation largely shaped by what they watch on television. For example, as Postman suggests, people believe that political problems can be solved quickly and with simple measures; complex language is not to be trusted and all problems lend themselves to theatrical production.⁴⁶ Programs such as *The West Wing* have led television viewers to believe that major political crises can be dealt with within a few short episodes, or in some cases a single episode.⁴⁷ Therefore, when they see the president struggling to pass a bill through Congress, they become disillusioned with the system.

This false perception of how the political system functions is exacerbated by media outlets who produce news. News stories today are less about facts and more dramatic narratives. The reason for this is because drama is perceived by news organizations to be more engaging than disjointed facts and quotations to fill time during the 24-hour news cycle. Their ability to produce these theatrical narratives allows them to better compete with dramatic entertainment programs.⁴⁸ This dramatization of news thus changes our expectations about what the world and politics is truly like. The significance of such manipulation is important to understand because, as Walter Lippmann argued in the 1920s, what we “know” about the world comes from the mass media, not from personal experiences.⁴⁹ This is especially true for American presidential politics. For example, consider the fact that during the 1988 presidential election campaign, the average length of a candidate sound bite was 9.8

⁴⁶ Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 131.

⁴⁷ Yair Rosenberg, “Why ‘The West Wing’ is a Terrible Guide to American Democracy,” *The Atlantic*, Oct 1, 2012.

⁴⁸ Richard Joslyn, *Mass Media and Elections* (Reading, MA.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1984), 107.

⁴⁹ Quoted in King, “Newspapers,” 104.

seconds. During the 2008 election, the average sound bite length was 8.9 seconds.⁵⁰ By contrast, the average length of a television commercial, in which a single item is being sold, is about 25 seconds. Therefore the system forces candidates to rely more heavily on their image and performance rather than their position on issues in order to get their message across.⁵¹ According to Graeme Turner, the lack of emphasis on issues is unimportant in the new world of political celebrities: “The issues merely provide the occasion for testing the personal appeal of the contenders.”⁵² This helps to explain why within image-based politics, the fact that the nature of television and news has conditioned Americans to want their information in small, fun packages makes sense.

While America’s fascination with celebrity is not new, the development of new technologies has allowed for greater perceived accessibility to them, and caused celebrity culture to permeate a greater portion of everyday life. Marshall argues that various distinct forms of power are increasingly unifying into a system of celebrity status, and the political system is not exempt from this convergence.⁵³ It is, however, important to recognize that the concept of celebrity is a fluid one that is in constant

⁵⁰ It should be noted that the 2008 election marked an increase in sound bite length: the average length during the 2000 and 2004 election cycles was 7.8. Stephen J. Fransworth and Robert Lichter, *The Nightly News Nightmare: Media Coverage of U.S. Presidential Elections, 1988-2008* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 64.

⁵¹ According to a Pew poll, television is still the primary source for obtaining campaign information, with followed by newspapers and the Internet. However, between 2002 and 2010, the percentage of individuals who reported newspapers as their main source dropped slightly, while the percentage of Internet users increased significantly. Aaron Smith, “The Internet and Campaign 2012,” *Pew Internet and American Life Project*, May 17, 2011.

⁵² Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, 130.

⁵³ Marshall, *Celebrity and Power*, 19.

negotiation. Therefore the three case studies that follow all possess various characteristics of celebrity and it is these characteristics that have caused them to become some of the most favored presidents in American popular memory.

GLITZ AND GLAMOUR: THE KENNEDY PRESIDENCY

Even though John F. Kennedy was not the first president to use television as a political medium, he is nonetheless considered to be the first television president.¹ More importantly, Kennedy can also be considered the first modern celebrity president. Not only did Kennedy revolutionize how the newly rising medium of television was used in both presidential campaigns and by presidents in office, but his charisma and image also led him to become one of the most publically favored American presidents of all time, despite his less than perfect political record. John Hellman describes it best when he states: “Kennedy’s ‘style’ was arguably the most important ‘substance’ of his presidency.”² And, for better or worse, this style would forever change America and American politics.

While the centerpiece of Kennedy’s rise is often perceived as being his performance in the 1960 presidential debates, his celebrity status was in development long before he arrived at the White House. During the 1950s, the Kennedy family was a mainstay in popular magazines, Sunday supplements and gossip columns. This meant that the Kennedy children, of whom there were seven, grew up as celebrities. Not only did they frequent Hollywood hotspots, but the Kennedy boys were also known to date Hollywood starlets and have famous friends.³ All of this glitz and glamour was rooted in the Kennedy children’s childhood. From a very early age, Jack

¹ Dwight Eisenhower was actually the first president to use television during the 1952 election.

² John Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession: The American Myth of JFK* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 115.

³ One of his most notable Hollywood associations was with Frank Sinatra and the “Rat Pack.” Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs, *Mediated Political Realities* (New York: Longman, 1990), 95.

and his siblings were exposed to the glamour of Hollywood, as their father, Joseph (Joe) Kennedy, had purchased a film studio. The prominence of film and Hollywood in the Kennedy home as a result of this purchase led the future president to develop a fascination with Hollywood and the stars it produced.⁴ Joe was so in search of the glamour of Hollywood that he even had an affair with Gloria Swanson, a popular Hollywood actresses of the 1920s.⁵ The affair would foreshadow those that Kennedy himself would have with numerous Hollywood starlets, and is evidence of the close ties the Kennedy family had with Hollywood and the world of celebrity. Being in such an environment thus paved the way for Kennedy to adopt many celebrity characteristics as he developed his own public persona while running for both the Senate and the presidency.

Kennedy's 1960 presidential election campaign had all the hallmarks of the creation of a celebrity president. The glamorous aura that in many ways defined his presidency began early on during the campaign. This can be attributed to his father Joe, who took charge of orchestrating his son's presidential run; he understood that his son should run for president like a star rather than just another politician, with significant focus on image. In an interview with journalist Ed Plaut in 1959, Joe stated that his son had become "the greatest attraction in the country today."⁶ He goes on to list the ways in which his son's popularity manifest itself, including the fact that Jack's face on the cover of magazines, such as *LIFE* and *Redbook*, always sold a

⁴ David C. Taylor, *JFK: Presidency Revealed*, DVD, A & E Television Networks (2003).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Quoted in Seymour M. Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 89.

record number of copies, and that he had the ability to draw more people to a fundraiser than the biggest Hollywood stars, including Cary Grant. Joe attributes this popularity to his son's incredible "universal" appeal, something that he himself could not quite comprehend.⁷ And the polls supported the senior Kennedy's theory.

In a speech given by Ted Sorensen, Kennedy's speechwriter, he remarks that unlike the other Democratic candidates, who had mostly localized popularity and support in various regions of the country, Kennedy showed dominant strength in *every* part of the country. This thereby made him a nationwide candidate for the party, cutting across all societal divisions, including religion, economic, liberal and conservative.⁸ This is an interesting claim to make, considering Kennedy was part of the Catholic Northeastern elite. Yet Harris polls throughout the primaries indicated that within the Democratic Party, Kennedy was more favorable in the West with Protestants than any other Democratic Protestant candidate.⁹ Even a poll as early as 1956, when Kennedy was a potential choice for vice president for the then-Democratic nominee Adlai Stevenson, showed that "nearly three out of four respondents said they would vote for a well-qualified Catholic nominated by their party for *the Presidency itself*."¹⁰ These poll results suggested that come 1960, the Catholic issue might not be so severe. Nevertheless, the Kennedy election team did their best to minimize the damage it may cause by dealing with the issue directly and

⁷ While the universality of his appeal is debatable, a more reasonable way to understand his popularity may be by way of his star quality. Quoted in Hersh, *The Dark Side*, 89.

⁸ Ted Sorensen, "Summary of Sorensen Talk," Summer 1959.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Shaun Casey, *The Making of a Catholic President: Kennedy vs. Nixon 1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.

fielding any questions or concerns the press and the people had regarding Kennedy's religion.¹¹ During the primaries, Kennedy's two most notable victories in spite of his Catholicism were in the states of Wisconsin and West Virginia. These wins were extremely significant as they ultimately led his Democratic opponent, Hubert Humphrey, to lose the nomination.¹² While the Catholic issue remained a constant throughout the primaries, it ended up gaining him electoral votes during the general election: five Eastern and Midwestern states and New Mexico switched over to the Democrats because of Kennedy's religious affiliation, thereby gaining him 132 electoral votes.¹³ This all suggests that Sorensen's claim about Kennedy crossing religious boundaries may have been true.

Kennedy's appeal also caught the attention of undecided voters. As mentioned in the previous chapter, image is especially important when looking at the undecided voter, and Kennedy proves to be a good example of this during the 1960 election campaign. According to a Gallup poll reported in the *Chicago Sun-Times* on May 17, 1959, Kennedy had an overwhelming lead among independent voters with 32% favoring Kennedy, as opposed to 19% who favored Adlai Stevenson, the second place holder in the poll.¹⁴ While Stevenson, who had run for the Democratic nomination in both 1952 and 1956, was not very interested in the 1960 nomination, Kennedy's other opponents were only able to achieve more regionalized support, such as Lyndon

¹¹ See Theodore White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1962), 107-108.

¹² See White, *The Making of the President 1960*, 107-108.

¹³ G. Scott Thomas, *A New World to Be Won: John Kennedy, Richard Nixon, and the Tumultuous Year of 1960* (Santa Barbara, CA.: Praeger, 2011), 257.

¹⁴ George Gallup, "Adlai and Kennedy Run Nip and Tuck," *The Chicago Sun-Times*, May 17, 1959.

Johnson with the Sothern Protestant vote. According to Hellman, the primaries lacked major debate over domestic or foreign policy, therefore the candidates' popularity must have been rooted somewhere other than political issues and ¹⁵ this may explain the localized success of the other Democratic candidates. While Johnson was not considered the right candidate for the party in the 1960 election, he made a good running mate for Kennedy, as it helped Jack secure Southern Protestant votes resulting in the win of five Southern states, including Johnson's home state of Texas.¹⁶ Kennedy remained popular among independents even once he won the nomination, with one newspaper reporting that his "personality profile" was more favorable than that of his Republican opponent, Richard Nixon.¹⁷ However, the final elections numbers were not as decisive. Kennedy only won the election by approximately 160,000 votes, which shows that personality and celebrity have their limits and are not the only deciding factors in the election. Nonetheless, image and celebrity undoubtedly helped sway the ever-coveted undecided and independent voter.

Kennedy's appeal arguably has roots in his embodiment of the world of film. His star quality and mythic nature was based on his telegenic good looks, creative intelligence and skills at self-presentation, most of which he undoubtedly learned

¹⁵ Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession*, 96. A good example of the fact that candidates popularity rested somewhere other than with issues was that Lyndon Johnson had the greatest popularity in the south, where is was from and Hubert Humphrey was popular in his birth region, the Midwest. Therefore Kennedy's appeal was truly something significant. Sorensen, "Summary of Sorensen Talk."

¹⁶ Thomas, *A New World*, 257.

¹⁷ George Gallup, "Poll Rates Nixon, Kennedy on 'Personality Appeals'," *New York Herald Tribune*, December 30, 1959.

from his Hollywood studio owning father.¹⁸ That said, his natural star quality did not mean that his public image was not carefully crafted. For example, one internal campaign document circulated on October 20, 1959 suggests that more mature and serious photographic portraits of the presidential candidate be sent out, as the ones being used were seen by many within the party as too boyish-looking.¹⁹ This shows that while his youth made him stand out among his older contemporaries, and thus often make him more memorable, youth is also often identified with inexperience, thus potentially being more harmful than helpful. Yet the same document goes on to say that regardless of the immaturity of his photographs, Kennedy's popularity was still based mainly on his personality, suggesting that the image Kennedy created throughout his campaign helped to counterbalance the skepticism surrounding his age. This also further indicates that Kennedy's election was carried less by his ideas and more by his celebrity.

This strong concentration on image worried many within the Kennedy camp, as they feared he would come across as not truly caring about the people, instead appearing as too much of Hollywood star to get elected. It was suggested that Kennedy work on developing a solid "major over-all program" that could be identified with him, similar to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. This would help counteract criticism from many Democrats and labor leaders who argued that he was "too slick," "too much of a glamour boy to be President," and most importantly, that he was "not really concerned with people's problems."²⁰ This alludes to the fact that

¹⁸ Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession*, 90.

¹⁹ "Some Modest Realignment in the Kennedy Image," Oct 20, 1959.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

while people liked Kennedy, they were not sure that putting such a celebrity figure into the most powerful office in the country was the right thing, highlighting the potential dangers of a celebrity title. Regardless, Kennedy did win the nomination and would continue to develop this new breed of politician during the first televised debates.

While many historians and communications scholars have extensively studied the first 1960 debate, it cannot be overlooked when trying to understand the true power of Kennedy's celebrity. There was a sense among many in the media even before the debates that the new televised format would not only be crucial to the election, but that it would also change American presidential elections forever. In an editorial broadcast on WTOP radio and television on September 1, 1960, Jack Jury reflected on the fact that the candidate "who comes off the best" would likely become the next president.²¹ Jury also touched on a potential pitfall of the new debate format: there was a sense that televised debates would turn the presidential race into a "popularity contest, with too much emphasis on superficial appeal," ultimately covering up any shortcomings the candidates may have.²² In many ways this is exactly what happened. The debate is remembered today not for what the candidates argued, but *how* they argued and what they looked like.

This focus on appearance in many ways highlights the failure of the debates: they did not help voters better understand either candidate's position on the issues,

²¹ "WTOP Editorial," Sept 1, 1960.

²² Ibid.

which was what the debates are intended to do.²³ This is because of the nature of the television medium, which Nixon argued, “place[s] a greater premium on showmanship than on statesmanship.”²⁴ Kennedy understood that such showmanship requires preparation, a lot of rehearsal and gaining psychological command of the stage.²⁵ He also understood that the debates were an opportunity to speak to the American people and become a guest in their home for the evening. Nixon, on the other hand, made no real effort to prepare, and instead simply came to debate the issues with his opponent. By the end of the first debate, it was apparent that America preferred being acknowledged, as opposed to simply observing politicians operate within their own world through a screen.²⁶ Television created a new intimacy between politicians and the people, a sense only fulfilled until that point by film, and to some extent radio. Don Hewitt, the director of the debates, poignantly remarked in an interview: “That night was the greatest night for Jack Kennedy, and the worst night

²³ Walter Zakahi and Kenneth Kacker, “Televised Presidential Debates and Candidate Images,” in *Candidate Images in Presidential Elections*, ed. Kenneth L. Hacker (Westport, CT.: Praeger, 1995), 104.

²⁴ Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), 104.

²⁵ Alan Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief* (Bolder, CO.: Westview Press, 2004), 267.

²⁶ Many writers who have examined the topic of the first 1960 debate have stated that those who listened on the radio felt Nixon won, while those who watched the television broadcast felt that Kennedy won. Walter Zakahi and Kenneth Hacker argue that this story appears to originate from Theodore White’s 1962 book *The Making of the President 1960* (p. 290-1), however White does not actually provide any references for the polls he refers to. David Vancil and Sue Pendall conducted a search for primary sources to support White’s assertion and found only one national source that compared television viewers and radio listeners of the debate. Vancil and Pendall raised serious questions about the polls sampling techniques, as there were significantly more television views (n=1,856) than radio listeners (n=282), and participants were not asked about their partisanship. Therefore there is no real basis to support the claim that Nixon won on the radio. See Zakahi and Kacker, “Televised Presidential Debates,” 105.

that ever happened to American politics. That's the night the politicians looked at us and said, 'That's the only way to campaign'. And television looked at them and said, 'They're a bottomless pit of advertising dollars'.²⁷ Hewitt's remarks that the commodification of the campaign and the presidency had taken on a whole new meaning; Kennedy created the beginnings of a "new politics."

This "new politics" rests with image and style. Thomas Brown argues in *JFK: History of an Image*, that Kennedy converted voters into consumers of political image. More specifically, he aimed to convert the relatively young voters, consisting of well-educated urban professionals, who became a trendsetting force once they returned from World War II.²⁸ Kennedy made good looks and glamour into a major political asset and used the media to suggest the potential of every American family. Americans loved their first family so much, they started to treat them the same way they would movie stars. The people were not only fascinated with Kennedy, but also his wife Jacqueline and their children. For the first time in American history, newspaper reporters were assigned to cover the first lady exclusively.²⁹ Jackie's famous glamour and style was directly thanks to Hollywood, as she had her own personal fashion designer, Oleg Cassini, who was known for designing for the most famous film stars; together, they revolutionized American fashion.³⁰

²⁷ Donald T. Critchlow and Emilie Raymond, eds., "Network: 1960 Presidential Election," in *Hollywood and Politics: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 31.

²⁸ Thomas Brown, *JFK: History of an Image* (Bloomington, IN.; Indiana University Press, 1988), 14.

²⁹ Taylor, *JFK: Presidency Revealed*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Jackie was not the only Kennedy to heavily influence America's fashion sense. Kennedy himself was rarely seen wearing a hat, an accessory he truly hated despite the universal acceptance of hats in the early and mid 20th century. Despite the fact that the *New York Times* reported that the president selected two silk top hats for his inauguration, neither was worn on the day, as Kennedy opted for a bare head instead.³¹ This decision single-handedly killed a decades-old male fashion tradition, thereby significantly damaging the hat industry;³² as John Strausbaugh notes: "That's what stars do."³³ While Hollywood often fulfilled the role of royalty in a country so adamantly against the monarch system, the Kennedys became the "new" American royalty. Americans arguably accepted their first family becoming royalty because of how much they seem to be like Hollywood stars. They lived a charmed existence never seen before in the White House,³⁴ like something from out of a movie.

Like Hollywood actors, the Kennedys also maintained strong connections with the industry throughout Jack's presidency. While having Hollywood connections does not make one a celebrity, these connections heightened the celebrity reality of the Kennedy campaign and administration. During the campaign, a number of celebrities took part in and performed at rallies in support of the presidential candidate, including Judy Garland.³⁵ Kennedy even got Hollywood celebrities to appear in his television spots, which was the first occurrence of its kind since

³¹ "Kennedy Selects 2 Top Hats," *New York Times*, Jan 19, 1961, 20.

³² Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief*, 277; Elliot King, "Newspapers," in *The American President in Popular Culture*, ed. John W. Matviko (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 2005), 104-105.

³³ Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief*, 277.

³⁴ Taylor, *JFK: Presidency Revealed*.

³⁵ Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief*, 207.

television was introduced into politics during the 1952 campaign. Both Harry Belafonte and Henry Fonda appealed to the American people on behalf of Kennedy, showing that they were concerned about the same political issues as the average American.³⁶ This not only further bridged the gap between Hollywood and Washington, but it also bridged the gap between viewers and celebrity. The distinction between celebrity and politics was further blurred during the Kennedy campaign as Mort Sahl, an American comedian, was hired to write jokes for the presidential candidate.³⁷ However, not everyone was pleased with the involvement of celebrities in presidential politics. A letter sent by a Harold Belt to Pierre Salinger, Kennedy's press secretary, bemoaned that the planned performance by a number of film actors at the inauguration was inappropriate and that instead a "committee of distinguishable Americans from all walks of life" should be in charge of public events relating to the inauguration.³⁸ Therefore, while celebrities on the campaign trail added glamour to Kennedy's image, not everyone saw it as an asset. Regardless, the connection between celebrities and celebrity culture in the campaign helped Kennedy to maintain his celebrity status, and arguably helped him get elected.

Another of Kennedy's characteristics that was very influential with regards to his image was his sex appeal. While such a topic is generally reserved for film and rock stars, Kennedy's sex appeal played a major role in not only his election but

³⁶ See "Harry Belafonte," *The Living Room Candidate*; "Henry Fonda," *The Living Room Candidate*.

³⁷ Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief*, 226. Kennedy was well known for his comedy and was even the first president to present his own comedy routine at the White House Correspondence dinner, something that many other presidents who followed decided to do in an effort to make the event more fun and interesting. *Ibid.*, 266.

³⁸ Harold A. Belt, letter to Pierre Salinger, Dec 10, 1960.

also in his enduring memory. Unlike his immediate predecessors, who were balding father figures, Kennedy appeared as a romantic hero, both young and good-looking.³⁹ Young American women took notice, with “jumpers” appearing shortly after the first debate. “Jumpers” during this historical period were young teenage girls who jumped and squealed at the sight of their idol.⁴⁰ These girls were staples at Elvis Presley concerts, however their presence around the president was a new phenomenon. A national poll of college age women conducted in 1962 deemed the president sexier than Rock Hudson, with such polling results supported by exclamations at the president such as “You’re better than Elvis Presley!”⁴¹ According to Alan Schroeder, author of *Celebrity-in-Chief*, this reaction and popularity among women was appreciated by Hollywood, where Kennedy was embraced into their celebrity fraternity.⁴² And the actors were not the only ones who noticed, but America’s new it-boy also mesmerized numerous actresses. Kennedy was infamous for having extra-marital affairs while in office, and some of the ladies he was connected to were Hollywood’s brightest starlets, including Gene Tierney, Angie Dickinson, and most famously, Marilyn Monroe.⁴³ Kennedy’s sex appeal, therefore, allowed him not only to immerse himself in a celebrity culture that was built around such characteristics,

³⁹ Joseph P. Berry Jr., *John F. Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President* (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1987), 91; Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession*, 114.

⁴⁰ Later on in the campaign and the presidency, “jumpers” also included older women. *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴¹ Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief*, 277.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ It is interesting to note that despite Kennedy’s celebrity, the press did not really report or dig into any of Kennedy’s affairs while he was in office. This goes against the notion of celebrity being defined by intrusion of privacy of public figures, yet these affairs did not become public fodder. Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession*, 95. Also see Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief*, 199.

but it also made him popular among an important voter base; as with the most popular celebrities, young women wanted him and young men wanted to be him.⁴⁴

Another part of Kennedy's celebrity rested with the fact that he was a "cool" candidate. Marshal McLuhan argues that television is inherently a cool medium, whereby it is characterized by personality, inclusiveness and low-definition.⁴⁵ Kennedy had a cool, low-definition, objective aura, which allowed viewers to fill in the gaps with their own experiences and personal identifications, thereby making him more likable and well suited for the television medium.⁴⁶ Kennedy understood not only the power of television as a cool medium, but also his power to utilize the medium well. During the election, Kennedy used his "cool" nature to charm the American public during his appearance on the *Tonight Show*, where he followed actress Anne Bancroft and Peggy Cass.⁴⁷ As movie stars are also considered "cool" due to the nature of film, Kennedy's appearance on a late-night comedy show associated with celebrities not only solidified his status as a made-for-television candidate, but also as a "cool" celebrity.

Kennedy continued to harness the power of television throughout his presidency. In an effort to appear on camera as often as possible, Kennedy was the first president to permit live television broadcasts of White House news conferences,

⁴⁴ While Kennedy did manage to win the under-30 vote in the election (54% in comparison to 45% for Nixon), it is important to remember that not all youth were pro-Kennedy. There was a significant youth population that supported Nixon, most notably the Young American's for Freedom, who were founded in 1960. Therefore, while Kennedy may have had the image, it was not enough to sway many conservative leaning youth. "Election Polls –Vote by Groups, 1960-1964," *Gallup*.

⁴⁵ "The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan," *Playboy Magazine*, March 1969, 61.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* McLuhan argues that this is why Nixon lost the first debate, because he came across as too "hot," with too sharp an image that came across as phony on television.

⁴⁷ Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief*, 276.

thereby creating an even greater sense of intimacy and inclusiveness between himself and the American people.⁴⁸ This also meant that maintaining his celebrity extended to the way he dealt with the public as president.

Kennedy's assassination truly elevated his celebrity status, leading to the development of a myth that would come to define his presidential legacy. The president's assassination was followed by four days of intensive television coverage, making it the first time that the American people could participate vicariously through the means of television in the mourning process.⁴⁹ Once again, television created a sense of intimacy between the presidency and the people, which had never been possible before in this way. However, Kennedy's youth at the time of his death placed him within a phenomenon often reserved for the entertainment industry, and further amplified his celebrity status. "Dying young freezes the stars at their peak: like the promise of Hollywood itself they remain young and beautiful[.]"⁵⁰ This helps explain why Kennedy is still beloved today, despite the fact that he had few policy achievements. His early death thus helped elevate his celebrity to idol status.

While the mythology surrounding the Kennedy presidency was building throughout his time in office, the "Camelot" myth only arose after the president's death. It originated with a statement his wife Jackie made in a *LIFE* interview following her husband's assassination. She reminisced about how before bed,

⁴⁸ William C. Spragens, "John F. Kennedy," in *Popular Images of American Presidents*, ed. William C. Spragens (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 438. Also see Bob Schieffer and Gary P. Gates, *The Acting President* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989), 147; Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession*, 131.

⁴⁹ Spragens, "John F. Kennedy," 460.

⁵⁰ Steven Stark, "The Cultural Meaning of the Kennedys: Why JFK has More in Common with Elvis than with FDR," *The Atlantic*, Jan 1994.

Kennedy liked to play some records, and his favorite lines from his favorite song were: “Don’t let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot.”⁵¹ She went on to say that while there may be great presidents in the future, there would never be another Camelot. The use of Camelot as a symbol for the Kennedy administration is an interesting one, as it not only suggests romance and a gallant nature, but also a fairytale quality so common in Hollywood. It was a time in which America was exempt from political drama and brought into a glittering world of glamour featuring a handsome king and his beautiful queen.⁵²

The lasting power of the Camelot myth for not only the Kennedy administration but also the Kennedy family is interesting within the realm of politics. As Steven Stark argues in his article “The Cultural Meaning of the Kennedys: Why JFK had More in Common with Elvis than with FDR,” there is a relatively weak tradition of political families in America. By contrast, this tradition is quite longstanding in the entertainment industry.⁵³ Therefore the Kennedys as a family are much more like the Presleys than the Bushs. The reason for this in large part has to do the celebrity of Jack Kennedy and his revolutionary use of television to create this celebrity. Kennedy said it best when he stated: “We wouldn’t have a prayer without that gadget.”⁵⁴ Kennedy truly was American’s first television president and he managed to take the presidential celebrity status to a whole new level. He helped

⁵¹ Theodore White, “For President Kennedy: An Epilogue,” *LIFE*, Dec 6, 1963, 159.

⁵² Brown, *History of an Image*, 42.

⁵³ Good examples of this in Hollywood are the Baldwins’, the Douglas’ and the Sheen’s. This is not to say that there are no successful political families. It is simply less common in politics than in Hollywood. Stark, “The Cultural Meaning of the Kennedys.”

⁵⁴ Quoted in Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief*, 276.

make politics “America’s favorite movie, America’s first soap opera and America’s best seller.”⁵⁵ That said, Kennedy only had a 56% approval rating in 1963, therefore it is often debated whether or not Kennedy would have won the election 1964.⁵⁶ His mythic status only really took hold after his death, thus it is important to remember that while he was a major celebrity during his time, he became a mega-celebrity only after his death. While the Kennedys were not the first politicians to court the entertainment industry, they elevated style and substance to an art form and arguably paved the way for a candidate like Ronald Reagan.

⁵⁵ Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession*, 114.

⁵⁶ “Presidential Approval Ratings – Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends,” *Gallup*.

HOLLYWOOD GOES TO WASHINGTON: THE REAGAN YEARS

Ronald Reagan is one of the most interesting presidents in American history. Looking back at his early life, there is no sense that the man who became the 40th President of the United States would ever take a political path. This is not to say that Reagan was completely oblivious to politics in his younger years; in the footsteps of his father, Reagan was a strong supporter of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. He hoped that the new economic plan would pull the country out of the Great Depression, which had a direct impact on Reagan's family. Reagan was so captivated by Roosevelt that he later admitted to patterning part of his own speaking style on his former presidential idol.¹ While Roosevelt cast the mold for Reagan's presidential style, Reagan's acting career solidified his future as the Great Communicator. Just like John F. Kennedy, style mattered more than substance, with Reagan blurring the lines between Hollywood, celebrity and politics more than ever. His presidency set an even stronger precedent for a celebrity-in-chief in the White House, and for eight years truly made Washington a celebrity affair.

It is first important to understand where Reagan came from in order to better understand his role as a celebrity-in-chief. His career began as a radio football announcer in Iowa, where his skills as a natural, charismatic storyteller came to good use.² This position led him to his dream career as a Hollywood actor in 1937, when he signed his first movie contract to play, conveniently, a radio announcer in *Love is in*

¹ Robert Lindsey, "Creating the Role," in *Reagan the Man, the President* (New York: MacMillian Publishing, 1980), 26.

² It was custom for sports announcers to inject intimacy into their reports and Reagan was especially adept at doing this. Andrew Helfer, *Ronald Reagan: A Graphic Biography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 19-20.

the Air. This role was followed by variety B-list movies, when finally he landed a role that not only change his life, but also molded his future political career. In *King's Row*, (1942), Reagan's character, Drake McHugh, loses both his legs, culminating in a scene that captivated Reagan for the rest of his life. As his character awakes and discovers his double amputation, he cries: "Where is the rest of me?"³ The film, and especially this scene, made Reagan realize that he was only "half a man" and that there was something missing.⁴ Film helped Reagan discover who he was and what he wanted, and would heavily influence how he operated within the day-to-day of his presidency.

It was through his involvement with the Screen Actors Guild that Reagan seemed to find at least part of what he felt he was missing. He believed that this was his avenue to the stars, his way to make it big with the big names of Hollywood. When he was finally selected as president of the organization in 1947, he said: "I saw [the boardroom] crowded with the famous men of the business. I knew that I was beginning to find the rest of me."⁵ Politics seemed to be the thing that would complete him, yet he would have one more role to play before taking on the role of a lifetime as president.

Reagan's position as host of *The General Electric's Television Theater* was his final role before entering the world of American politics. Reagan hosted the show from 1954 to 1962 and his presence on a small screen highlighted his strengths as a

³ "Where's the Rest of Me?" *YouTube*.

⁴ Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie: And Other Episodes of Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 18.

⁵ Ronald Reagan, *Where's the Rest of Me* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1965), 154.

performer while not emphasizing his deficiencies as an actor.⁶ It is very important to make the distinction between Reagan as performer and Reagan as actor. His inability to break through to A-list movies during his Hollywood career was due to the fact that while he was a good actor, he was not a *great* one. That said, he was an A-list *performer*, and that is what would ultimately matter for his role as president. Reagan's role on *GE TV Theatre* established him as a new kind of celebrity specific to television; he became a corporate icon, intimately identified with General Electric.⁷ This meant that even before his political campaigns, Reagan was a brand defined by technology. As spokespeople for the GE brand, the Reagans' became the first all-electric family with all the latest household appliances, modeling the virtues of "entertainment," "pleasure" and "comfort."⁸ Similar to the Kennedys, the Reagans and their brand were known to the American people before Reagan entered politics, and this brand rested heavily on image and celebrity.

In addition to refining his acting skills, Reagan's relationship with GE also gave him the opportunity to practice his skills as a politician. As part of his contract with the corporation, Reagan went on GE production plant visits, which were largely considered meet and greets with the factory line workers. However, the company soon realized the potential of his celebrity for community relations and asked him to make a few remarks while at the various plants. Because of his popularity during these presentations on the factory floors, the company added auditoriums and banquet halls filled with employees from all levels of the company to his speaking tours,

⁶ Tim Raphael, "The Body Electric: GE, TV, and the Reagan Brand," *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Summer 2009): 121.

⁷ Raphael, "The Body Electric," 133.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

thereby giving Reagan an invaluable opportunity to learn firsthand how a live audience made up of a cross-section of the American electorate worked.⁹ This experience would ultimately lead him to the governorship of California in 1966 and later to the White House in 1980. The opportunity not only allowed him to hone his skills as a politician, but it also allowed him to build-up a substantial voter base.

When Reagan finally entered politics, he did not leave Hollywood very far behind, and neither did the press in their descriptions of him. While governor of California, newspapers consistently referred to Reagan as the former actor and strong Democratic supporter turned right-wing Republican politician.¹⁰ Even after his first successful term as governor, the former actor could not shake his Hollywood association: “Ronald Wilson Reagan, former sports announcer and movie star, former “bleeding hearts” Democrat, now governor of California, was going campaigning.”¹¹ And like the press, Reagan never strayed too far from his Hollywood roots. Most notably, when asked about what kind of governor he thought he would make on the 1966 campaign trail for governor, Reagan replied: “I don’t know. I’ve never played a governor before.”¹² This response in many ways is how he thought of his entire political career; one big Hollywood production. The Democrats in 1966 hoped that

⁹ Raphael, “The Body Electric,” 135.

¹⁰ See David Broder, “Eisenhower Meets Reagan and Back Him for Governor,” *New York Times*, Jun 16, 1966, 1; Lawrence Davies, “Reagan Favored to Win Coast G.O.P. Nomination for Governor Tuesday,” *New York Times*, Jun 5, 1966, 84.

¹¹ Steven Roberts, “Ronald Reagan is Giving ‘Em Heck,” *New York Times*, Oct 25, 1970, SM22.

¹² Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 37.

this attitude and his movie background would work against him but it didn't.¹³ Amidst numerous California university campus riots and urban demonstrations throughout the 1960s under the governorship of Pat Brown, Californians were growing weary of their current gubernatorial situation and were growing increasingly concerned about the condition of their state. Lou Cannon argues that Californians, specifically Southern Californians, thought more highly of performers than of politicians.¹⁴ Therefore while many dismissed Reagan as a serious candidate in 1966, they were underestimating the power of his celebrity. Even though Reagan held strongly conservative views, his smile, self-deprecating one-liners and avoidance of the terms "Republican" and "conservative," helped soften his ideological edge and enabled him to fashion a performance palatable to Californians. While Reagan may have arguably been the right candidate in the right state at the right time, it is undeniable that his celebrity helped him get elected to the California governorship. Even though he became part of the world of American politics, the distinction between reality and Hollywood never truly became clear for Reagan and this meant that many aspects of his presidency often resembled a Hollywood production.

Reagan's presidency is the perfect example of the convergence between celebrity and politics. While public polls have continually ranked him as one of the greatest American presidents, the control over and focus on image throughout his presidency makes him one of the most interesting celebrity-in-chiefs. For Reagan, the

¹³ Adam Clymer, "A Star is Born," in *Reagan, the Man, the President* (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1980), 11-12.

¹⁴ Cannon, *President Reagan*, 44.

presidency was the “role of a lifetime.”¹⁵ Reagan seemed to understand that the same skills that were useful in Hollywood were also useful in Washington. In a farewell interview at the end of his second term as president, Reagan admitted to interviewer David Brinkley: “There has been times in this office when I’ve wondered how you could do the job if you hadn’t been an actor.”¹⁶ Reagan had appeared on virtually every form of electronic media before becoming president, and this helped him understand not only how to work with an audience but also how an audience responded to his image.

That said, Reagan never truly seemed all that interested in the political side of the presidency. While he held strong beliefs about political issues, which is clear from his diary entries, there are cases in which it seems as if the president was disinterested in his duties.¹⁷ For example, Republican congressional leaders often complained that Reagan was uninterested in political strategy. He would, however, place a call to any wavering congressmen, as long as he was provided with a script of what to say.¹⁸ In many ways, this example brings to light the nature of the Reagan presidency: politics was largely just another part of the screenplay for the Reagan presidential production.

The previous example also brings to the fore the fact that Reagan’s presidency was much more than a man carefully controlling his image; it was a true team effort. Reagan relied heavily on his aides throughout his time in office, as he was the

¹⁵ This phrase is borrowed from the title of Lou Cannon’s biography on Reagan entitled *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*.

¹⁶ Quoted in Michael Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan: America and its President in the 1980s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 37.

¹⁷ Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 2007), 251.

¹⁸ Cannon, *President Reagan*, 56.

celebrity that showed things off rather than the producer who made things happen.¹⁹ Cannon states: “Reagan thought in terms of performance and those closest to him approached his presidency as if it were a series of productions casting Reagan in the starting role.”²⁰ His reliance on his aides was something that he carried over with him from his governorship. John Sears, Reagan’s presidential campaign manager in 1976 and early 1980, argues that Reagan seldom came up with an original idea, but instead waited to be fed lines and shown how to say them.²¹ Such an approach to politics is not surprising when considering that this is how Reagan learned to operate in Hollywood and through his appearances on television, thereby placing him within the role of “acting” president.

It was not that Reagan was stupid or incompetent or simply a dimwitted celebrity. However as one of the people who helped draft the planning document for his first hundred days stated: “He was the least curious person that I ever met.”²² While Reagan’s laid back approach to running his presidency may suggest that this aide was correct, there may have been something else at play. It was not that he lacked curiosity, but rather that he only really understood one language and that was the language of show business.²³ For example, on the eve of the 1983 economic summit of the world’s industrialized democracies in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia,

¹⁹ Rogin, *Ronald Reagan*, 8.

²⁰ Cannon, *President Reagan*, 53.

²¹ This is not to say that Reagan had no original ideas. Notably, Reagan developed the Strategic Defense Initiative. However, his plans for this initiative were later shown to be unrealistic and impossible. Quoted in Robert Lindsey, “California Rehearsal,” in *Reagan the Man, the President* (New York: MacMillian Publishing, 1980), 48.

²² Quoted in Bob Schieffer and Gary P. Gates, *The Acting President* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989), 90.

²³ See *Ibid.*, 168.

Chief of Staff James Baker gave the president a briefing binder. On the day of the summit, Baker found the binder right where he had left it the night before, untouched. Uncharacteristically, he asked Reagan why he had not looked at the binder, to which the president replied: “Well, Jim, *The Sound of Music* was on last night.”²⁴ The incident points to something very important: Reagan’s first passion was always going to be film and if his presidential duties were going to compete, they would have to be communicated in a language he understood.

The change would come from one of the most unexpected places within the president’s administration: foreign relations. When Bill Clark took over as Reagan’s national security adviser in 1982, he discovered that Reagan knew very little about the goings on of many areas of the globe. This meant that Reagan had been president of over a year and was not well informed about one of the most important aspects of American politics. Therefore Clark decided to educate the president through the medium Reagan knew best: film. With the cooperation of the CIA, “profile movie documentaries” were produced on the world leaders Reagan was scheduled to meet and the countries he was to visit. The president was very receptive to the films, learning significantly more about other countries, their policies and their leader than ever before.²⁵ It was not that Reagan could not or did not like to read. As his former Deputy Chief of Staff Michael Deaver recounts, Reagan was a voracious reader who would read the ingredients on an empty gum wrapper if there was nothing else to

²⁴ Quoted in Cannon, *President Reagan*, 57.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 156-157. Also see Schieffer and Gates, *Acting President*, 158.

read.²⁶ Therefore it was not that Reagan was not curious, he simply needed to be educated in a language and through a medium that he understood; film was much more accessible to him than binders of briefing documents. This thus highlights just how similar Reagan's political production was to a Hollywood production.

Reagan's questionable political knowledge did not end with foreign policy. Reagan was known to conflate Hollywood pictures with reality, often quoting films as if they were hard facts. During World War II, Reagan was sent to make training films in California for the First Motion Picture Unit of the Army Air Corps after being disqualified from service for being near-sighted. Despite the fact that he spent the war making movies, Reagan still spoke of his firsthand experience with the horrors of war. In a 1982 meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, Reagan claimed to have traveled to Europe to shoot footage of the liberation of a Nazi concentration camp; the truth was he never left Hollywood.²⁷ This embarrassing incident highlights just how big a part film played in the president's life: film, Hollywood and celebrity culture *were* his life. And this was not the only incident of confusion between fact and fiction. Numerous times on the campaign trail in both 1976 and 1980, Reagan recounted the story of a World War II bomber captain who chose to go down with his plane rather than abandon his wounded crew. Despite the fact that Reagan became emotional every time he told the story, the account was more fiction than fact: the story was the plot from the 1944 film *A Wing and a Prayer*.²⁸

²⁶ Michael Deaver, *Behind the Scenes: In Which the Author Talks About Ronald and Nancy Reagan...and Himself* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987), 43.

²⁷ Joe Conason, "Bush Lies About His Military Service, and So Did Reagan," *Salon*, May 20, 2010.

²⁸ Rogin, *Ronald Reagan*, 7-8.

In many ways none of this is surprising. According to Cannon: “[R]eagan spent more time at the movies during his presidency than at anything else. He went to Camp David on 183 weekends, usually watching two films on each of his trips.”²⁹ Reagan’s diary entries corroborate this assertion, indicating that on the weekend of June 23-24, 1984 he watched both *Star Trek III* and *Bedtime for Bonzo*.³⁰ He watched films wherever he could and as often as he could. Even as president, film continued to influence Reagan, therefore the fluidity between film and reality for Reagan makes sense; it was part of who he was at his core.

His aides not only understood the importance and function of film in Reagan’s perception of politics, but they also understood that television encouraged his celebrity and utilized this to their advantage through attempted control of the medium.³¹ Control of Reagan’s image was especially important in light of a number of mishaps with the press early on in his presidency. These misfortunes were often a result of lack of scripting of the president’s answers during interactions with the press, for example during press conferences, in addition to a lack of proper preparation for these events by Reagan himself. William Safire, one of the most notable independent conservative columnists during the Reagan era, called Reagan out on his poor press conference performances, stating: “The President has been skimping on his preparation, neglecting the black book, relying instead on oral give-and-take with his aides for a couple of hours before press conferences. He thinks he

²⁹ Cannon, *President Reagan*, 56.

³⁰ Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, 251.

³¹ Schieffer and Gates, *Acting President*, 148.

can wing it [...] and he has been flunking the test.”³² Despite the fact that Safire’s evaluation of the president in this regard was true, his aides knew that Reagan was unwilling to study and knew they could not change this. As a result, they tried to limit his interactions the press. This led him to only hold six open session press conferences during his first year in office. His aides also made it clear that reporters were to refrain from asking the president questions during ceremonial occasions such as photo sessions.³³ Reagan therefore fits the hallmark of controlled access to celebrities in order to maintain a certain image and mystique.

Like his contemporary Hollywood celebrities, Reagan also carefully controlled his physical appearance. He was so vain about his physique that when the Secret Service insisted he wear a bullet-proof vest he complained: “Everyone will think I’m getting fat.”³⁴ He also refused to be photographed wearing glasses and remained so proud of his physical condition that he allowed cameras to capture him bare-chested in 1984 at the age of 73.³⁵ While Reagan much preferred movie cameras to photographic ones, photographers noted how incredible it was that Reagan never seemed to be caught off guard in photos, even though he often did not appear aware

³² Safire did not believe that Reagan was stupid. He was simply reflecting on the facts. One of the most notable cases of such lack of preparation was during a 1981 press conference, when Reagan referred to the surface-to-air missiles Syria had installed in Lebanon as “offensive” weapons. The White House press subsequently had to issue their first correction of his presidency, announcing that Reagan had meant to say “defensive” weapons. Cannon argues that his mistake highlighted Reagan’s ignorance and lack of preparation. William Safire, “Those Upraised Hands,” *The New York Times*, Jun 18, 1981. Also see Cannon, *President Reagan*, 157-8.

³³ Michael Kilian and Arnold Sawislak, *Who Runs Washington?* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), 168.

³⁴ Quoted in Alan Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief* (Bolder, CO.: Westview Press, 2004), 273.

³⁵ Lisa Tolin, “Obama Has Lean Edge in Presidential Physique,” *SFGate.com*.

that his picture was being taken.³⁶ Yet this fact highlights just how much he learned from his years as an actor; once in public, he was always “on.” This thus helped to create a mystique about the celebrity-in-chief, which remains part of his popular image today.

Part of Reagan’s image was that of “one of the people.” He was very good at relating to the average American, despite the fact that he himself was not average, leading his self-proclaimed title of “Mr. Norm” to stick.³⁷ One of the important features of a celebrity is their reliability, which he cultivated through his experience in film and television. Deaver even described his former boss as “the most human among us.”³⁸ This was in many ways the key to his popularity. On the eve of his 1980 presidential victory, Reagan was asked what the electorate saw in him. He replied: “I think maybe they see themselves and that I’m one of them.”³⁹ While there may be some truth to this, it is also important to understand that the 1980 election was multifaceted. By November 1980, then-President Jimmy Carter only posted a 31% job approval rating according to a Gallup poll.⁴⁰ Therefore, it raises the question as to whether the 1980 election was really a pro-Reagan vote or rather an anti-Carter vote. Undoubtedly though, Reagan’s “one of them” image and persona helped him connect with the electorate.

His embodiment of the American Dream also allowed him to remain personally popular throughout his administration. In January 1983, for example,

³⁶ Schieffer and Gates, *Acting President*, 170.

³⁷ Rogin, *Ronald Reagan*, 12.

³⁸ Deaver, *Behind the Scenes*, 35.

³⁹ Lou Cannon, “Thinking About Ronald Reagan: On 100th Birthday, He's Remembered for Good Reason,” *Politics Daily*, Feb 1, 2011.

⁴⁰ “Presidential Job Approval Center,” *Gallup*.

Reagan only posted a 35% job approval rating.⁴¹ Yet large stretches of his presidency were marked by over 60% public approval ratings.⁴² While fluctuations in approval ratings are quite standard for all presidents, what is significant about this is that he was personally popular even though his job performance was not. This is a testament to his team's ability to manipulate his media image, and as a result, many Americans liked Reagan on a personal level, politics aside. His celebrity allowed him to remain the "Teflon President,"⁴³ and regardless of his many political gaffes and low job approval ratings, he managed to maintain considerable popular support.

Reagan can be classified as what David Schultz describes as a politianer: an individual who uses their entertainment career to benefit their political career and who uses their political career to benefit their entertainment career.⁴⁴ By the time Reagan entered politics, he was already a celebrity in his own right, and he would use his knowledge of celebrity culture to excel in politics. He was never able to detach

⁴¹ This poor rating may have had something to do with the major economic recession that hit the American economy in the fall of 1982, which left 11.5 million Americans unemployed by January 1983 (when the initial poll was conducted). Frank Newport, Jeffrey M. Jones, and Lydia Saad, "Ronald Reagan from the People's Perspective," *Gallup*, Jun 7, 2004. Also see "Timeline: Ronald Reagan's Life," *PBS*.

⁴² He hit his highest approval rating of 68% twice, first in May 1981, following his assassination attempt, and May 1986, the beginning of his second term. Bootie Cosgrove-Mather, "A Look Back at the Polls," *CBS News*, Feb 11, 2009. Also see "Presidential Approval Ratings – Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends."

⁴³ Schieffer and Gates, *Acting President*, 180.

⁴⁴ In Reagan's case, his political career made him even more desirable to companies who wanted him as a spokesman. A 1988 article in *Advertising Age* revealed that three advertising firms had already offered the president future spokesman positions. In addition, a survey conducted among nationwide adults ranked Reagan second among whom they considered the best celebrity spokesman, placing him only behind Bill Crosby. David A. Schultz, "From Saxophones to Schwarzenegger: Entertainment Politics on Late-Night Television," in *Light, Camera, Campaign!: Media, Politics and Political Advertising*, ed. David A. Schultz (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004), 221; Scott Hume, "What Next, Ron?; Crosby, Reagan, Hope Top Celeb Survey," *Advertising Age*, Sept 19, 1988.

himself from his life as an actor; it was the only way he knew how to operate. As Michael Rogin describes it: “Reagan was president because of film, hospitalized because of film, and present as an undamaged image because of film.”⁴⁵ He was the quintessential idol of consumption, as discussed in the first chapter. His rise through the political ranks was not because he was an outstanding politician, but rather because of personality and some good luck. Reagan’s abilities as a performer further built on the changes that Kennedy had initiated with regards to what the American people expect from their president. The press also took the celebrity foundation Kennedy created for the presidency even farther: Reagan received more magazine coverage than any of his presidential predecessors.⁴⁶ Such coverage suggests that even as president, Reagan was covered as a celebrity, and not simply a political figure, by the media. Whether or not this coverage was beneficial is debatable, but it is nevertheless important when defining Reagan as a celebrity-in-chief. No one put it better than Reagan himself when describing the new political environment in which he inhabited: “Politics is just like show business.”⁴⁷ Little did he know, 20 years later a new president would take this statement to a whole new level.

⁴⁵ The hospitalization is in reference to the attempted assassination of the president in 1981 by John Hickley Jr. who claimed he was inspired by the 1976 film *Taxi Driver*. Rogin, *Ronald Reagan*, 4.

⁴⁶ John Orman, “Covering the American Presidency: Valenced Reporting in the Periodical Press, 1980-1982,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14 (1984): 381-390.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Drew, *Portrait of an Election: The 1980 Presidential Campaign* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 263.

THE “ENTERTAINMENT TONIGHT PRESIDENT”¹: BARACK OBAMA AS CELEBRITY-IN-CHIEF

As the first African American president, Barack Obama represents many things: hope, change and another step towards closing the racial gap in America. However, Obama has also come to represent a new kind of president, one that has been in development for the last 60 years or so: the celebrity-in-chief. Like his predecessors John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, Obama has mastered the technology of his time and has successfully combined the worlds of entertainment and politics into a seamless celebrity presidency. While much of what Obama did during his 2008 campaign, such as appearing on talk shows or putting a strong emphasis on image is not new, he took these techniques to a new level. His use of the Internet in both his campaign and presidency amplified whatever celebrity status his predecessors had established, making the president as celebrity more accessible than ever before. There is nothing more telling of his celebrity status than a simple Google search: the first thing that appears when “celebrity-in-chief” is typed into Google Images is a photo of President Barack Obama.²

Obama first came to the nation’s attention by way of his now famous keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, where he emerged as the party’s rising star.³ This event, in addition to his two best selling books, *Dream from My Father* (1995) and *Audacity of Hope* (2006), helped to make Obama a household

¹ The title of “Entertainment Tonight President” is borrowed from Stuart Rothernberg’s article “Media Covers Obama Like He’s Ultimate A-List Celebrity.”

² “Celebrity-in-Chief,” *Google Images*.

³ This is similar to Reagan, who made his first mark in politics after his speech, “A Time for Choosing,” supporting presidential candidate Barry Goldwater during Goldwater’s 1964 campaign.

name among not only Democrats, but also many Americans. While Obama was considerably well known before entering the presidential race, it was his command of various media portals, especially social media, which lies at the heart of his celebrity. Just as Kennedy created a greater sense of intimacy with the American people through his strategic use of the then-new medium of television, Obama took this intimacy to a whole new level with his use of the Internet. According to Sarah Lai Stirland, Obama ran “the most sophisticated organizing apparatus of any presidential campaign in history” in 2008.⁴ Part of this sophistication was due to Obama having some of the best and brightest minds working on his campaign, including Facebook’s co-founder, Chris Hughes, who aided in the development of Internet software that helped the president’s team connect with the electorate through social networking-based technologies.⁵ And connect they did: the Obama 2008 campaign generated more than two million friends on Facebook, 866,887 friends on MySpace and a campaign listserv with over ten million email addresses. This is significant as McCain’s campaign paled in comparison with only approximately 620,000 Facebook friends.⁶ In addition to a major online presence, the Obama campaign also used text messaging to mobilize the masses, especially the youth vote.⁷ Another important innovation of the campaign was mybarackobama.com, which was a social networking site that helped local Obama supporters organize as grass-roots activists, thereby

⁴ Sarah Lai Stirland, “Obama’s Secret Weapon: Internet, Databases and Psychology,” *Wired.com*, Oct 29, 2008.

⁵ Mark Wheeler, “The Democratic Worth of Celebrity Politics in an Era of Late Modernity,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 14 (2013): 418.

⁶ “The Social Media Election,” *Vertical Measures*.

⁷ Douglas Kellner, “Barack Obama and Celebrity Spectacle,” *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 3 (2009): 718.

allowing supporters to connect on a level never before possible during a presidential election. This direct and real-time connection to the American people took the notion of media creating intimacy between a presidential candidate or president-elect and the people to a whole new level. His innovative uses of technology enabled him to connect with voters in a seemingly more direct fashion, as well as simultaneously on a collective basis.⁸ As discussed in the first chapter, intimacy is crucial to the idea of celebrity; therefore the greatly intimate nature that the Obama campaign created by way of the Internet and social media sources helped put Obama on a path to becoming a super-star.

Another way Obama developed his celebrity identity was by way of his appearances on traditionally celebrity-based talk shows. As discussed in Chapter 1, talk shows and late night television programs have become major sources of political and campaign information for the American electorate. These programs do not require that viewers have higher education or “bourgeois knowledge;”⁹ they are accessible to the average American. Presidential candidates in the 2008 election made four times as many appearance on late night programs than in the previous election cycle, indicating that these outlets are becoming increasingly important venues for candidates to get their message across.¹⁰ In addition, candidates in the 2008 campaign particularly sought out appearances on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *The Colbert Report*, and *The Tonight Show*, suggesting that these primarily entertainment-based

⁸ Wheeler, “The Democratic Worth,” 419.

⁹ Graeme Turner, *Understanding celebrity* (London: SAGE Publications, 2004), 78.

¹⁰ Stephen J. Fransworth and Robert Lichter, *The Nightly News Nightmare: Media Coverage of U.S. Presidential Elections, 1988-2008* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 159.

programs are becoming more important for presidential campaigns than ever before.¹¹ However appearances on these shows do not guarantee a victory. Even though Obama's opponent, John McCain, made more appearances on late night programs than any other presidential candidate from 2007 through to Election Day, Obama still won the election.¹² This suggests that it is not the quantity but rather the quality of the candidate's appearances that makes these them effective. If they do not have the right celebrity qualities and do not put on a believable performance, no amount of television is compensatory. The rise in popularity of these types of programs also highlights just how much the worlds of entertainment and politics have truly blended. Obama was the first sitting president to appear on *The Tonight Show* on March 19, 2009. While appearing on these programs during the campaign has become standard campaign practice, as noted above, the appearance of a sitting president highlights just how prominent such a celebrity medium has become for reaching out to the American electorate.¹³

Obama's image in many ways can be seen as quite similar to Kennedy's: they both represent youth and glamour, and just like Kennedy, these characteristics, often associated with Hollywood culture seem to have kindled a connection between many American youth and politics. In the 2008 election, 66% of voters between the ages of 18-29 voted for Obama. This is compared to only 31% of this age group who voted for McCain.¹⁴ Obama's image was made even more powerful, once again through his

¹¹ Fransworth and Lichter, *Nightly News Nightmare*, 140.

¹² Robert Lichter, ed., "The Comedy Campaign: The Role of Late-Night TV Shows in Campaign '08," *Media Monitor*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Winter 2008): 1.

¹³ "Obama on the Tonight Show with Jay Leno," *The Huffington Post*, Apr 19, 2009.

¹⁴ "Young Voters in the 2008 Election," *Pew Research Center*, Nov 13, 2008.

use of the Internet. The Obama campaign uploaded 1,982 videos online, including speeches, advertisements, interviews and debate clips, which received approximately 900 million hits during the 2008 campaign.¹⁵ In comparison, the McCain camp only uploaded 376 videos.¹⁶ For Obama, the videos were in addition to hundreds of Obama posters and stickers that appeared all over numerous cities throughout the United States during the campaign. Street artists around the globe, including in Paris and Beijing, also began to place graffiti of Obama in various urban public spaces, a phenomenon that was non-existent for McCain.¹⁷ All of the coverage and hype surrounding Obama turned him into a kind of idol, celebrated not solely for his political beliefs but because he represented the American Dream.

Part of this American Dream and another facet of Obama's celebrity image was his race. Questions about whether Obama was too black or not black enough were mainstay throughout the 2008 campaign and brought to the fore the idea of "good black" versus "bad black" within American culture. Obama was seen as a "good black:" articulate, clean and good looking and thus gathered a sizable following in Middle America. However, these same traits also caused other to question his authenticity as a black man.¹⁸ This meant that Obama had to walk a fine line in order to satisfy both sides. He made sure to control his temper to prevent accusations of being the "angry black man," a common racist assumption, which dates back to the days of slavery. Thus the way Obama has handled and not handled

¹⁵ Fransworth and Lichter, *Nightly News Nightmare*, 88.

¹⁶ Liz Gannes, "The Final Online Video Tally: Obama's Long Primary Season Prepped Him for the Win," *GigaOM*, Nov 5, 2008.

¹⁷ Kate Lithkicum, "Tagged, He's it: Election Becomes Their Turf," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug 23, 2008, 11.

¹⁸ Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Is Obama Black Enough," *TIME*, Feb 1, 2007.

race throughout his run for the White House and his presidency has become part of his political persona and celebrity.

The media coverage of Obama, especially during the campaign, emphasizes just how idolized he and his family had become. As early as the primaries, the liberal press elevated Obama to celebrity status, with *Saturday Night Live* spoofing how delicately and uncritically the press was treating him in comparison to his opponent Hillary Clinton. Clinton even referenced the skit during a primary debate, in which she remarked how curious it was that she always got the first question and noted that maybe they should ask Obama if he needed another pillow, implying that Obama held a position similar to royalty, and his comfort was of utmost importance.¹⁹ Another instance in which the Clinton campaign complained about a pro-Obama press bias was after the *CBS Early Show* aired a video clip in which they stated that Obama not only had the ability to move audiences politically, but also emotionally. The clip went on to praise Obama for his “stoic eloquence,” which it likened to Kennedy.²⁰ The *SNL* skit and Clinton’s comments brought considerable attention to the liberal press’ celebrity coverage of the presidential hopeful, after which they turned a much more critical lens toward Obama and his campaign. This included many more expository stories about Obama’s life and political record, and a number of media outlets including *The New York Times*, openly questioned the media’s treatment of the Democrat’s golden boy.²¹

¹⁹ “Hillary Clinton Recalls SNL Parody: Does Obama Want Pillow?,” *YouTube*, Feb 27, 2008.

²⁰ “Obama’s Oratory Grabbing Spotlight,” *CBS News*, Feb 11, 2009.

²¹ “Press Takes a Harder Look at Obama – And Itself,” *Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism*, Mar 2, 2008.

The bias in favor of Obama was also clear on late light programs such as *The Tonight Show*: across all the programs of this genre, there were 1,224 jokes made about the Republican ticket, as opposed to approximately 330 made about the Democratic ticket.²² Conservative media outlets including the *Washington Times* complained that Obama was receiving “adoring press coverage Elvis would envy,” and that the press had crowned Obama “as the permanent American Idol.”²³ Obama’s celebrity was so big that he was the first president to be endorsed by *Rolling Stone*, a publication known generally for its coverage of celebrity and music culture.²⁴ Post-election, numerous magazines and tabloids covered the Obama family vacation to Hawaii, including a shirtless photo of the new president on the beach. The paparazzi also followed him home to Chicago after he returned from his vacation in a horde “perhaps never before equated.”²⁵ During the campaign, the McCain camp produced a commercial comparing Obama to celebrities such as Britney Spears and Paris Hilton, with the hope that it would significantly hurt Obama’s image and campaign.²⁶ There was considerable backlash to the advertisement and what the McCain team failed to understand was that Obama’s celebrity associations were *helping* not hurting him; it got him more attention and support from a population “generally attracted to celebrity status and culture,” and frustrated with negative attack ads.²⁷

²² Fransworth and Lichter, *Nightly News Nightmare*, 162.

²³ Wesley Pruden, “The Messiah Who Can’t Break Away,” *The Washington Times*, Jul 29, 2008, A4.

²⁴ Wheeler, “The Democratic Worth,” 417.

²⁵ Kellner, “Barack Obama,” 735.

²⁶ “Celeb,” *The Living Room Candidate*..

²⁷ Kellner, “Barack Obama,” 722; Jeffrey Alexander, “Barack Obama Meets Celebrity Metaphor,” *Society*, Vol. 47, No. 5 (2010): 413-5.

While such celebrity-style tabloid coverage was out of the control of the Obama public relations team, they understood the power of his celebrity status and helped to feed the Obama celebrity-in-chief machine. It was revealed in a *Washington Post* article that the White House orchestrated “exclusives,” including the story about the Obama’s new dog, Bo, going to the *Post*, while the story about the first lady Michelle Obama’s White House garden going to the *New York Times*.²⁸ These exclusives provided a way to gain some control over the release of information, which has become increasingly difficult in an age dominated by the Internet and paparazzi. This delegation of personal stories as exclusives is a hallmark of celebrity culture and spin doctors, as discussed in the first chapter, thereby placing Obama and his family within the celebrity designation.

Obama’s celebrity connections also aided his rise to star status. While many presidents have had strong connections with Hollywood and the music world, such as Kennedy and the “Rat Pack,” the celebrity support Obama received during his 2008 campaign was extraordinary. Not only did he have the support of major Hollywood stars such as George Clooney, Matt Damon and Spike Lee, but he also had one of the biggest celebrities in the world endorse his campaign: Oprah Winfrey. In addition to holding a star-studded fundraiser to celebrate Obama at \$2,300 a ticket,²⁹ one study estimates that Winfrey’s endorsement resulted in over one million votes for Obama in

²⁸ Manuel Roig-Franzia, “The First Puppy Makes a Big Splash,” *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2009.

²⁹ “United States: The Celebrity Primary; Presidential Politics,” *The Economist*, Sept 13, 2007.

the primaries alone.³⁰ Obama understood that the more celebrities he had on his side, the wider a constituency he could reach. A study looking at the effect of celebrity endorsement on youth voting shows that young respondents are more likely to agree with beliefs of famous and admired celebrities than if that same information comes from a less known source.³¹ Therefore advertisements such as will.i.am's "Yes We Can," in which the famed musician took part of an Obama speech and turned it into a song performed by high profile celebrities, bought a significant "cool factor" to the campaign.³² To top off the start-studded campaign, a major concert was held after the inauguration on the Washington Mall featuring Bruce Springsteen and Stevie Wonder among other A-list performers. While celebrity support of presidential candidates and president-elects is nothing new, the extent and pervasiveness of support for Obama was arguably more so than every before, leading to an ever greater connection between Obama and celebrity.

Despite all of this focus on Obama as celebrity in the 2008 election, he was not the only candidate to attain such a designation. While McCain fell short of attaining celebrity status, his vice presidential running mate, Sarah Palin, did not. Her over-the-top maverick image, in addition to her down-home hockey-mom performance endeared her to many conservative Americans, leading her to become a celebrity in her own right. However, like many celebrities, Palin seemed to be more good looks than smarts. This was extremely evident in Palin's now infamous

³⁰ Overall, the Hollywood establishment raised approximately \$4.8 million. Craig Garthwaite and Tim Moore, "The Role of Celebrity Endorsement in Politics: Oprah, Obama and the 2008 Democratic Primary," *Columbia University*, Aug 2008, 3.

³¹ David J. Jackson, "Selling Politics: The Impact of Celebrities' Political Beliefs on Young Americans," *Journal of Political Marketing*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (2007): 77.

³² "Yes We Can – Barak Obama Music Video," *YouTube*, Feb 2, 2008.

interview with Katie Couric, in which the vice presidential candidate could not name any specific newspapers or journals she read on a regular basis, and could not name a Supreme Court decision she opposed beyond *Roe v. Wade*.³³ Palin's lack of knowledge was in sharp contrast to Obama, whose appeal was based, in many ways, on his intellect. While intellect is not a common or necessary faction for the modern celebrity, it nonetheless became part of Obama's celebrity. This is because Obama was a stark contrast to his predecessor, George W. Bush, who had a number of comparable media blunder to Palin.³⁴ Obama's intellectual appeal demonstrates that glitz and glamour are not the only factors in the equation, and that Americans want a perceivably well-rounded candidate. In Palin's case, her small amount of radically conservative knowledge did not sit well with the many Americans, and regardless of her celebrity, the McCain-Palin ticket was not elected.

The election outcome was not about the issues or celebrity status exclusively, but rather about whom the American people felt could best handle the issues. Palin's political failure reinforces the fact that while celebrity has become a major part of presidential politics, it is not the sole deciding factor; the American people still want a leader who they feel can *lead* the country. While celebrity helps bolster a candidate's image, political know-how is also an important part of the equation.

Like Kennedy, the Obama presidency has transformed the concept of celebrity-in-chief, largely due to the integration of new technology into the public

³³ "CBS Exclusive: Gov. Sarah Palin," *YouTube*, Oct 31, 2008.

³⁴ This includes a statement made by President Bush right after Hurricane Katrina, in which he stated: "I don't think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees," despite major warning from meteorologist leading up to the disaster. See Joby Warrick, "White House Got Early Warning on Katrina," *The Washington Post*, Jan 24, 2006.

relations process. His charisma and relatable image undoubtedly made him a celebrity within the Democratic Party; however his public relations team's use of various new media, in addition to unplanned press coverage, made him a national celebrity. The nation was primed for the election of a president like Obama through various television programs and films such as *The Man* (1972), which features James Earl Jones as president, helping prepare the American people for an African American commander-in-chief. More importantly, though, *The West Wing* astonishingly anticipated Obama's election. The writing team on *The West Wing* called David Axelrod, one of Obama's key advisors during the 2008 campaign, asking him to tell them about the presidential hopeful. This resulted in the 2004-2006 seasons of the series borrowing from the information they received from Axelrod and creating a storyline in which a Latino, Matthew Santos, runs as a Democratic presidential candidate. Among other things, Santos resembled Obama in an uncanny fashion: both wanted a new brand of politics, both had young attractive families and both were candidates of color.³⁵ Therefore when Obama entered the 2008 primaries, the country was ready. The fact that the American people had seen characters that shadowed Obama and his image in fictional form perhaps gave them a sense that they could elect the same individual they had seen in these various shows and films; fiction had the possibility of becoming reality.

Obama's use of the Internet and social media has not only revolutionized the presidential campaign but also the concept of the celebrity-in-chief. His ability to create major media spectacles has become a necessity for governing in this new

³⁵ The program also featured a character who strongly resembled McCain, making the 2008 election even more remarkable. Kellner, "Barack Obama," 733.

media age, and he has undoubtedly set a new standard for communication for both the campaign and the presidency. Obama, in comparison to Palin, reminds us that even in a country saturated by celebrity culture, celebrity status is only part of the equation. The American people expect a lot from their presidents, and Obama has evidenced that one of those expectations has become the fulfillment of the role of celebrity-in-chief.

CONCLUSION

The concept of celebrity-in-chief is far from simple. The outcome of political elections is always based on a complicated intermingling of numerous issues. However, the rise of the modern celebrity and its increasing presence within the presidential political sphere cannot be denied, and thus must be considered when examining presidential candidates and president-elects. David Marshall argues that the changing definitional focus of the term celebrity has historically delineated the transformation of power.¹ In other words, the development of the concept of celebrity has changed alongside what it means to attain and hold power. This evolution has also been aided by the development and rise of new technologies, such as television and the Internet. News has increasingly become what Douglas Kellner refers to as a “media spectacle,” where celebrity “replaces the complexities of policy with symbolic gestures.”² While this does not mean that political issues are completely disregarded, it does mean that coverage of politicians is increasingly framed through the lens of superstar. This suggests that while politics still matters for the presidential campaign and the presidency, the stylistic form of politics has changed. In order to win, a presidential hopeful must properly synthesize personality and performance to

¹ David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 6.

² Douglas Kellner, “Celebrity Diplomacy, Spectacle and Barack Obama,” *Celebrity Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2010): 123.

create a convincing political persona.³ It is not only about the ideas, but also the performance by which they are delivered.

It can be argued that John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama cultivated the right images at the right time. For example, Reagan and Obama both followed presidents who were very unpopular when they left office. While having the right image at the right time is important to consider when looking at these presidents, their celebrity is not only part of their campaigns but also part of the way they operate within the presidency, making their positions as celebrity-in-chief significant. This paper explored both the campaigns of these three presidents, as well as the way celebrity was built into their administrations, in an attempt to highlight how deep it permeated their presidencies.⁴ While it is not enough to be a celebrity-in-chief to govern the United States, it can definitely help, and is definitely part of the equation.

There is undoubtedly a celebrity system that has been developed around the presidential campaign and the American presidency, including the rise of public relations departments, in addition to an increasing focus on image. Just as in Hollywood, personality and charisma are very important and have come to play

³ Schroeder argues that this helped to explain why some candidates excel, while others do not: it is about charisma. Mark Wheeler, "The Democratic Worth of Celebrity Politics in an Ear of Late Modernity," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 14 (2013): 409; Alan Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief* (Bolder, CO.: Westview Press, 2004), 300.

⁴ It is important to clarify that this paper did not explore the policies of Kennedy, Reagan or Obama within a celebrity context, but instead tried to focus on the way the administrations were run on a more basic level; in other words, how the administrations functioned as oppose to what they actually accomplished politically as celebrity-in-chiefs.

significant roles in who gets elected.⁵ As stated in the Introduction, there is a line of argument that suggests that voters tend to choose candidates they feel can best *deal* with the issues, rather than based on shared ideological positions. While there are many voters who vote for the candidate who shares their stance on certain issues, there is truth behind the idea of voting for whom you believe will govern best. As large segments of the American voting population have grown increasingly disillusioned with the American political system and presidency, this has resulted in a growing tendency to disregard any message that sounds like politics, at least according to Stephen Medvic.⁶ Therefore politicians need to find other ways to grab the attention of the American electorate, and celebrity and image is an effective way to do so. Thus, presidential candidates must take on celebrity qualities and provide convincing performances as politicians in order to catch and maintain support.

Developments in communications technologies have unquestionably played a very important role in the development of the modern celebrity and the celebrity-in-chief. The candidates who are successful are those who have mastered the communication technologies of their times. While Obama has shown the potential of the Internet to feed the celebrity-in-chief machine, it will be interesting to watch how this new political culture evolves. There is a danger to the celebrity title in politics, as discussed throughout this paper, therefore as celebrity culture intensifies due to the

⁵ There are a number of studies that suggest that candidate image has become one of, if not the most, important factor in a voter's decision. See Lynda Lee Kaid and Dorothy K. Davidson, "Elements of Videostyle," in *New Perspective on Political Advertising*, edited by Lynda Lee Kaid, Dan Nimmo and Keith R. Sanders (Carbondale, IL., 1986), 185.

⁶ Stephen K. Medvic, "Developing 'Paid Media' Strategies: Media Consultants and Political Advertising," in *Lights, Camera, Campaign: Media, Politics, and Political Advertising*, ed. David A. Schultz (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004), 22.

real-time and open access nature of the Internet, the celebrity-in-chief may have to adapt once more. The concept of celebrity is constantly in a state of transformation, therefore the Internet is one more step in the evolutionary process. As the lines between politics and celebrity are constantly negotiated and blurred, one thing is for certain: America's president is not only a commander-in-chief, but also a celebrity-in-chief.

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