

# *Questions in Politics*

The Journal of the Georgia Political Science Association  
Volume III

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## **Two Matters of Choice in the Twenty-first Century: George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and the Legacy of Richard Neustadt<sup>1</sup>**

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*Debate over the continuing relevance of Neustadt's Presidential Power has been driven largely by the evolution of the presidency and the surrounding political environment. It is proper, then, to consider its continued applicability by evaluating the actions of contemporary presidents. While persuasion forms the basis for presidential power for Neustadt, the underlying key to that power lies in the choices presidents make and whether they are made with an eye toward future power. The two cases here involve President George W. Bush and the effects of his prior staffing choices in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and President Barack Obama and the effects of his early policy promotion choices in the aftermath of the 2010 elections. Neither Bush nor Obama acted with their power stakes clearly in mind. They suffered in terms of their subsequent job approval, legislative record, and ultimately in their party's fates in the 2006 and 2010 midterm elections, respectively. Choices still matter. That conclusion still applies to presidents and can help those in the future avoid the failures seen here.*

**I**n the decades since the initial publication of Richard Neustadt's *Presidential Power*, presidential scholars have debated its continuing relevance. This debate is driven largely by the evolution of the presidency and the surrounding political environment. Neustadt's well-known thesis is that the true power of the presidency does not lie with command, but with persuasion

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<sup>1</sup> Originally presented at the 2015 annual meeting of the Georgia Political Science Association, Savannah, Georgia, November 12–14, 2015. I would like to thank Ms. Risa Momota, a student in my Spring 2015 Presidency class, for her assistance in researching the two case studies in this project.

(Neustadt 1990). Neustadt based the applicability of his writings on what he termed “midcentury” conditions—that is, of course, mid-*twentieth* century conditions. My concern is whether or not his work is still viable today, at a time that is closer to the mid-*twenty-first* century than it is to the mid-*twentieth* century. There are certainly some notable similarities between the two periods. In other words, “midcentury” conditions may have not evolved as substantially as we may fear. In fact, they have not evolved as much as even Neustadt himself thought (1990). While conditions have surely evolved somewhat, there is no reason to believe that this evolution invalidates his signature work (Cavalli 2013).

It is proper, then, to consider the continued applicability of Neustadt. I propose to evaluate the actions of contemporary presidents, using the very same case study method used by Neustadt in *Presidential Power*. I do so to test the validity of this notion that Neustadt is still relevant. While persuasion is true presidential power to Neustadt, the key *source* of that power lies in the choices presidents make and whether they make those choices with an eye toward their future power.

After a brief refresher on Neustadt, I will examine two case studies on presidential choices and their consequences for presidential power. Note that for the purposes of comparison, the case studies are structured in much the same way that Neustadt structured his. That is, his case studies routinely examined dramatic *failures*—high-profile cases where presidents’ actions did *not* enhance their power. Neustadt points this out in the preface to his first edition:

[E]very major illustration in this book is in some sense the story of a failure; without exception every case turns on dramatic incidents. (Neustadt 1990, xxi–xxii).

He goes on to justify this method by saying:

This does not mean that recent Presidents knew no successes, or that presidential business is invariably dramatic. It merely means that negative examples tend to be the most illuminating, and dramatic ones tend to be best remembered and recorded. (Neustadt 1990, xxii)

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, in a reevaluation of Neustadt’s work, both George Edwards and Lyn Ragsdale appear to support this choice of method. Edwards (2000) points out that “Neustadt’s framework highlights the president’s operational problem of self-help in thinking about influence strategically” (9; emphasis in original), and later points to Neustadt’s own words that “‘powers’ are no guarantee of power” (Neustadt 1990, 10). Ragsdale (2000) encapsulates Neustadt’s rationale this way: “the best way to study the office is to study its occupant and the best way to study the occupant is to rely on a series

of case studies examining the president's use of personal power" (33). Why? She suggests it is because presidential power is both "imperfect" and "quite personal" (33). In addition, she judges the focus on dramatic failures to be useful "in order to alert presidents that this could happen to them" (37).

The two cases that follow involve:

1. President George W. Bush and the effects of his choices regarding staffing—specifically staffing of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005–2006.
2. President Barack Obama and the effects of his choices regarding policy promotion (or more specifically, the lack of a broad promotion strategy) at the start of his administration on the fate of his party and their power—and thus his power—in the wake of the 2010 midterm elections.

### **A Brief Review of Neustadt**

It is perhaps the most well-known phrase in presidential studies: "Presidential power is the power to persuade" (Neustadt 1990, 11). This is the thesis of Neustadt's work. While it seems almost pedantic today, it amounts to a revolutionary break from prior studies that focused almost exclusively on the president's constitutional, institutional, and legal powers (e.g., see Corwin [1940] and Rossiter [1956]). To Neustadt, this power—equivalent to bargaining power—relies on the status and authority accorded both to presidents and to those with whom they must engage. Power in this regard is enhanced by a president's professional reputation and public prestige (Neustadt 1990)—and these (reputation and prestige) come down to the choices that presidents make:

Professional reputation is affected by the president's prior *choices* (e.g., to act or not act, to tolerate or not tolerate insubordination or inactivity, to steadily pursue a course of action or to change direction). Public prestige is affected both by how these prior choices are reflected in the media and in public opinion polls, and by how well the president can act as a teacher to a habitually inattentive public. (Cavalli 2013, 95–96)

Neustadt emphasizes this idea throughout *Presidential Power*. For example, he says that presidents guard their "power prospects in the course of making choices" (Neustadt 1990, 47). The key is to make those choices with an eye toward power.

In a passage from the heart of his book that is quite relevant to our current exploration, Neustadt notes that:

If Presidents could count upon past choices to enhance their current influence ... persuasion would pose fewer difficulties than it does. But Presidents can count on no such thing. Depending on the circumstances, prior choices can be as embarrassing as they were helpful. (Neustadt 1990, 48)

A few paragraphs later, he expands on this:

But adequate or not, a President's own choices are the only means in his own hands of guarding his own prospects for effective influence. He can draw power from continuing relationships in the degree that he can capitalize upon the needs of others for the Presidency's status and authority. He helps himself to do so, though, by nothing save ability to recognize the preconditions and the chance advantages and to proceed accordingly in the course of the choice making that comes his way. To ask how he can guard prospective influence is thus to raise a further question: What helps him guard his power stakes in his own acts of choice? (Neustadt 1990, 49)

Later on, he returns to the singular importance choice:

But whether his choice making actually is usable and whether it proves useful or does not, the fact remains that for the human being in the White House choices are the only means in his own hands by which to shield his sources of real power, prestige no less than the rest. (Neustadt 1990, 90)

Neustadt continued to emphasize the importance of presidential choice well beyond the publication of *Presidential Power*. In fact, right down to his last published writings, he appeared to emphasize presidential choice in considering the special challenges facing presidents Clinton and (George W.) Bush (Neustadt 2004).

So, the question to address in the following case studies is whether or not our most recent presidents, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, truly considered how their choices might contribute to their power and influence.

### **Case Studies**

As noted in the introduction, the two case studies that follow are designed to explore the importance of presidential choices. Additionally, they are constructed in a manner similar to those found in *Presidential Power*. In Chapter 6 of that book, titled "Two Matters of Choice," Neustadt explores examples of choices

made by Presidents Eisenhower and Truman that did *not* serve their power interests. That is, the cases were “suggestive less of mastery than failure” (Neustadt 1990, 24). As with that chapter, the cases in this article will show us “how *not* to extract power out of choice” in that they detail how two presidents “failed to make their choices serve their influence” (Neustadt 1990, 124). And so,

[i]f choices are a President’s own means to guard his power, he is likelier to hurt than to help himself *unless he knows what power is and sees its shape in what he does. Before power can be served, it must be seen.* (Neustadt 1990, 101; emphasis added)

So I will move to our two matters of choice in the twenty-first century with the final bit of advice from *Presidential Power* that

nobody and nothing helps a President to see [his power stakes] save as he helps himself; that neither issues nor advisers as they reach him are a substitute for sensitivity to power on his part. (Neustadt 1990, 102)

This was sage advice in the mid-twentieth century, and it remains so in the early twenty-first century.

### **Case Study I: George W. Bush, FEMA, and Hurricane Katrina**

One of the worst natural disasters in U.S. history struck the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005. Hurricane Katrina was one of the strongest storms of the last century, and it remains the costliest storm in U.S. history. As of August 2006, over 1,800 lives were lost and damages exceeded \$125 billion (Graumann et al. 2006). In the wake of the disaster, there was significant criticism of the response—with a particular focus on the federal government because of the sheer size of the event (e.g., see Lipton 2006). Appearing before a Senate panel the following February, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff described the incident as “one of the most difficult and traumatic experiences of my life” (Lipton 2006, para. 6). During his appearance, he acknowledged “many lapses” in the government’s response.

The focus of those “lapses” fell squarely on the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) director, Michael Brown. In the Senate hearing, Secretary Chertoff noted that the day before the storm hit, Brown suggested “that supplies and personnel were positioned to respond to the disaster” (Alpert 2006, A-11). After the storm hit land, Chertoff accused Brown of dodging his phone calls “for two days” (Straw 2006, 1). This may have been a case of scapegoating by Chertoff, who did not escape significant criticisms over his own actions during and after the disaster, but Brown was certainly the

focus of much of the anger over the government's response from the very beginning. That anger centered on Brown's qualifications and his competence to serve as FEMA's director. Many reports suggested that he lacked experience in emergency management. A *U.S. News and World Report* article two weeks after the disaster said that Brown's "prior experience for the job was in enforcing judging standards in Arabian horse contests" (Mulrine 2005, para. 2). The same report noted that "even with Brown pulled off the Katrina clean-up effort ... three of his deputies in the agency have virtually no prior experience in handling disasters," and that even "two weeks after the storm, the post-Katrina effort seemed wanting, and FEMA, once again, seemed to draw most of the finger-pointing" (Mulrine 2005, para. 4).

Other reports raised a different angle on the story. Brown's dismissal was described as a "blunt rebuke, especially by an administration that typically ignores disapproval of its own and prizes loyalty among top officials," while FEMA was described as a "parking lot for political allies since its creation in 1979" whose "highest ranks began to fill with political chums during the Bush administration" (Marek et al. 2005, para. 1; Thompson 2006, para. 8).

Herein lies the significance of this case study for our purposes. As noted earlier, the key to presidential power according to Neustadt is the choices presidents make. Specifically, it is whether those choices are made with an eye toward the president's power stakes. A number of presidential scholars have suggested that executive appointments, like that of Michael Brown to direct FEMA, are one of the key choices that can affect a president's power. For instance, Michael Genovese (2008) says:

The primary means by which a president can control the bureaucracy is through *appointments*. A president who appoints competent and loyal administrators can sometimes rely on them to get the president's directives implemented. Unfortunately, not all appointees are competent; and some aren't even loyal. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush were notorious for delegating a great deal of authority to political appointees. Both Reagan and the second Bush were somewhat disengaged and, therefore, not very deeply involved in management. (160)

The consequences of being "somewhat disengaged" can be profound, according to Genovese:

This delegating style sometimes worked well, as when Reagan appointed George Shultz as secretary of state; but it sometimes failed miserably, as when Reagan appointed Donald Regan as his chief of staff

or when *George W. Bush appointed Michael Brown to head the Federal Emergency Management Agency only to have him fail in the face of the hurricane Katrina disaster.* (Genovese 2008, 160; emphasis added)

While recent administrations have insisted upon control over not only cabinet-level appointments, but over subcabinet personnel hiring as well, this disengagement has been documented by others (e.g., see Rockman 2008; Warshaw 2005). In addition, greater White House supervision, whether presidents are directly engaged or not, does not necessarily mean that staffing decisions are being made with the president's power stakes in mind. Under presidents Reagan, Clinton, and the two Bushes,

officials could not be hired merely because of technical expertise, as Carter had done, or because of personal relationships with the cabinet officer, as Nixon had done. They had to be hired as a means of ensuring that the president's agenda remained at the forefront of departmental decision-making and was not compromised by bureaucratic politics. (Warshaw 2005, 301, 303)

President George W. Bush, specifically, is described as appearing

not to expend much effort in monitoring where his decisions are leading and how they are being implemented, nor in reviewing where alternative decisions might lead. Nor, apparently, has Bush much valued what is referred to as "neutral competence." Since, as he is reported to have proclaimed, he doesn't argue with himself, there is apparently little need to go past gut instinct. ... [T]his leaves Bush oftentimes in the position of being a vessel for the agendas of others within his administration and failing to follow through with care on decisions that have been reached. (Rockman 2008, 342)

The combination of a White House focus on loyalty plus a "somewhat disengaged" president proved to be disastrous for Bush. How does loyalty without the competence or experience to manage one's charge serve the president? Appointing someone who was loyal to the president but who had little experience in emergency management to head FEMA was clearly not a choice that was made with the president's power stakes in mind.

Rather than taking action to address and correct the criticisms directed at FEMA and the White House, President Bush seemed to compound the problem. His initial response to critics of Brown and FEMA was to issue a seemingly blithe statement of support for Brown. His "Heckuva job, Brownie" not only

failed to quell the criticism, but it became a sort of mantra to those who were convinced of the president's disengagement and lack of appreciation for the true scope of the disaster. When he was finally driven to admit errors in the government's response to Katrina, he seemed to make matters worse:

When George W. Bush blundered in the federal response to Hurricane Katrina, his first reaction was to blame everyone but himself. Then he issued the generic "mistakes were made" statement. By the time a week later, when he finally took responsibility for his failures, it was too little too late. His adversaries were handed a golden opportunity to make him look insensitive and out of touch. The Bush administration was put into an unwinnable position as they tried to undo the damage done by the president. But as they scrambled, they only further dug a hole for the beleaguered president. (Genovese 2008, 94)

It appears Bush's choices were made with loyalty and a rather Pollyannaish viewpoint in mind, rather than any consideration of his own power stakes.

So, what was the damage to Bush's power? There is general agreement that Bush's second term was not nearly as successful as his first. The declines in both his approval ratings and in his legislative success rate are well documented. His approval rating was already in decline well before the hurricane struck. It almost had to decline, as his approval rating shortly after the attacks of September 11, 2001, at 91 percent according to Gallup, was the highest ever recorded for any president by Gallup and many other organizations (Gallup.com 2015a; Kell and Murray 2005). By the late summer of 2005, Bush had already lost about half. In the three months before Katrina struck, his Gallup approval rating averaged around 46 percent (Gallup.com 2015a). In the three months after the hurricane struck, the average dropped to 41 percent. Furthermore, his approval ratings continued to decline, topping 40 percent only four times after mid-February 2006 (Kell and Murray 2005).

The fallout related to the Katrina response is certainly not the sole factor in this decline. A string of events and issues (setbacks in Iraq, revelations about the administration's national security tactics, questions about the competence of Supreme Court nominee Harriet Miers, and concern over the proposed "privatization" of Social Security, among others) hurt the president's professional reputation and public prestige, to use Neustadt's terms. However, it is clearly cited as a factor in most, if not all, discussions of the decline of Bush's power during his second term in office. For example:

What might have damaged Bush's legacy most was his administration's mixed record of competent governance. Between Iraq, *the government's*

*flawed relief effort in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina*, and more minor missteps over the Dubai ports issue and other matters, the government “brand” deteriorated badly during the Bush years. (Pew Research Center 2008; emphasis added)

The biggest blow came in the 2006 midterm elections, which were characterized as “a stinging rebuke to Bush and congressional Republicans” as “a pervasive sense that the government in Washington was failing both ethically and in policy terms drove voters” (Sinclair 2008, 183).

Bush could not rely on anyone else to save him and his presidency. Recall the quote from *Presidential Power* that appears just above this case study:

[N]obody and nothing helps a President to see [his power stakes] save as he helps himself; that neither issues nor advisers as they reach him are a substitute for sensitivity to power on his part. (Neustadt 1990, 102)

Practicality may prevent presidents from directly overseeing literally every appointment, but even the best White House advisers are no substitute for presidential engagement in the overall process.

### **Case Study II: Barack Obama, Policy Promotion, and the 2010 Midterm Elections**

A disaster of another kind occurred in November 2010. This one was not environmental, it was political; so fortunately, no lives were lost. However, the Democratic Party suffered one of its worst political defeats on record. This defeat was particularly disastrous as the party was actually riding quite high as a result of the previous two national election cycles in 2006 and 2008. They had made tremendous gains in Congress, in part as a rebuke to the problems suffered by the Bush administration as discussed in the previous case.

In the wake of these losses, President Obama accepted the blame, saying that “It’s not enough just to build a better mousetrap. People don’t automatically come beating to your door. We’ve got to sell it. We’ve got to reach out to the other side and, where possible, persuade” (Shear 2014, A14). He continued by saying, “I think we have not been successful in going out there and letting people know what it is that we’re trying to do and why this is the right direction” (A14). Fellow Democrats apparently agreed that the president did not devote enough time attempting to connect with the public. Former Democratic Tennessee Governor Phil Bredesen said there “doesn’t seem to be anybody in the White House who’s got any idea what it’s like to lie awake at night worried about money and worried about things slipping away” (Tumulty and Balz 2010, para. 4). Former Clinton White House policy adviser William A. Galston said that “[t]hroughout his first

two years in office, President Obama often struggled to connect individual initiatives to larger purposes” (Tumulty and Balz 2010, para. 8).

Though some research questions the value of presidential rhetoric (e.g., see Edwards [2003], Edwards and Wood [1999]), most presidential scholars see it as an important component in any successful administration. Hoffman and Howard (2012) argue that “a president’s legislative success has become intimately tied to our perception of leadership” (1317), while Crew and Lewis (2011) note that the choices about how presidents present their policy agendas “have potential implications for their success” (626).

However, Bruce Miroff (2014) quotes President Obama from a media interview as deciding to focus on “getting the policy right” (250) rather than attempting to influence the public’s opinions and perceptions regarding policy. Miroff describes Obama as possessing such “rhetorical gifts” that he wonders:

Of what other presidential candidate could it be said that his campaign oratory could be remixed as song? But when will.i.am of the Black-Eyed Peas assembled an all-star cast of musicians and actors to transform Obama’s “Yes We Can” speech in an early primary into a music video, it swiftly went viral and became an anthem for the candidate’s young supporters. (250)

Yet, he notes that, once elected, the new president “focused intently on the power of policy,” believing that this “alone could transform the nation” (250–51). Obama’s senior adviser, David Axelrod, put it another way: “Without the what and the why, the communicating is of little value.” (Baker 2009, para. 8).

This idea that focusing on policy details could somehow “transform” the public absent any public appeals by a president who was clearly seen by many as a gifted orator appeared quite curious. In a 2012 *New York Times* article addressing this curiosity, Matt Bai suggests that his often-acclaimed oratorical gift

makes it even more baffling that Obama’s presidential alter-ego, this grayer and more somber version of his literary self, spent the past four years immersed in legislative minutiae and marching out dull slogans—“an economy built to last,” “winning the future” and so on—while failing to advance any larger theory of the moment confronting the country and what it required. “They haven’t talked about how the pieces of the puzzle fit together and move us forward from where we’ve been,” says Don Baer who served as President Clinton’s communications director. (Bai 2012, MM16).

In the article, Bai offers a potential explanation:

As with so much else about this presidency, the answers [to how he has squandered opportunities to lead] can probably be traced back to those first overwhelming months after the 2008 election. Remember that John McCain's most effective line of attack against Obama during the campaign was that he was more of a motivational speaker than a leader. And so, having won the election and facing crises on several fronts, the president's advisers were understandably wary of too much speechifying, which might have underscored the idea that Obama was going to orate his way through the presidency while leaving the business of governing to others. As a result, Obama spent much of his first months—the period when he might have been speaking directly to an anxious public...—holed up with aides and members of Congress, rather than pushing any kind of overarching narrative. (Bai 2012, MM16).

The effect of that choice on the public perception of Obama and the subsequent toll on his status and authority had significant consequences for both him and his party.

Even when the White House did try to communicate to the public, it rarely if ever consisted of the type of selling noted earlier. It was more often in the form of policy explanations with the belief that good policy would sell itself. In a *New York Times* video report, Sheryl Stolberg and Ben Werschkul suggest that "President Obama has believed that by listening and appealing to reason, he can bring people together to get results," and they describe his style as "a sort of moderator-in-chief" (Stolberg and Werschkul 2010). The result of this choice, as described by Richard Stevenson (2010), was that "a year into his presidency, Mr. Obama has lost control of his political narrative, his ability to define the story of his presidency on his own terms" (para. 4)—supporting both Bai's analysis and the president's own regrets, noted above.

Furthermore, President Obama's style of oratory changed once he entered the White House. Gone was the lofty oration on "hope." The style that emerged was "No-drama Obama," with content that "is more often found in rational persuasion than in inspiration appeals" (Engbers and Fucilla 2012, 1127). This aversion to hopeful and inspirational oratory once in office left the impressions of both inconsistency and emptiness. Inconsistency in that, as David Gergen said, "[f]or a narrative to work, a president has to be extremely repetitive," but Obama, according to Matt Bai (2012), has an "obvious aversion to political theatrics and mindless repetition" (para. 6). Emptiness in that Obama's rational approach left a void in the public discourse that was filled by his opponents—on both the right and the left—with birth certificates, death panels, tea partiers, and occupiers (Engbers and Fucilla 2012; Miroff 2014). Diane Heith (2012) put it very directly:

“By the end of his second year in office ... headlines trumpeted the failure of the Obama administration to communicate effectively” (124). A senior White House aide assessed the administration’s communications just as directly, but much less charitably, by saying, “They need to fire people. In politics and communications, this White House has been terrible” (Wolffe 2010, 274).

This failure to communicate was compounded by the changing media landscape. The swift growth of newer “social media” in the mid-2000s allowed for direct communication with the public – bypassing traditional media. The new Obama administration was determined to exploit this evolving landscape as it “sought to diminish the [traditional] media’s capability to filter presidential messages” (Heith 2012, 124–25). Heith (2012) explains the strategy:

The Obama White House used a two-pronged communications strategy: old and new. The traditional approach continued the use of a White House Office of Communications, as well as a press secretary. This office followed the script provided by presidents in the post-Watergate media age: it aimed to manage the media by engaging it, and to manage the public by polling it. (126)

The second prong of the strategy, however, challenged the traditional relationship between the president and the press and aimed to forge a new relationship with the public. The Obama White House added their new media savvy and public connectivity to the traditional public outreach structure and expanded it. (128)

The result of this dual strategy—combined with President Obama’s drier oratorical style—appeared not to be the best of both worlds, but rather the worst of each. New media do allow the president to communicate directly with the public, but this is not unique to the president. They pretty much allow *anyone* to directly communicate with *anyone* else. That capacity, along with the narrative vacuum, helped the “birth certificates, death panels, tea partiers, and occupiers” mentioned earlier to fill the landscape. In addition, much of the traditional media “became significantly more confrontational over the [administration’s] first two years, after continued exposure to the Obama communications strategy” (Heith 2012, 124–25). Those new issues filling the landscape provided fuel for this confrontation.

With the White House constantly on the defensive, the Democrats lacked the leadership needed to counter their critics. The results were evident as early as the fall of 2009, as noted by conservative columnist David Brooks:

The result is the Obama slide, the most important feature of the current moment. The number of Americans who trust President Obama to make the right decisions has fallen by roughly 17 percentage points. Obama's job approval is down to about 50 percent. All presidents fall from their honeymoon highs, but in the history of polling, no newly elected American president has fallen this far this fast. (Brooks 2009, A29)

Obama's job approval never recovered. The week before the 2010 election, it stood at just 43 percent, statistically indistinguishable from the 42 percent low point for his term at the time (Gallup.com 2015b). The president's tepid approval ratings and growing voter dissatisfaction led to a defeat of historic proportions for the Democratic Party in 2010, on both the national and state levels. The Republican Party gained 63 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives to retake the majority they had lost four years earlier. This was the largest partisan turnover in almost six decades. They also gained six seats in the U.S. Senate to significantly expand their minority. In addition, Republicans made significant gains in both state legislatures and in governorships, allowing them to put forth a more consistent policy message at all levels of government.

Just as Hurricane Katrina was not the sole cause of Bush's decline or the Republicans' 2006 losses, it overstates the case to blame the Democrats' losses in 2010 *entirely* on Obama (For example, after two consecutive wave elections, the party had picked up many traditionally Republican seats that would be difficult to defend under any circumstance), his communication skills were a significant factor in the chorus of criticisms:

Some Democrats believe they fell victim to the inevitable tide of midterm elections. Others blame the economy, plain and simple, while *a growing chorus accuses Mr. Obama of failing to communicate the party's successes*. ... [A] lot of Democrats now contend, that Mr. Obama offered an inconsistent pitch over these last several weeks, jumping from a critique of the Bush years (how Republicans drove the national car into a ditch, and so on) to an indictment of campaign cash from outside groups. But it's probably also the case that, by that point, public opinion had hardened. Some 62 percent of voters in exit polls Tuesday said the country was on the wrong track (Bai 2010, P3; emphasis added).

Since then, despite an improving economy and his reelection in 2012, President Obama has been playing defense almost exclusively. We have seen nothing better than legislative gridlock and stalemate, perhaps epitomized by several government shutdowns and the infamous budget "sequester"—a "doomsday machine"-like budgetary policy that was designed to be so odious that it would

supposedly spur both sides toward cooperation. The two parties found cooperation so distasteful, they actually accepted the doomsday machine.

This is clearly not what Obama wanted for himself, his presidency, or his party. Heith (2012) summarized the dilemma in this manner:

[T]he costs resulting from the *choices made by the president* to continue his direct public leadership approach appear to outweigh the benefits. (140; emphasis added)

With a cacophonous coupling of old and new media, President Obama faced an exponential increase in the number of voices in the political system. A president can naturally cut through the clamor by virtue of his stature in the political system—the “bully pulpit” still stands—but it has become much more difficult to control the background noise. (144)

The president’s communication strategy increased the capacity to reach the public without the filter of media coverage; but it did nothing to eliminate the cacophony of competing voices. (144)

Shortly after the 2010 electoral “shellacking,” President Obama was questioned by reporters aboard Air Force One. One reporter asked about how he might alter, among other things, his style. His response was that he “neglected some things that matter a lot to people and rightly so,” such as:

making sure that the policy decision that I made were fully debated with the American people and that I was getting out of Washington and spending more time shaping public opinion and being in a conversation with the American people about why I was making the choices I was making. (Obama 2010)

Obama’s communication choices in 2009 and 2010 were not made with careful consideration of his power in mind. This is what he was owning up to when he accepted blame for his party’s losses in 2010.

### **Discussion**

Both of these case studies illustrate the effects of presidential choices on future power. Recall the Neustadt quote from earlier in this essay: “a President’s own choices are the only means in his own hands of guarding his own prospects for effective influence” (Neustadt 1990, 49). Presidents must consider their power stakes when making choices.

In these two cases, neither Bush nor Obama acted with their power stakes clearly in mind. Bush's executive appointments focused on loyalty at the expense of competence. Obama focused on rationality at the expense of leadership, believing that good policy will sell itself. Both of these decisions came back to haunt them and their political parties. They suffered in terms of their subsequent job approval, legislative record, and ultimately in their party's fates in the 2006 and 2010 midterm elections.

Perhaps the lesson for all presidents is engagement. For Bush, this would have meant taking a more direct interest in executive appointments, and basing them on more than just a friendly relationship with the president. It would have meant appointments based on demonstrated ability to do the job in question. For Obama, this would have meant that the "permanent campaign" is crucial to consider from the very start of a new administration. It would have meant considering the public's needs in the transition from campaigning to governing.

Richard Neustadt's work is in the form of advice, and so is this essay. The advice here is that Neustadt's work is demonstrably still useful. Choices matter. This lesson may seem obvious, but as has been demonstrated by these case studies, it bears repeating. The lesson learned from Bush and Obama (as well as from Truman and Eisenhower many decades ago) can help future presidents avoid similar fates. Whoever takes the oath in January 2017 should consider this from the outset of their administration.



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