The Digital Soapbox

by Suzanne Osborne

There was a time, in the not so distant past, when the leaders of our country conducted themselves and the business of the country with discretion. The public was only privy to information it was deemed necessary to share for their reassurance in trying times or hot ticket items debated for elections. Presidents then discovered it was not only possible, but effective to go directly to the public when seeking support for a cause or agenda they wanted backing on. As Thomas Carlyle famously stated, "Necessity dispenseth with decorum."

The tactic of "going public" can be used in a wide range of ways from small, specialized venues dealing with a specific area of interest to huge public rallies and, in the past century, televised broadcasts and the internet have been added to the repertoire. While the strategy isn't necessarily employed with the intent of changing public opinion, it is impressive as a form of garnering support and swaying those who are uncertain which puts pressure on Congress, especially regarding issues the public is already in favor of. Congressional members seen as adversarial to the will of the majority, in conjunction with the President, may find themselves ousted when it's time for re-election. It behooves them to take a stand for or against the issue being touted dependent upon where they believe their constituency stands.

An early illustration of a president using the public forum to garner the support of the American people for his cause was when President Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address. While dedicating the battlefield to the memory of the fallen soldiers, he used his short but powerful speech to rally the people to the cause of pressing on in the Civil War. In the address,

Lincoln stated, “It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion.” While there were thousands present to hear his plea, the real benefit was incurred by newspapers printing the speech and sending it out across the entire country where it became a source of inspiration.

In 1919 President Wilson went to the public via a train journey known as the “whistle stop” tour for what he believed was an imperative moral reason. He was promoting the creation of the League of Nations following the devastation of World War I. It was his belief that an international group of world leaders could engage constructively to settle the world’s differences without violence. His goal was to cover 8,000 miles in 22 days delivering speeches all along the way. In his paper, Dorsey stated, “He reminded audiences of their millennial destiny to aid the Supreme Being in realizing a divine goal: world peace” (118). While Wilson’s intention was an admirable one, he had failed to court Congress as assiduously as he courted the public leading to dissension amongst the ranks and, ultimately, the United States did not join the League of Nations when it was formally founded the following year.

In the 1980s when President Reagan wanted to bolster public support, he would co-opt the three major broadcasting networks to deliver a national address. Every American over the age of 40 remembers when the President was on every channel and we were a captive audience. This format allowed the President to come into our homes and make the issues something we felt involved in. Because of his ability to speak to the common man in a way that was understandable and personable, he became known as “The Great Communicator.” However, once he had said his

piece, the only means the public had of following up was reading the newspapers or watching the nightly news so whatever impetuous was garnered may have been short lived.

While the concept of "going public" isn't new, it has certainly reached new heights with the onset of mass media and social forums. There are those who would argue it has been detrimental to proper political conduct, but no one can deny politics are far more a part of the general populations' daily lives than in the past. In economics, we use the Pareto Principle to describe the unequal input/output ratio. The Pareto Principle "sometimes known as the 'power law', or the '80/20 rule'—stipulates that 80 percent of the land always ends up belonging to 20 percent of the population" (Dorchon). This formula could just as easily be ascribed to political social media participation where 80% of the daily din can be attributed to 20% of the public. While 20% is not a small amount, it is by no means an all-encompassing picture of the views of the silent majority.

President Trump is the first president in office to actively engage with the public using social media on a regular basis. He has been so active on the Twitter platform that there is a Trump Twitter archive where 50,000+ tweets are searchable. "Tweeting is like a typewriter—when I put it out, you put it immediately on your show," Trump said (qtd. in Cillizza). There are those who will argue he has contributed a great deal to his own negative publicity by saying what he thinks without benefit of a speech writer overseeing it to be sure it is politically acceptable, but I contend Trump knows exactly what he is doing. He is, after all, first and foremost a businessman. The product he is selling now is his presidential agenda.

In a marketing study conducted by students at Stanford, it was discovered that negative

publicity brought attention to an unknown author of a book that may have gone otherwise unnoticed, and the book sales rose. “This suggests that whereas the negative impression fades over time, increased awareness may remain, which can actually boost the chances that a product will be purchased,” explains Sorensen (qtd. in Stanford). In layman’s terms there is a quote, sometimes attributed to P.T. Barnum, that there’s no such thing as bad publicity. The Stanford study data appears to back the adage up.

As Molière acknowledged in *Le Misanthrope* over 350 years ago, “He’s a wonderful talker, who has the art of telling you nothing in a great harangue” (Bartlett 270a). The paradox that lies therein is Trump’s harangue is not intended to tell us anything, but to create a carefully calculated reaction. In that arena, his use of social media has been perfected, and his legacy may well be that the increased awareness for the need to actively engage the public remains part of our political landscape in perpetuity.

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