

The President's Most Powerful Tool

A Chief Executive's main strength lies in his leadership of public opinion.

Here a professor of political science examines the varieties of that leadership.

By ELMER E. CORNWELL, JR.

IT IS the office of the Presidency that makes American democracy unique in the democratic world. It has been the Presidency, more than any other part of the system, that has enabled American democracy to succeed and flourish for a century and three quarters. And it has been the relationship between President and public that has given this office its power and importance.

Sweeping assertions? Yes, but defensible—if not provable in an ultimate sense. The uniqueness of the Presidential institution in a world of free nations that have most often followed the British cabinet model is obvious, and hardly less so in light of de Gaulle's assumed role under the Fifth French Republic. That the Presidency has made the constitutional system workable is perhaps less obvious but can be persuasively argued in light of the roles played by Jackson, Lincoln, Wilson, and the Roosevelts.

But why insist that the President's key relationship is with the public rather than with his party or with Congress? Popular government by definition entails close links between governors and governed, whatever the constitutional forms. Likewise all freely elected officials must cherish their popular base of support. In a very real sense, however, the American President finds in the populace not only his base of electoral support but the very essence of his power to influence the process of governance. Were he the British Prime Minister and were American parties like British parties, Presi-

dents could govern as party leaders. But American parties have rarely lent themselves to anything approaching "party government."

The separation of powers and the constitutional allocation of legislative authority to Congress shape the President's relation with that body. Save for the veto, the occupant of the White House has no means of either setting major policy himself or forcing the Legislative branch to do his bidding. Apparently the framers did not intend the chief magistrate to be a policymaker except in crisis situations. The leverage the President has acquired in the lawmaking process has been indirect, based on use of the arts of persuasion, and ultimately grounded in the popular support he can claim or mobilize. Hence his link with the public is his key relationship.

THE President, in the nature of things, must deal with the citizenry largely through the media of communication, and the impact of the revolution in communications on the Presidential office during the present century has obviously been tremendous. Presidents have found in the mass circulation daily newspaper, radio broadcasting, and, recently, television unprecedented channels for exerting leadership of opinion in the making of national policy. But not only does the Chief Executive now have the technical means to reach his clientele with an ease and rapidity unknown in the last century; he has also achieved an omnipresence in the general flow of news and in the awareness of the average citizen which in itself has vast implications for the shaping both of national opinion and of public policy.

The role of the President as leader of national opinion, as it has evolved during the first six decades of the twentieth century, is clearly a permanent feature

of the office and of the American political scene. This role, however, invites two sharply contradictory interpretations. Some will ask, especially in the light of the Kennedy (and Johnson) success in harnessing television: Does not the White House now have available an array of communications techniques of limitless and even frightening potential? Have contemporary Presidents perhaps become dangerously powerful, as channels for manipulating the public have opened up to them?

On the other hand, a case can certainly be made that, short of an overriding crisis, Presidents need more than publicity techniques to overcome the enormous frictions in the American political system. The legislative accomplishments of the Kennedy Administration seem meager indeed when measured against the amount of effort and virtuosity expended to obtain them. The real question may therefore turn out to be: Is the President's power and capacity to influence events likely to be equal to the ever-increasing demands being made upon him?

The one thing that has emerged clearly, whatever its ultimate significance, is the pre-eminent ability of the Chief Executive to generate publicity and to command public attention. Both his interpretation of the potential of the office and his natural reserve caused President Kennedy to modulate somewhat his use of the enormous publicity power of the White House. But the breezy and uninhibited Texan who succeeded him has apparently felt no compulsion to keep the danger of overexposure continually in mind, with results that come out graphically in the following from *Time*:

In the course of a single breathtaking, nerveshaking, totally implausible

Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr., is chairman of the Department of Political Science at Brown University. This article is adapted from his forthcoming *Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion*, which will be published later this month by the Indiana University Press.

week, the 36th President of the U.S. made nearly two dozen speeches, traveled 2,983 miles, held three press conferences, appeared on national television three times, was seen in person by almost a quarter of a million people, shook so many hands that by week's end his right hand was puffed and bleeding.

Quite apparently Lyndon Johnson began his Presidency on the theory that there is virtually no limit, no brooding danger of ultimate public boredom which he need take into account in his efforts to mold and marshal public opinion. Johnson, of course, like Coolidge and Truman before him, faced (and easily surmounted) the problem of building his own national image in order to secure his party's nomination, and eventual re-election to office.

But whatever a President's theory in this regard, he can consistently hold the center of the governmental stage against virtually any rival. The Congress, with which he must, in constitutional theory, joust for the citizen's attention, is ill adapted to vie with him for first position in the public eye. A phenomenon of the Kennedy era, archly labeled the "Ev and Charlie Show," dramatically underscored the legislative branch's dilemma—which is also the dilemma of the opposition party—in making itself heard. It consisted of periodical televised "press conferences" staged by the minority leaders of the Senate and House, Everett McKinley Dirksen and Charles Halleck.

These affairs were an outgrowth of the need on the part of the Republican Party, and particularly the Republican Congressional leadership, for a platform from which to compete with the Democratic White House. The format chosen

was a recognition of the tremendous impact of the Presidential press conference and the even greater presumed impact of Kennedy's live televising. As Russell Baker wrote in the *New York Times*, Dirksen and Halleck "did not expect to match the White House with its traditional monopoly over the headlines and the television tube, but they hoped to hold a minority share of the communication lines."

Not long after this effort had got under way in 1961, its serious weaknesses became evident—not the least of which was the irreverent title coined by a reporter and taken over gleefully by Washington and the rest of the country. The principals were not particularly telegenic compared with President Kennedy and other youthful New Frontiersmen. In manner, phraseology, and the stridency of their approach to the issues of the day, they seemed faintly old-fashioned. Whether the results would have been happier with more attractive spokesmen whose views hewed closer to the middle of the political road is hard to say. For whatever reason, the show declined after an initial flurry of success born no doubt of curiosity. According to Baker the session of March 15, 1962, was typical:

President Kennedy's news conference yesterday was attended by 391 persons. For this morning's "Ev and Charlie Show" the authorities of the Capitol press gallery had set up facilities for seventy-five reporters. Seventeen showed up.

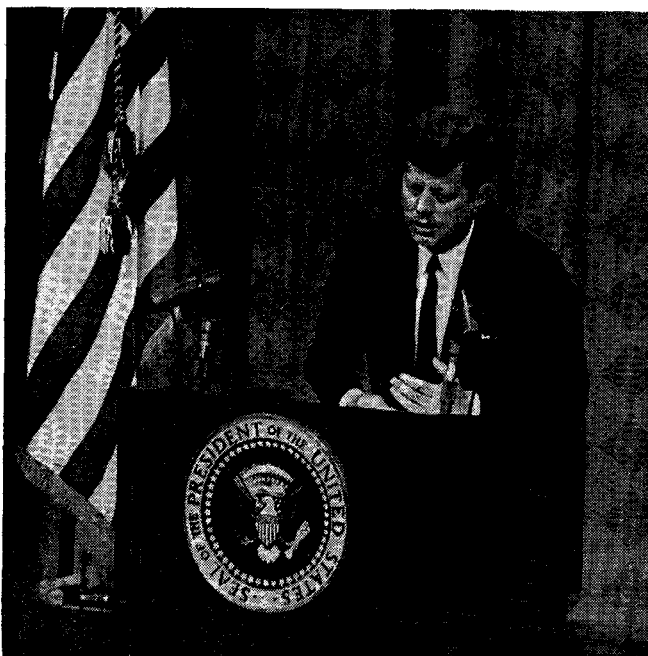
After the President's news conference yesterday afternoon, all the major television and radio networks had tapes immediately available for unabridged reproduction across the country. "Ev

and Charlie" drew four screen-film cameras to record fragments that may, or may not, yield the Republicans a few seconds of canned film in some of the nation's living rooms tonight.

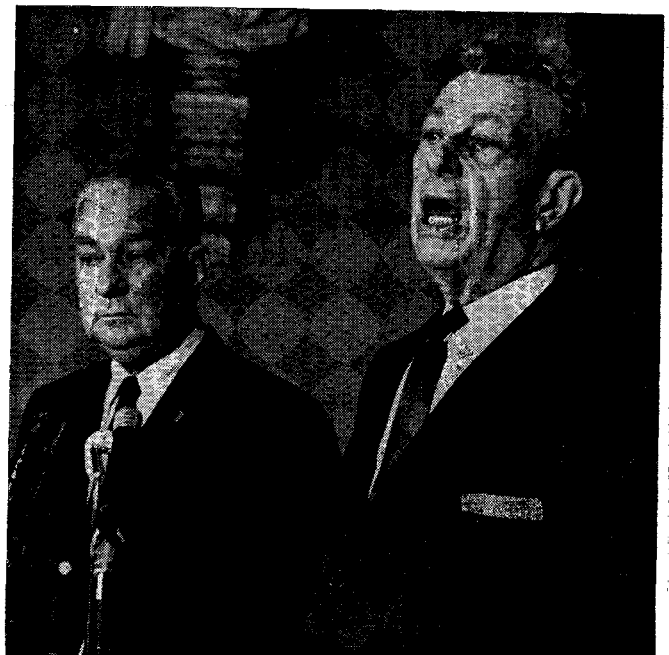
Such is the enormous advantage enjoyed by the Chief Executive in the television age. The blurred public image of Congress is thus further blurred, and the already monumental disadvantages of the out party are made worse. So despondent had the Republican leadership become as the 1963 session dawned that funds for the continuance of the show were cut off.

Added to this one-sided advantage which the President enjoys in gaining access to the public is his vast image as national leader and even as father figure. Gallup poll findings that Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy all enjoyed popularity in or near the 80 per cent range at high points in their careers bespeak more than the partisan following that put them in office. A President, once in the White House, quickly assumes a public position far beyond the limits of his electoral majority, even when this was narrow and inconclusive. This would seem to clinch his unchallengeable position and to confirm the worst fears of those who cry incipient tyranny.

However, access to an attentive public by no means automatically confers the power to shape and mold popular attitudes. TV viewers, even of a Presidential telecast, though they may hang on his words, need not accept his conclusions. Not only the legislative record since 1960 but the Congressional achievements of JFK's three predecessors underscore the point that the President is far from invincible, however fully or skil-



—Pix.



—Wide World.

Competitors for public attention—The "Ev and Charlie Show" lost by a landslide.

fully he may exploit the mass media. The Kennedy efforts along these lines, which drew from Senate Republican Leader Dirksen the lament that he "had never seen an Administration so organized in the propaganda field," resulted in surprisingly little forward movement by Congress.

What, one might ask, explains this apparent anomaly? Why is the White House, with all its recent electronic embellishments, so much less effective than it ought to be? For one thing, the collective impact of recent innovations in communications has been far more complex than would at first appear. James Burns, an astute observer of the Presidency, wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* shortly after President Kennedy's assassination:

... the more [Kennedy] spoke and acted in terms of national unity and bipartisanship, the more he dulled his image as a leader moving strongly ahead, and in a partisan direction, at home. As in the case of Presidents before him, his role as chief of state had to pre-empt his role as party chief and legislator-in-chief.

Presidents, when they address the nation, cannot help evoking their role as national leader, symbol, and spokesman, because the media operate continually to cast them in this role. And the more the public comes to see the President as the personification of the nation, irrespective of party, the less willing it is to accept the partisan side of his office. The cold war with its recurring crises has also enhanced the President's stature as a nonpartisan national leader and cham-

pion in a dangerous world. Both the magnitude of the reaction to President Kennedy's assassination and the mingled feelings of personal loss and fear for the future that it brought suggest the psychological and symbolic importance which the White House occupant has come to have for the nation.

When the Chief Executive then assumes the mantle of party leader or protagonist of one group against another, the "President of all the people" image becomes blurred. The American public, which has been taught to think that political controversy is always in bad taste, reacts unfavorably when the pre-eminent symbol of its yearning for unity and leadership demeans himself. The higher the pedestal to which the man and the office have been elevated in recent years, the greater the adverse reaction to Presidential partisanship. The nation followed Harry Truman willingly in foreign affairs, yet reviled him bitterly for moves like the steel seizure and some of his less inhibited public comments. Similarly, the enormous popularity of Eisenhower the general, the man, and the President was coupled with a refusal to see him as a partisan figure or to heed him when he plugged his policies or his party's candidates.

THE last months of President Kennedy's life are particularly suggestive, and in a sense ironic. During most of his tenure he seemed to be acutely aware of a need to preserve his image and to husband his broad nonpartisan support. Sidney Hyman and others criticized him for this acute image-consciousness and urged him "to forget about his

popularity entirely" in the interest of more effective leadership on critical issues. In 1963, events on the erupting civil rights front forced a sympathetic but reluctant President into taking an increasingly clear stand on behalf of the embattled Negro groups. Unquestionably he took his stand fully aware that it was fraught with danger to his image. Reaction, measured by the polls, showed that the public was indeed responding unfavorably. His general popularity went down sharply and a Gallup survey released just before the fateful 22nd of November showed that nearly 50 per cent of several samplings since May felt the Administration was pushing too fast on integration.

Though the point cannot be proved, it seems obvious that entwined with this specific reaction to a policy trend was a generalized uneasiness and even anxiety at having the President thus take sides and abandon impartiality. Ironically, his fateful visit to Texas was part of an effort to recoup this loss; and even more ironically, its tragic outcome, releasing again as it did the floodgates of emotional identification with both man and office, gave back to the President in death the broad base of support and affection which the imperatives of policy leadership had jeopardized while he was alive.

President Johnson, between November 1963 and his landslide re-election, displayed a keen awareness of this aspect of the office. He has been extraordinarily successful in cultivating and maintaining the "President of all the people" image, much as Franklin Roosevelt was able to do in his first year or two of office. The exceedingly unpopular Goldwater candidacy further enhanced the President's broad base of national acceptance, both electoral and otherwise. And yet the polls showed that the major negative element in LBJ's public image was his reputation as a skilful politician and wheeler-dealer. Though precisely these qualities made possible his striking legislative successes, they again represented partisan blemishes on a man whom the public yearned to have symbolize a national unity and harmony that is above politics.

This is the point. The vast impact of the mass media in capitalizing on the President as good copy, the President's own exploitation of these possibilities for "image-building," and a general yearning in the public for a nonpartisan national symbol—a yearning reinforced by the anxieties of cold war—have lifted the White House occupant above the sordid arena of partisan politics. Thus any effort to participate in the party or group struggle, as a President must, is as likely to produce shock and disillusionment as it is to enlist active support.

A supplementary—and more orthodox



—explanation of the modest legislative achievement of the Kennedy Administration is the different constituencies of the President and Congress. Congress represents the nation in terms of local groups and interests, while the President represents it as a whole and particularly its *national* interests and currents of opinion. Congress thus has a vested interest in promoting local claims and ignoring national claims, while the President seeks to emphasize national goals and problems at the expense of parochialism. Add to this the rural imbalance that is characteristic of the Senate and, through malapportionment and obsolete district patterns, of the House as well, and the difficulty is compounded.

The President's prime weapon for influencing policymaking is his ability to command and influence a national audience. In theory a public which he has convinced will communicate its desires to Capitol Hill, and action will result. But Congress by its nature is far less responsive to national currents of opinion than to local pressures. Furthermore, well over half the membership comes from safe seats and is immune to anything but a virtual tidal wave of popular demand. Only events, rarely Presidents alone, can produce opinion of this intensity. Finally, many of the most powerful individuals on the Hill, the committee chairmen, are from the safest districts and hence the most insulated from any White House-generated pressure.

THE consequences of recent Supreme Court decisions on legislative apportionment may help make Congress more amenable to the influence the President can bring to bear from the electorate. His basic power position must remain essentially the same, however. He confronts the checks and balances and planned frictions of the American constitutional system, which no degree of mastery of the media or further expansion of the Presidential image can neutralize. Thus, in the last analysis, those who lament the limits of Executive power, rather than those who fear strong Presidents, may have the better case.

Since little is likely to be done constitutionally to strengthen the President's hand, his ability to lead and mold public opinion, for all its inherent limitations, must remain his prime reliance. American parties and the American public will do well to bear this in mind as they act in their mysterious ways to fill the office—and hardly less as they fill the Vice Presidency. More than ever before in the history of the Republic, the times demand strong Presidents, and, more than ever before, the strong President will be the skilful leader and molder of public opinion throughout the country he serves.

SR/January 2, 1965

Meanwhile, Back at the Plot...

By WILLIAM WALDEN

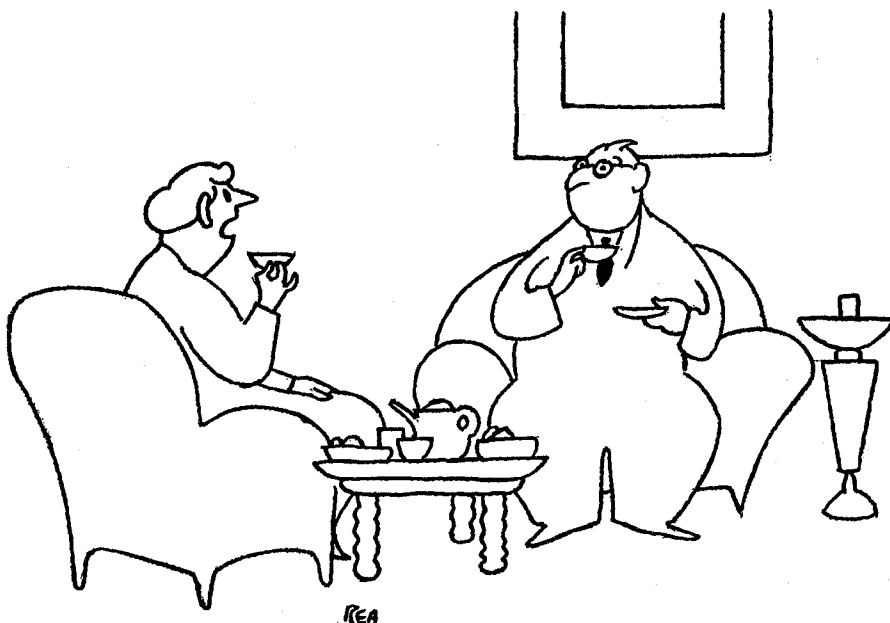
IN THE SHORT STORY I was reading—the author and title of which I shall not identify, for reasons that will be obvious later—the lovely young wife had just confessed, under unremitting pressure from her much older, insanely jealous husband, to having succumbed to the blandishments of his best friend and spent the previous night with him. Would the husband erupt in a towering rage? Collapse in a state of shock? Icily order her out of the house? Search out his best friend and kill him? In an agony of suspense I read on:

For several moments he stared at her, dumb with incredulity. In the unnatural silence, the old clock on the mantel clacked away rhythmically. Downstairs, the swishing of the housekeeper's broom could be heard in a sibilant, mocking refrain. On the next block a motorist blasted his horn at a dilatory pedestrian. Far off, a train whistle hooted faintly and derisively, as if...

I never learned what the wronged husband did, for at that point the story and I parted company. I could have exercised the reader's prerogative of skipping ahead, but years of overexposure to fiction have bred in me a violent antipathy to certain narrative tricks. The dead-weight space filler that is planted at suspenseful moments, like that quoted

above, is, in my opinion, the most underhanded of them all.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, let me hasten to explain that I have no quarrel with exposition that, however indirectly or remotely, creates background, rounds out character, or is otherwise pertinent to the story. The author may be as oblique or circuitous as he pleases in telling his tale without offending me. What I cannot abide is deliberate padding—the bit of pseudo-atmospheric detail, unconnected with the rest of the story, flung lumpishly into the narrative stream, usually at a critical juncture, for the sole purpose of exploiting the reader's interest. A son angrily accuses a father of having callously driven his wife into an early grave; the ominous silence that follows is broken by the racking cough of a neighbor in the next apartment—a neighbor never previously mentioned and almost certain never to be mentioned again. A thief, having just murdered a storekeeper, stares, sweat-drenched and horror-stricken, at the dead body; at that precise moment a rat begins to gnaw at the plaster in the wall. A child is about to topple to his death from an open window; a delivery boy whistles blithely as he bicycles along with his groceries in the street below. (The rat is one of the shortest-lived in the annals of zoology, being born an instant before he gnawed the plaster and dying an instant after. As for the delivery boy, he belonged on



"You always have to have the middle word in an argument, don't you?"