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One of the most distinctive features of the modern presidency is its constant cultivation of popular support. The Framers of the U. S. Constitution envisioned a president substantially insulated from the demands and passions of the people by the long duration of the term and the dignity of the office. The modern president, in contrast, not only responds to popular demands and passions but also actively reaches out to shape them. The possibilities opened up by modern technology and the problems presented by the increased fragility of parties and institutional coalitions lead presidents to turn to the public for support and If popular backing is to be maintained, however, the public must believe in the president's leadership qualities.

Observers of presidential politics have come to recognize the centrality of the president's relationship with the American public. George Edwards has written of "the public presidency" and argued that the "greatest source of influence for the president is public approval." Samuel Kernell has suggested that presidential appeals for popular favor now overshadow more traditional methods of seeking influence, especially bargaining. Presidents today, Kernell argued, are "going public," and he demonstrated their propensity to cultivate popular support by recording the mounting frequency of their public addresses, public appearances, and political travel. These constitute, he claimed, "the repertoire of modern leadership."

This new understanding of presidential leadership can be carried further. A president's approach to, and impact on, public perceptions is not limited to overt appeals in speeches and appearances. Much of what the modern presidency does, in fact, involves the projection of images whose purpose is to shape public understanding and gain popular support. A significant—and growing—part of the presidency revolves around the enactment of leadership as a spectacle.

To examine the presidency as a spectacle is to ask not only how a president seeks to appear but also what the public sees. We are accustomed to gauging the public's responses to a president with polls that measure approval and disapproval of overall performance in office and effectiveness in managing the economy and foreign policy. Yet these evaluative categories may say more about the information desired by politicians or academic researchers than about the terms in which most members of a president's audience actually view the president. A public that responds mainly to presidential spectacles will not ignore the president's performance, but its understanding of that performance, as well as its sense of the more overarching and intangible strengths and weaknesses of the administration, will be colored by the terms of the spectacle.

The Presidency As Spectacle

A spectacle is a kind of symbolic event, one in which particular details stand for broader and deeper meanings. What differentiates a spectacle from other kinds of symbolic events is the centrality of character and action. A spectacle presents intriguing and often dominating characters not in static poses but through actions that establish their public identities.

Spectacle implies a clear division between actors and spectators. As Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz have noted, a spectacle possesses "a narrowness of focus, a limited set of appropriate responses, and ... a minimal level of interaction. What there is to see is very clearly exhibited; spectacle implies a distinction between the roles of performers and audience." A spectacle does not permit the audience to interrupt the action and redirect its meaning. Spectators can become absorbed in a spectacle or can find it unconvincing, but they cannot become performers. A spectacle is not designed for mass participation; it is not a democratic event.

Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of a spectacle is that the actions that constitute it are meaningful not for what they achieve but for what they signify. Actions in a spectacle are gestures rather than means to an end. What is important is that they be understandable and impressive to the spectators. This distinction between gestures and means is illustrated by Roland Barthes in his classic discussion of professional wrestling as a spectacle. Barthes shows that professional

wrestling is completely unlike professional boxing. Boxing is a form of competition, a contest of skill in a situation of uncertainty. What matters is the outcome; because this is in doubt, we can wager on it. But in professional wrestling, the outcome is preordained; it would be senseless to bet on who is going to win. What matters in professional wrestling are the gestures made during the match, gestures by performers portraying distinctive characters, gestures that carry moral significance. In a typical match, an evil character threatens a good character, knocks him down on the canvas, abuses him with dirty tricks, but ultimately loses when the good character rises up to exact a just revenge.

It may seem odd to approach the presidency through an analogy with boxing and wrestling—but let us pursue it for a moment. Much of what presidents do is analogous to what boxers do—they engage in contests of power and policy with other political actors, contests in which the outcomes are uncertain. But a growing amount of presidential activity is akin to wrestling. The contemporary presidency is presented by the White House (with the collaboration of the media) as a series of spectacles in which a larger-than-life main character and a supporting team engage in emblematic bouts with immoral or dangerous adversaries.

A number of contemporary developments have converged to foster the rise of spectacle in the modern presidency. The mass media have become the principal vehicle for presidential spectacle. Focusing more of their coverage on presidents than on any other person or institution in American life, the media keep them constantly before the public and give them unmatched opportunities to display their leadership qualities. Television provides the view most amenable to spectacle; by favoring the visual and the dramatic, it promotes stories with simple plot lines over complex analyses of causes and consequences. But other kinds of media are not fundamentally different. As David Paletz and Robert Entman have shown, American journalists "define events from a short-term, anti-historical perspective; see individual or group action, not structural or other impersonal long run forces, at the root of most occurrences; and simplify and reduce stories to conventional symbols for easy assimilation by audiences."

The mass media are not, to be sure, always reliable vehicles for presidential spectacles. Reporters may frame their stories in terms that undermine the meanings the White House intends to convey. Their desire for controversy can feed off presidential spectacles, but it also can destroy them. The media can contribute to spectacular failures in the presidency as well as to successful spectacles.

Spectacle has also been fostered by the president's rise to primacy in the American political system. A political order originally centered on institutions has given way, especially in the public mind, to a political order that centers on the person of the president. Theodore Lowi wrote, "Since the president has become the embodiment of government, it seems perfectly normal for millions upon millions of Americans to concentrate their hopes and fears directly and personally upon him." The "personal president" that Lowi described is the object of popular expectations; these expectations, Stephen Wayne and Thomas Cronin have shown, are both excessive and contradictory. The president must attempt to satisfy the public by delivering tangible benefits, such as economic growth, but these will almost never be enough. Not surprisingly, then, presidents turn to the gestures of the spectacle to satisfy their audience.

To understand the modern presidency as a form of spectacle, we must consider the presentation of the presidents as spectacular characters, their teams' role as supporting performers, and the arrangement of gestures that convey to the audience the meaning of their actions.

A contemporary president is, to borrow a phrase from Guy Debord, "the spectacular representation of a living human being." An enormous amount of attention is paid to the president as a public character; every deed, quality, and even foible is regarded as fascinating and important. The American public may not learn the details of policy formulation, but they know that Gerald Ford bumps his head on helicopter doorframes, that Ronald Reagan likes jellybeans, and that Bill Clinton enjoys hanging out with Hollywood celebrities. In a spectacle, a president's character possesses intrinsic as well as symbolic value; it is to be appreciated for its own sake. The spectators do not press presidents to specify what economic or social benefits they are

providing; nor do they closely inquire into the truthfulness of the claims presidents make. (To the extent that they do evaluate the president in such terms, they step outside the terms of the spectacle.) The president's featured qualities are presented as benefits in themselves. Thus, John F. Kennedy's glamour casts his whole era in a romanticized glow, Ronald Reagan's amiability relieves the grim national mood that had developed under his predecessor, and George W. Bush's traditional marriage rebukes the cultural decay associated with Bill Clinton's sex scandals.

The president's character must be not only appealing but also magnified by the spectacle. The spectacle makes the president appear exceptionally decisive, tough, courageous, prescient, or prudent. Whether the president is in fact all or any of these things is obscured. What matters is that he or she is presented as having these qualities, in magnitudes far beyond what ordinary citizens can imagine themselves to possess. The president must appear confident and masterful before spectators whose very position, as onlookers, denies the possibility of mastery.

The most likely presidential qualities to be magnified will be those that contrast dramatically with the attributes that drew criticism to the previous president. Reagan, following a president perceived as weak, was featured in spectacles that highlighted his potency. The elder Bush, succeeding a president notorious for his disengagement from the workings of his own administration, was featured in spectacles of "hands-on" management. Clinton, supplanting a president who seemed disengaged from the economic problems of ordinary Americans, began his administration with spectacles of populist intimacy. The younger Bush, replacing a president notorious for personal indiscipline and staff disorder, presents a corporate-style White House where meetings run on time and proper business attire is required in the Oval Office.

Presidents are the principal figures in presidential spectacles, but they have the help of aides and advisers. The star performer is surrounded by a team. Members of the president's team can, through the supporting parts they play, enhance or detract from the spectacle's effect on the audience. For a president's team to enhance the spectacles, its members should project attractive qualities that either resemble the featured attributes of the president or make up for the president's perceived deficiencies. A team will diminish presidential spectacles if its members project qualities that underscore the president's weaknesses.

A performance team, Erving Goffman has shown, contains "a set of individuals whose intimate cooperation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained." There are a number of ways the team can disrupt presidential spectacles. A member of the team can call too much attention to himself or herself, partially upstaging the president. This was one of the disruptive practices that made the Reagan White House eager to be rid of Secretary of State Alexander Haig. A team member can give away important secrets to the audience; Budget Director David Stockman's famous confessions about supply-side economics to a reporter for the *Atlantic* jeopardized the mystique of economic innovation that the Reagan administration had created in 1981. Worst of all, a member of the team can, perhaps inadvertently, discredit the central meanings that a presidential spectacle has been designed to establish. Thus, revelations of Budget Director Bert Lance's questionable banking practices deflated the lofty moral tone established at the beginning of the Carter presidency.

The audience watching a presidential spectacle is, the White House hopes, as impressed by gestures as by results. Indeed, the gestures are sometimes preferable to the results. Thus, a "show" of force by the president is preferable to the death and destruction that are the results of force. The ways in which the invasion of Grenada in 1983, the bombing of Libya in 1986, and the seizing of the Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega in 1989 were portrayed to the American public suggest an eagerness in the White House to present the image of military toughness but not the casualties from military conflict—even when they are the enemy's casualties.

Gestures overshadow results. They also overshadow facts. But facts are not obliterated in a presidential spectacle. They remain present; they are needed, in a sense, to nurture the gestures. Without real events, presidential spectacles would not be impressive; they would seem contrived, mere pseudoevents. However, some of the facts that emerge in the course of an event might discredit its presentation as spectacle. Therefore, a successful spectacle, such as Reagan's "liberation" of Grenada, must be more powerful than any of the facts on which it draws. Rising

above contradictory or disconfirming details, the spectacle must transfigure the more pliant facts and make them carriers of its most spectacular gestures.

Presidential spectacles are seldom pure spectacles in the sense that a wrestling match can be a pure spectacle. Although they may involve a good deal of advance planning and careful calculation of gestures, they cannot be completely scripted in advance. Unexpected and unpredictable events will occur during a presidential spectacle. If the White House is fortunate and skillful, it can capitalize on some of these events by using them to enhance the spectacle. If the White House is not so lucky or talented, such events can detract from, or even undermine, the spectacle,

Also unlike wrestling or other pure spectacles, the presidential variety often has more than one audience. Its primary purpose is to construct meanings for the American public. But it also can direct messages to those whom the White House has identified as its foes or the sources of its problems. In 1981, when Reagan fired the air traffic controllers of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers' Organization (PATCO) because they engaged in an illegal strike, he presented to the public the spectacle of a tough, determined president who would uphold the law and, unlike his predecessor, would not be pushed around by grasping interest groups. The spectacle also conveyed to organized labor that the White House knew how to feed popular suspicions of unions and could make things difficult for a labor movement that became too assertive.

As the PATCO firing shows, some presidential spectacles retain important policy dimensions. One could construct a continuum in which one end represents pure policy and the other pure spectacle. Toward the policy end one would find behind-the-scenes presidential actions, including quiet bargaining over domestic policies (such as Lyndon Johnson's lining up of Republican support for civil rights legislation] and covert actions in foreign affairs (the Nixon administration's use of the CIA to "destabilize" a Socialist regime in Chile). Toward the spectacle end would be presidential posturing at home (law and order and drugs have been handy topics) and dramatic foreign travel (from 1972 until the 1989 massacre in Tiananmen Square, China was a particular presidential favorite]. Most of the president's actions are a mix of policy and spectacle.

The Triumph of Spectacle; Ronald Reagan

The Reagan presidency was a triumph of spectacle. In the realm of substantive policy, it was marked by striking failures as well as significant successes. But even the most egregious of these failures—public exposure of the disastrous covert policy of selling arms to Iran and diverting some of the profits from the sales to the Nicaraguan contras—proved to be only a temporary blow to the political fortunes of the most spectacular president in decades. With the help of two heartwarming summits with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, Reagan recovered from the Iran-contra debacle and left office near the peak of his popularity. His presidency had, for the most part, floated above its flawed processes and failed policies, secure in the brilliant glow of its successful spectacles.

The basis of this success was the character of Ronald Reagan. His previous career in movies and television made him comfortable with and adept at spectacles; he moved easily from one kind to another, Reagan presented to his audience a multifaceted character, funny yet powerful, ordinary yet heroic, individual yet representative. He was a character richer even than Kennedy in mythic resonance.

Coming into office after a president who was widely perceived as weak, Reagan as a spectacle character projected potency. His administration featured a number of spectacles in which Reagan displayed his decisiveness, forcefulness and will to prevail. The image of masculine toughness was played up repeatedly. The American people saw a president who, even though in his seventies, rode horses and exercised vigorously, a president who liked to quote (and thereby identify himself with) movie tough guys such as Clint Eastwood and Sylvester Stallone. Yet Reagan's strength was nicely balanced by his amiability; his aggressiveness was rendered benign by his characteristic one-line quips. The warm grin took the edge off, removed any intimations of callousness or violence.

Quickly dubbed the Great Communicator, Reagan presented his character not through eloquent rhetoric but through storytelling. As Paul Erickson has demonstrated, Reagan liked to tell tales of "stock symbolic characters," figures whose values and behavior were "heavily colored with Reagan's ideological and emotional principles." Although the villains in these tales ranged from Washington bureaucrats to Marxist dictators, the heroes, whether ordinary people or inspirational figures like Knute Rockne, shared a belief in America. Examined more closely, these heroes turned out to resemble Reagan himself. Praising the heroism of Americans, Reagan, as representative American, praised himself.

The power of Reagan's character rested not only on its intrinsic attractiveness but also on its symbolic appeal. The spectacle specialists who worked for Reagan seized on the idea of making him an emblem for the American identity. In a June 1984 memo, White House aide Richard Darman sketched a campaign strategy that revolved around the president's mythic role: "Paint RR as the personification of all that is right with or heroized by America. Leave Mondale in a position where an attack on Reagan is tantamount to an attack on America's idealized image of itself." Having come into office at a time of considerable anxiety, with many Americans uncertain (according to polls and interviews) about the economy, their future, and the country itself, Reagan was an immensely reassuring character. He had not been marked by the shocks of recent U.S. history—and he denied that those shocks had meaning. He told Americans that the Vietnam War was noble rather than appalling, that Watergate was forgotten, that racial conflict was a thing of the distant past, and that the U.S. economy still offered the American dream to any aspiring individual. Reagan (the character) and America (the country) were presented in the spectacles of the Reagan presidency as timeless, above the decay of aging and the difficulties of history.

The Reagan team assumed special importance because Reagan ran what Lou Cannon has called "the delegated presidency." His team members carried on, as was well known to the public, most of the business of the executive branch; Reagan's own work habits were decidedly relaxed. Reagan's team did not contain many performers who reinforced the president's character, as did Kennedy's New Frontiersmen. But it featured several figures whose spectacle role was to compensate for Reagan's deficiencies or to carry on his mission with a greater air of vigor than the amiable president usually conveyed. The Reagan presidency was not free of disruptive characters— Alexander Haig's and James Watt's unattractive qualities and gestures called the president's spectacle into question. Unlike the Carter presidency, however, the Reagan administration removed these characters before too much damage had been done.

David Stockman was the most publicized supporting player in the first months of 1981. His image in the media was formidable. *Newsweek*, for example, marveled at how "his buzz-saw intellect has helped him stage a series of bravura performances before Congress," and acclaimed him "the Reagan Administration's boy wonder." There was spectacle appeal in the sight of the nation's youngest ever budget director serving as the right arm of the nation's oldest ever chief executive. More important, Stockman's appearance as the master of budget numbers compensated for a president who was notoriously uninterested in data. Stockman faded in spectacle value after his disastrous confession in the fall of 1981 that budget numbers had been doctored to show the results the administration wanted.

As Reagan's longtime aide, Edwin Meese III was one of the most prominent members of the president's team. Meese's principal spectacle role was not as a White House manager but as a cop. Even before he moved from the White House to the Justice Department, Meese became the voice and the symbol of the administration's tough stance on law-and-order issues. Although the president sometimes spoke about law and order, Meese took on the issue with a vigor that his more benign boss could not convey.

In foreign affairs, the Reagan administration developed an effective balance of images in the persons of Caspar Weinberger and George Shultz. Weinberger quickly became the administration's most visible cold war hard-liner. As the tireless spokesperson and unbudging champion of a soaring defense budget, he was a handy symbol for the Reagan military buildup. Nicholas Lemann noted that although "Weinberger's predecessor, Harold Brown, devoted himself almost completely to management, Weinberger ... operated more and more on the theatrical side."

His grim, hawklike visage was as much a reminder of the Soviet threat as the alarming paperback reports on the Russian behemoth that his Defense Department issued every year. Yet Weinberger could seem too alarming, feeding the fears of those who worried about Reagan's war-making proclivities.

Once Haig was pushed out as secretary of state, however, the Reagan administration found the ideal counterpoint to Weinberger in George Shultz. In contrast to both Haig and Weinberger, Shultz was a reassuring figure. He was portrayed in the media in soothing terms: low-key, quiet, conciliatory. In form and demeanor, he came across, in the words of *Time*, "as a good gray diplomat." Shultz was taken to be a voice of foreign policy moderation in an administration otherwise dominated by hard-liners. Actually, Shultz had better cold war credentials than Weinberger, having been a founding member of the hard-line Committee on the Present Danger in 1976. And he was more inclined to support the use of military force than was the secretary of defense, who reflected the caution of a Pentagon burned by the Vietnam experience. But Shultz's real views were less evident than his spectacle role as the gentle diplomat.

The Reagan presidency benefited not only from a spectacular main character and a useful team but also from talent and good fortune at enacting spectacle gestures. It is not difficult to find events during the Reagan years—the PATCO strike, the Geneva summit, the Libyan bombing, and others—whose significance primarily lay in their spectacle value. The most striking Reagan spectacle of all was the invasion of Grenada. Grenada deserves a close look, as it can serve as the archetypal presidential spectacle.

American forces invaded the island of Grenada in October 1983. Relations had become tense between the Reagan administration and the Marxist regime of Grenada's Maurice Bishop. When Bishop was overthrown and murdered by a clique of more militant Marxists, the Reagan administration began to consider military action. It was urged to invade by the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, composed of Grenada's island neighbors. And it had a pretext for action in the safety of the Americans—most of them medical students—on the island. Once the decision to invade was made, U.S. troops landed in force, evacuated most of the students, and seized the island after encountering unexpectedly stiff resistance. Reagan administration officials announced that in the course of securing the island U.S. forces had discovered large caches of military supplies and documents, indicating that Cuba planned to turn Grenada into a base for the export of revolution and terror.

Examination of the details that eventually came to light cast doubt on the Reagan administration's claims of a threat to the American students and a buildup of "sophisticated" Cuban weaponry in Grenada. Beyond such details, there was sheer incongruity between the importance bestowed on Grenada by the Reagan administration and the insignificance that the facts seemed to suggest. Grenada is a tiny island, with a population of 100,000, a land area of 133 square miles, and an economy whose exports totaled \$19 million in 1981. That U.S. troops could secure it was never in question; as Richard Gabriel has noted, "in terms of actual combat forces, the U.S. outnumbered the island's defenders approximately ten to one." Grenada's importance did not derive from the facts of the event or from the military, political, and economic implications of America's actions, but from its value as a spectacle.

What was the spectacle about? Its meaning was articulated by a triumphant President Reagan: "Our days of weakness are over. Our military forces are back on their feet and standing tall." Reagan, even more than the American military, came across in the media as "standing tall" in Grenada.

The spectacle actually began with the president on a weekend golfing vacation in Augusta, Georgia. His vacation was interrupted first by planning for an invasion of Grenada and then by news that the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut had been bombed. Once the news of the Grenada landings replaced the tragedy in Beirut on the front page and television screen, the golfing angle proved to be an apt beginning for a spectacle. It was used to dramatize the ability of a relaxed and laid-back president to rise to a grave challenge. And it supplied the White House with an unusual backdrop to present the president in charge, with members of his team by his side. As Francis X. Clines reported in the *New York Times*,

The White House offered the public some graphic tableaux, snapped by the White House photographer over the weekend, depicting the President at the center of various conferences. He is seen in bathrobe and slippers being briefed by Mr. Shultz and Mr. McFarlane, then out on the Augusta fairway, pausing at the wheel of his golf cart as he receives another dispatch. Mr. Shultz is getting the latest word in another, holding the special security phone with a golf glove on.

Pictures of the president as decision-maker were particularly effective because pictures from Grenada itself were lacking; the Reagan administration had barred the American press from covering the invasion. This move outraged the press but was extremely useful to the spectacle, which would not have been furthered by pictures of dead bodies or civilian casualties or by independent sources of information with which congressional critics could raise unpleasant questions.

The initial meaning of the Grenada spectacle was established by Reagan in his announcement of the invasion. The enemy was suitably evil: "a brutal group of leftist thugs." American objectives were purely moral—to protect the lives of innocent people on the island, namely American medical students, and to restore democracy to the people of Grenada. And the actions taken were unmistakably forceful: "The United States had no choice but to act strongly and decisively."

But the spectacle of Grenada soon expanded beyond this initial definition. The evacuation of the medical students provided one of those unanticipated occurrences that heighten the power of spectacle: When several of the students kissed the airport tarmac to express their relief and joy at returning to American soil, the resulting pictures on television and in the newspapers were better than anything the administration could have orchestrated. They provided the spectacle with historical as well as emotional resonance. Here was a second hostage crisis—but where Carter had been helpless to release captive Americans, Reagan had swiftly come to the rescue.

Rescue of the students quickly took second place, however, to a new theme: the claim that U.S. forces had uncovered and uprooted a hidden Soviet-Cuban base for adventurism and terrorism. In his nationally televised address, Reagan did not ignore the Iran analogy: "The nightmare of our hostages in Iran must never be repeated." But he stressed the greater drama of defeating a sinister Communist plot. "Grenada, we were told, was a friendly island paradise for tourism. Well, it wasn't. It was a Soviet-Cuban colony being readied as a major military bastion to export terror and undermine democracy. We got there just in time." Grenada was turning out to be an even better spectacle for Reagan: He had rescued not only the students but the people of all the Americas as well.

As the spectacle expanded and grew more heroic, public approval increased. The president's standing in the polls went up. *Time* reported that "a post-invasion poll taken by the *Washington Post* and ABC News showed that 63 percent of Americans approve the way Reagan is handling the presidency, the highest level in two years, and attributed his gain largely to the Grenada intervention." Congressional critics, although skeptical of many of the claims made by the administration, began to stifle their doubts and chime in with endorsements in accordance with the polls. An unnamed White House aide, quoted in *Newsweek*, drew the obvious lesson: "You can scream and shout and gnash your teeth all you want, but the folks out there like it. It was done right and done with dispatch."

In its final gestures, the Grenada spectacle commemorated itself. Reagan invited the medical students to the White House, and, predictably, basked in their praise and cheering. The Pentagon contributed its symbolic share, awarding some eight thousand medals for the Grenada operation—more than the number of American troops that set foot on the island. In actuality, Gabriel has shown, "the operation was marred by a number of military failures." Yet these were obscured by the triumphant appearances of the spectacle.

That the spectacle of Grenada was more potent and would prove more lasting in its effects than any discontinuing facts was observed at the time by Anthony Lewis. Reagan "knew the facts would come out eventually," wrote Lewis. "But if that day could be postponed, it might make a great political difference. People would be left with their first impression that this was a decisive President fighting communism." Grenada became for most Americans a highlight of Reagan's first

term. Insignificant in military or diplomatic terms, as spectacle it was one of the most successful acts of the Reagan presidency.

A Schizoid Spectacle: George H. W. Bush

Time magazine accorded George Herbert Walker Bush a unique honor: it named him its "Man of the Year" for 1990. There were really two President Bushes, the magazine explained, a strong and visionary leader in international affairs and a fumbling and directionless executive at home. The split in Bush's presidency that *Time* highlighted was as evident in the realm of spectacle as in the realm of policy. The foreign affairs spectacle of the first Bush presidency featured a masterful leader, a powerhouse team, and thrilling gestures. The domestic spectacle featured a confused leader, a colorless team, and gestures of remarkable ineptitude. Together, they created a schizoid spectacle.

Critics could find much to fault in the substance of Bush's foreign policy, but as spectacle, his foreign policy leadership was a great triumph. The main character in the Bush administration's foreign policy spectacle was experienced, confident, decisively in charge. Bush seemed bred to foreign policy stewardship in a patrician tradition dating back to Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Stimson. He came across to the public as the master diplomat, successfully cajoling and persuading other world leaders through well-publicized telephone calls; in truth, he moved easily among international elites, obviously in his element. He was an even more triumphant spectacle character when featured in winning tableaux as commander in chief of Operation Desert Storm.

The foreign policy team made a superb contribution to the global side of the Bush spectacle. Not since the administration of Richard Nixon had a president's skill at diplomacy been so effectively magnified by his top civilian advisers; not since World War II had a commander in chief been blessed with such popular military subordinates. James Baker, Bush's one-time Houston neighbor and long-time political manager, was both courtly and canny as secretary of state. Richard Cheney was a cool, cerebral secretary of defense, with an air of mastery reminiscent of Robert McNamara. Colin Powell, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, radiated dignity and authority as the highest-ranking African American in the history of the military and was almost universally admired. Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf was a feisty commander for Desert Storm—an appealing emblem for a military finally restored to glorious health after two decades of licking its Vietnam wounds.

More than anything else, military gestures produced exciting drama in the Bush foreign affairs spectacle. Panama was the prelude to the Persian Gulf War. It featured, in Manuel Noriega, a doubly immoral adversary—a drug smuggler as well as a dictator. The U.S. military operation to depose Noriega was swift and efficient, and a victorious outcome was assured once the Panamanian strongman was seized and transported to the United States to face drug-trafficking charges.

The Gulf War victory dwarfed Panama, not only as significant policy accomplishment but also as spectacle. Bush depicted Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein as a second Hitler, a figure whose immense record of evil made Noriega look like a small-time thug. To be sure, Operation Desert Storm lacked the satisfying climax of destroying the evil adversary, but as a military display, it provided Americans with numerous scenes to cheer. The indisputable favorites were Defense Department videos of laser-guided bombs homing in on Iraqi targets with pinpoint accuracy. In the cinematic terms that President Reagan had made popular, Desert Storm was not the cavalry rescue of Grenada or the capture of the pirate captain in Panama; it was high-tech epic, the return of the American Jedi.

Bush's foreign policy spectacle was successful—perhaps too successful. Once the Soviet Union crumbled and Iraq was militarily humiliated, foreign policy seemed much less relevant to most Americans. According to Walter Dean Burnham, "In 1992 foreign policy issues and public concerns about them played the smallest role in any American presidential election since 1936." As Americans began to focus almost exclusively on the home front, they witnessed a domestic Bush spectacle utterly unlike the foreign affairs version.

The domestic Bush was an uncertain, awkward character, especially in the electorally decisive field of economic policy. Inheriting what he had once derided as Reagan's "voodoo economics," Bush presided over an economic crisis when the policy's magic failed. In the face of this crisis, which was evident by the second year of his administration, Bush drifted, seemingly without a clue as to how to restore the economy to health. The only economic prescription he ever put forward with any conviction was a cut in the capital gains tax rate that would have most directly benefited wealthy investors. Comfortable dealing with the problems that beset international elites, Bush seemed ill at ease with the economic problems plaguing ordinary Americans.

Bush's economic team only magnified his weaknesses. His secretary of the treasury Nicholas Brady, and chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, Michael Boskin, were pale, dim figures who barely registered in the public's consciousness. To the extent that anyone did notice them, they seemed to epitomize inaction. A more visible economic team member was the budget director, Richard Darman. But he was portrayed in the media as arrogant and abrasive, epitomizing the antagonism between the Bush White House and Capitol Hill that resulted in domestic policy gridlock.

It was through a series of small gestures, some intended and others inadvertent, that Bush's disengagement from the economic difficulties of ordinary people was most dramatically demonstrated. Touring a grocery store, the president expressed amazement at the electronic scanners that read prices. To those who stood by every week as these scanners recorded their food purchases, here was a president unfamiliar with how families struggled to pay their grocery bills. Visiting a suburban mall on the day after Thanksgiving (the busiest shopping day of the year) in 1991, Bush brought along reporters who publicized his purchases: athletic socks for himself, Christmas presents for his family. Bush's shopping expedition seemed designed to convey the message that Americans could lift themselves out of recession just by taking a few more trips to the local mall. The most telling gesture of disengagement came early in 1992 at a campaign stop in New Hampshire, when Bush blurted out a stage cue from one of his speechwriters: "Message: I care." The message that came through, instead, was that the president had to be prompted to commiserate with the economic woes of the American people. Real economic fears and pains denied Bush reelection in 1992. But the fears and pains were made worse by the ineptitude of his domestic spectacle. A president who lacked not only a credible economic plan but also credible gestures that would communicate concern and effort to restore economic health went down to a landslide defeat, with 63 percent of the electorate voting against him. The schizoid spectacle of George Bush, triumphant in its foreign policy performance, disastrous in its domestic policy performance, was over.

A Postmodern Spectacle: Bill Clinton

George Bush had two disparate spectacles; Bill Clinton had many. Clinton's was a postmodern spectacle. A postmodern spectacle, heretofore more familiar in popular culture than in presidential politics, features fleeting images and fractured continuity, surfaces without depths, personae rather than personalities. Characters in a postmodern spectacle do not succeed by capturing the lasting admiration or trust of their audience but by personifying artfully the changing fashions that fascinate it.

Depictions of Clinton by close observers in the media tended to agree on his shape-shifting presidential performance but to differ as to whether it should evoke moral indignation or neutral evaluation. One constantly caustic Clinton-watcher, *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, has called the president "the man of a thousand faces." Other commentators prefer cool postmodern terms such as *makeover* and *reinvention*, the same words used to describe the diva of contemporary pop culture, Madonna.

Clinton's presidency had important elements of constancy, including the successful economic course first charted in 1993 and the president's underlying attachment to government as a potentially positive force in society. And the frequent changes during Clinton's two terms owed as much to the formidable political constraints he faced as to the opportunities for spectacle he seized.

Moreover, historical precedents for Clinton's "mongrel politics" may be found in the administrations of presidents such as Woodrow Wilson and Richard Nixon, who also were accused of opportunistic borrowings from ideological adversaries in eras when the opposition party had established the reigning terms of political discourse. Nonetheless, Clinton's repeated redefinitions of himself and his presidency made these predecessors seem almost static by comparison. Sometimes awkwardly, sometimes nimbly, Clinton pirouetted across the presidential stage like no one before him.

Clinton's first two years in power were largely a failure of spectacle. The promising populist intimacy of the 1992 campaign quickly gave way to a spectacle of Washington elitism, of social life among the rich and famous (the infamous \$200 haircut by a Beverly Hills stylist) and politics among the entrenched and arrogant (the cozy alliance with the Democratic congressional leadership). The new president seemed simultaneously immature (the undisciplined decision delayer aided by a youthful and inexperienced White House staff) and old-fashioned (the big-government liberal with his bureaucratic scheme to reform the health care system). The crushing rebukes that Clinton suffered in 1994—the failure of his health care plan even to reach the floor of either house of Congress and the Republican takeover of both houses in the midterm elections—showed how little he had impressed his audience. Yet a postmodern irony was at work for Clinton, for his defeats freed him. Not having to implement a large-scale health care plan, Clinton was able to dance away from the liberal label. Not having to link himself with his party's congressional leadership in a bid for legislative achievement, he was able to shift his policy stances opportunely to capitalize on the weaknesses of the new Republican agenda.

In his first two years Clinton lacked an important ingredient for many presidential spectacles: a dramatic foil. Bush had used Manuel Noriega and Saddam Hussein, but the post-cold war world was too uninteresting to most Americans to supply foreign leaders ripe for demonization. The hidden blessing of the 1994 elections for Clinton was that they provided him with a domestic foil of suitably dramatic proportions: Newt Gingrich. Gingrich was often compared to Clinton—and the comparison worked mostly in Clinton's favor. Shedding the taint of liberalism, Clinton pronounced himself a nonideological centrist saving the country from Gingrich's conservative extremism. Before, Clinton had talked and shown off too much in public; now, in comparison to the grandiose garrulousness of Gingrich, he seemed almost reticent—and certainly more mature. Attacked as too soft in his first two years, Clinton could turn the image of compassion into a strength by attacking a foil who proposed to reduce spending for seniors on Medicare and Medicaid and to place the children of welfare mothers in orphanages. Lampooned as spineless in his first two years, Clinton could display his backbone in winning the budget showdown with the Republicans in the winter of 1995-1996.

In a postmodern spectacle, a president can try on a variety of styles without being committed to any one of them. As the 1996 election season commenced (and as Gingrich fled the spotlight after his budget defeat), Clinton executed another nimble pirouette by emulating the patron saint of modern Republicans, Ronald Reagan. Clinton's advisers had him watch Reagan videotapes to study "the Gipper's bearing, his aura of command." His campaign team found a model for 1996 in the 1984 Reagan theme of "Morning in America," in which a sunny president capitalized on peace and prosperity while floating serenely above divisive issues. Like Reagan in 1984, Clinton presented himself in 1996 as the benevolent manager of economic growth, the patriotic commander in chief comfortable with military power, and the good father devoted to family values. Unlike Reagan, he added the images of the good son protecting seniors and the good steward protecting the environment. Clinton's postmodern appropriation of Reagan imagery helped to block the Republicans from achieving their goal of a unified party government fulfilling Reagan's ideological dreams.

Clinton's postmodern spectacle shaped public impressions of his team. With a man of uncertain character in the White House, strong women in the cabinet draw special attention: Attorney General Janet Reno at the outset of his first term, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright at the outset of his second. But no members of Clinton's cabinet or staff have played as important supporting roles in his spectacle as his wife, Hillary, and his vice president, Al Gore. Hillary

Rodham Clinton appears as an updated, postfeminist version of Eleanor Roosevelt, a principled liberal goad pressing against her husband's pragmatic instincts. Like Eleanor, she is a hero to the liberal Democratic faithful and a despised symbol of radicalism to conservative Republican foes. Al Gore's spectacle role was to be the stable and stolid sidekick to the quicksilver president. Even his much-satirized reputation as boring is reassuring when counterpoised to a president who appeared all too eager to charm and seduce his audience.

A postmodern spectacle is best crafted by postmodern spectacle specialists. When Clinton's presidential image began taking a beating, he turned for help to image makers who previously had worked for Republicans but who were as ideologically unanchored as he was. In 1993 Clinton responded to plunging polls by hiring David Gergen, the White House communications chief during Ronald Reagan's first term. But the amiable Gergen could not reposition Clinton as a centrist nearly so well as Dick Morris, Clinton's image consultant after the 1994 electoral debacle. Morris had worked before for Clinton but also for conservative Republicans such as Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott. As a *Newsweek* story described him, Morris "was a classic mercenary—demonic, brilliant, principle-free." It was Morris's insight, as much as Clinton's, that rhetoric and gesture, supported by the power of the veto, could turn a seemingly moribund presidency after 1994 into a triumphant one in 1996.

The remarkable prosperity of Clinton's second term purchased an unusual stretch of calm (some called it lethargy) for his administration— until the Monica Lewinsky storm threatened to wreck it early in 1998. Numerous Americans of all political persuasions were appalled by Clinton's sexual escapades and dishonest explanations in the Lewinsky affair. But for Clinton-haters on the right, long infuriated by the successful spectacles of a character who symbolized (for them) the 1960s culture they despised, the Lewinsky scandal produced a thrill of self-confirmation: See, they proclaimed, his soul *is* the moral wasteland we always claimed it to be. The fact that the majority of Americans did not concur with conservative Republicans that Clinton's moral failures necessitated his ouster from the presidency only made his impeachment and conviction more urgent for the right. If strong support for Clinton in the polls indicated that the public was following him down the path toward moral hollowness, removing him became a crusade for the nation's soul, an exorcism of moral rot jeopardizing the meaning of the Republic.

But the moralistic fulminations of the right were no match for the power of spectacle. It was not spectacle alone that saved the Clinton presidency. Clinton was protected by prosperity and by Americans' preference for his centrist policies over the conservative alternatives. He was aided, too, by the inclination of most Americans to draw a line between public rectitude and private freedom. Nonetheless, Clinton's eventual acquittal by the Senate owed much to spectacle. To be sure, his own spectacle performance in the Year of Lewinsky was hardly his best. Perhaps no role so little suited Clinton as repentant sinner. But he was blessed by even worse performances from his adversaries. Just as Newt Gingrich was necessary to resuscitate Clinton from the political disaster of 1994, so was Kenneth Starr essential to his rescue from the personal disaster of 1998. Starr's self-righteous moralism disturbed most Americans more than Clinton's self-serving narcissism.

In the end, the shallowness of the postmodern spectacle that had characterized the Clinton presidency from the start supplied an ironic benefit in the Lewinsky scandal. Had Clinton possessed a stable, respected character, revelations of secret behavior that violated that character might have startled the public and shrunk its approval of his performance in office. His standing in the polls might have plummeted, as President Reagan's did after the disclosure that his administration was selling arms to terrorists. But a majority of Americans had long believed, according to the polls, that Clinton was not very honest or trustworthy, so his misbehavior in the Lewinsky affair came as less of a shock, and was quickly diluted by reminders of his administration's popular achievements and agenda. Postmodern spectacle is not about character, at least not in a traditional sense; it is about delivering what the audience desires at the moment. Personality, political talent, and a keen instinct for survival made Bill Clinton the master of postmodern spectacle.

From Recycled Spectacle to War on Terrorism: George W. Bush

After reaching the White House through one of the closest and most intensely disputed elections in the history of the presidency, George W. Bush began his administration with a recycled spectacle. Promising the novelty of a "compassionate conservatism" during the campaign, the Bush administration's original agenda mainly followed the familiar priorities of the Republican right. But its conservatism ran deeper than its policy prescriptions. In its characters, its styles, its gestures, the Bush administration was determined to reach back past the postmodern spectacle of Bill Clinton and restore the faded glories of contemporary conservatism by recycling them.

One fund of recycled images and themes upon which Bush drew was the Reagan style spectacle. As a presidential character, Bush enjoyed many affinities with Reagan. Bush presented himself as a Reagan-style nonpolitician whose sunny optimism and embracing bonhomie would brighten a harsh and demoralizing political environment. His principal prescriptions for the nation also recycled Reaganesque themes and gestures. Like Reagan, Bush rapidly pushed through Congress a massive tax cut that favored the wealthy in the guise of an economic stimulus, using "fuzzy math" to promise Americans the pleasure of prosperity without the pain of federal deficits. Like Reagan, Bush promoted a national missile defense that would use cutting edge (and still nonexistent) technology to restore the ancient dream of an innocent America invulnerable to the violent quarrels of the world. Even the Bush administration's most politically costly stance in its early months—presidential decisions favoring private interests over environmental protection—was couched in the Reagan claim of protecting the pocketbooks of ordinary citizens. Revising a Clinton rule that would mandate higher efficiency for central air conditioners, Bush's secretary of energy, Spencer Abraham, indicated that his goal was to save low-income consumers from having to pay more to cool their homes or trailers.

Recycled images and themes from his father's administration were equally evident in the early months of Bush's presidency. They were especially useful as emblems of the "compassionate" side of the new chief executive. Like his father, "W" trumpeted his conciliatory stance toward congressional opponents. Like his father, W set out to be an "education president." The recycling of paternal gestures also was apparent in his meetings with representatives of the groups that had opposed his election most strongly. Just as the father had met with Jesse Jackson after winning the White House, the son invited the Congressional Black Caucus. Neither Bush expected to win over African American voters through these gestures. Instead, each hoped to signal to moderate white voters that they were "kinder, gentler" conservatives who exuded tolerance and good will.

The new Bush administration also reached even farther back in time in its bid to dramatize its repudiation of Clinton's postmodern character and style. Two of the new administration's most important figures—Vice President Richard Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld—were prominent alumni of the Ford administration; Cheney and Rumsfeld represented Bush's "That 70s Show," although they no longer sported the sideburns and wide lapels of Ford's day. Leaping back before the hated 1960s, the Bush administration also evoked an even earlier time, as Cheney, echoing the 1950s theme of "our friend, the atom," praised nuclear energy as "the cleanest method of power generation we know." Maureen Dowd, the most savage yet perceptive critic of Clinton's postmodern character, has been no less troubled by the "retro" nature of the Bush spectacle. After watching Bush speak at his alma mater, Yale, Dowd wrote that the president "seemed like a throwback" and described him as "Eisenhower with hair."

Bush's presidential team draws upon Republican characters and themes of the past to provide a reassuringly mature, veteran cast in contrast to the youthful self-indulgence associated with the postmodern Clinton. It also drains some of the political danger out of the widespread doubts about Bush's lack of preparation and seriousness in the presidency. Initially, the most visible team member was the vice president, who played the role of the wise and experienced father to the reformed playboy son, even though Cheney is only five years older than Bush. But Cheney's time in the spotlight was cut short when jokes and cartoons proliferated about him being the real White House decision-maker. Once Cheney declined in visibility (although not in influence), various

members of the Bush cabinet emerged to signal compassion or conservatism as the situation seemed to require. On the compassionate end of the spectrum, the most interesting figure was Secretary of State Colin Powell, conveying the warm image of moderation and multilateralism otherwise absent from the administration's approach to foreign affairs. On the conservative end, the most striking figure was Attorney General John Ashcroft, conveying the dour image of the Christian right's culture wars. The fundamental conservatism of the Bush spectacle was even evident in the first lady. As a demure traditional wife who eschews a political role, Laura Bush quietly renounces the feminist activism of Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Perhaps the most revealing spectacle gesture in the early months of the Bush presidency was the speech on stem-cell research on August 9, 2001. Speaking from his Texas ranch in his first televised address to the American public since his inauguration, Bush ended weeks of fevered media speculation by announcing that he would permit federal tax dollars to be used for research on existing stem-cell lines but not for research on lines established after August 9. Balancing the public's hope for miracle cures to an array of severe illnesses with the conservatives' insistence on preserving the life of embryos, Bush's decision was meant to epitomize compassionate conservatism. Yet the heart of the spectacle lay in the presentation of his decision more than in its substance. Reminiscent of Reagan at the launch of the Grenada spectacle, Bush's speech countered criticisms of a disengaged presidency by presenting a highly serious chief executive sacrificing his vacation time to make the gravest of decisions. A president under fire in the media as an intellectual lightweight who was the captive of his advisers was presented (by his advisers) as the real decision-maker, confronting a policy dilemma worthy of a moral philosopher. To make sure that the public grasped the gesture, the day after the speech, presidential communication director Karen Hughes provided the press with a detailed briefing on how Bush had wrestled with the decision. She portrayed the president, in the words of the *New York Times*, as "a soul-searching, intellectually curious leader."

Although the stem-cell speech was politically effective, by late summer of Bush's first year in office the recycled spectacle was wearing a bit thin. Polls revealed a downward drift in public approval, and media commentary suggested a policy drift after the enactment of the Bush tax program. In early August, word came from the White House that the fall would witness a new Bush focus on "values." Just as Bill Clinton, following the advice of Dick Morris, had turned to the rhetoric and gestures of values to overcome public unhappiness about his liberalism, so Bush was being urged to stress values to change the subject from his administration's increasingly unpopular conservatism. By early September, however, a sharp downturn in economic indicators had overshadowed the values campaign and redirected the Bush team's attention to the economy. On September 9, the *New York Times* reported that "as White House officials move to refocus President Bush's energies on the precarious economy, they are working to present him as a more commanding leader in what may be the most treacherous stretch of his first year in the White House."

As the Bush White House scrambled to adjust to changing political issues and fashions, it contemplated the same kind of reinventions that it had denounced in its postmodern predecessor. But the reinvention it was actually to undergo was completely unscripted. The terrorist attacks of September 11 and their aftermath hurled the Bush presidency into a crisis for which none of its previous images and gestures seemed particularly appropriate.

The terrorists who piloted hijacked airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon meant to kill thousands of Americans, but they also had a twisted spectacle of their own in mind by striking at symbols of American capitalism and military might. In the person of Osama bin Laden, the attack on America has featured a demonic villain far more menacing than the Manuel Noriega or Saddam Hussein who served as foils for the first Bush presidency. No one has accused the younger Bush of exaggerating when he labeled bin Laden "the evil one." But if the ingredients for a drama of extraordinary proportions were readily available, the horror of September 11 seemed too elemental for the contrivances characteristic of spectacle. The spectacle with which the Bush presidency commenced had recycled conservative themes from the past five decades to portray him as the opposite of a narcissistic Clinton presiding over a self-indulgent society. The war on

terrorism that began on September 11 offered Bush the chance to be the opposite of Clinton in a more novel and profound sense.

In the first weeks after the terrorist attacks, Bush at times seemed to leave behind the gestures of recycled spectacle and rise to this extraordinary occasion. His impressive speech to Congress on September 20 struck a delicate balance between a forceful response to terrorism, a compassionate response to tragedy, and a teaching of tolerance toward followers of the Islamic faith. Many observers were impressed by Bush's demeanor during the speech. Less stiff and more articulate than in prior national addresses, Bush appeared animated by the gravity of the crisis. His associates began to describe a transformation of the heretofore laid-back president. As Frank Bruni wrote in the *New York Times*, one Bush friend reported that Bush "clearly feels he has encountered his reason for being, a conviction informed and shaped by the president's own strain of Christianity." Of course, in an age of spectacle any characterization of the president from his aides and associates has been carefully "spun" for public consumption.

Although at times after September 11 Bush appeared a changed president, the habits of spectacle are too ingrained in the modern White House to allow the abandonment of its characteristic contrivances. Bush often turned the war on terror into a personal duel with bin Laden, playing the hero locked in mortal combat with the avatar of evil. Evoking Ronald Reagan doing his best Clint Eastwood imitation (and employing the title of a classic TV western starring Steve McQueen), Bush pledged that bin Laden would be hunted down: "There's an old poster out West, as I recall, that said 'Wanted: Dead or Alive.'" White House spectacle specialists, such as Karen Hughes, Ari Fleischer, and Karl Rove, worked furiously to stifle criticisms of their boss, using media-management techniques, as Dowd observed, to "spoon-feed the press the image of an In-Charge, Focused, Resolute President." At first, Bush's war on terrorism seemed to be fought most effectively on the terrain of television: the White House prevailed on the networks to edit bin Laden's videotapes before showing them, while arranging for the popular "America's Most Wanted" show to feature the administration's hunt for his accomplices.

With the unexpectedly swift success of the military campaign in Afghanistan, the delicate balance in Bush's initial response to September 11 gave way to a consistently martial tone. Paced by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, the Bush administration began to feature a spectacle of muscular globalism. In his State of the Union address in January 2002, the commander in chief previewed an expansion of the war on terror to combat "an axis of evil," composed of North Korea, Iran, and especially Iraq. Bush's dramatic phrase, which made headlines around the world, rhetorically called U.S. enemies on World War II and the cold war to amplify the peril from adversaries in the Middle East and Asia. In its emphasis on Iraq, it gestured toward the spectacular completion by the son of the mission in which the father had sadly fallen short. But as Bush looked to exemplary global crusades of the past to build support for an escalation of his own war on terror, messy modern realities, especially in the Middle East, began to complicate his strategy. As of this writing in April 2002, they threaten to call into question the crusading imagery of good versus evil that has become the central spectacle of the Bush presidency.

Conclusion

It is tempting to blame the growth of spectacle on individual presidents, their calculating advisers, and compliant journalists. It is more accurate, however, to attribute the growth of spectacle to larger structural forces: the extreme personalization of the modern presidency, the excessive expectations of the president that most Americans possess, and the voluminous media coverage that fixes on presidents and treats American politics largely as a report of their adventures. Indeed, presidential spectacles can be linked to a culture of consumption in which spectacle is the predominant form that relates the few to the many.

Spectacle, then, is more a structural feature of the contemporary presidency than a strategy of deception adopted by particular presidents. In running for the presidency, then carrying out its tasks, any contemporary chief executive is likely to turn to spectacle. Spectacle has become institutionalized, as specialists in the White House routinely devise performances for a vast press

corps that is eager to report every colorful detail. Spectacle is expected by the public as the most visible manifestation of presidential leadership. A president who deliberately eschewed its possibilities would probably encounter the same kind of difficulties as a president who tried to lead by spectacle and failed.

Still, the rise of spectacle in the presidency remains a disturbing development. It is harmful to presidents, promoting gesture over accomplishment and appearance over fact. It is even more harmful to the public, since it obfuscates presidential activity, undermines executive accountability, and encourages passivity on the part of citizens. The presentation of leadership as spectacle has little in common with the kind of leadership that American democratic values imply.