

Presentation is the Key to Presidential Legacies

by Jeanette Henderson

When you look at the biographies of our founding fathers, almost all of them include remarks about how that person was "a great orator." How many presidents have earned that moniker since the advent of radio and TV in the last century? Three, maybe four in eighty years. Consider the legacy of FDR. Though some of us might remember him for his massive social programs that helped us rise from the Depression, most of us remember his Fireside chats and his speech to Congress after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, that "date which will live on in infamy." The next president we all remember as a good speaker is JFK. Though we will never forget his assassination in broad daylight and the aftermath that followed, we very often remember how he beat his opponent Richard Nixon in a debate because Nixon was shifty-eyed, sweating, and on the verge of a "makeup malfunction," while JFK appeared cool, calm and "presidential." The next most remarkable president from a presentational standpoint, of course, is Ronald Reagan. As the first career actor to take the presidential podium, he grew up understanding and mastering the art of the electronic media, which is why he earned the coveted title, "The Great Communicator." In reality, his presidency succeeded because he knew precisely how to communicate with the people, even on unpopular issues, and to make us see the world as our world, together, for the first time in many decades. His successor, George H.W. Bush is better known for his lack of ability to communicate. While he may have been a very effective and popular leader at the time for having fought and won a war on his watch, he was unable to effectively communicate "that vision thing" during his re-election campaign. The result was a resounding defeat by a practically unknown, backwoods Arkansan who had almost no name recognition at the time, but quickly made up for that by being able to make a great presentation. It's a lesson astute contenders for the 2008 presidential election should take to heart. What Bill Clinton did have (and still does), is an excellent understanding of the techniques necessary to make an effective presentation, regardless of the venue or the circumstances. Clinton has clearly mastered the art of talking his way into and out of just about anything. It takes years of training to master, in the same way it took years of studio training for President Reagan to master, but the results are well worth it. Now, of course, we have President George W. Bush. What sort of presentational legacy will he leave? When he speaks before a friendly crowd using teleprompters, he can usually come across adequately, though not very inspiring, despite some very well written speeches, confirming that it's less about what you say and more about how you say it. When he has to answer questions, however, he fails miserably, for two main reasons. The first is his incessant use of "thinking words" like "um" and "uh," which makes it appear that he has no clue how to answer, or that he's just making things up as he goes along. This terrible and counterproductive habit (and one that even many newscasters are now succumbing), can have no other effect on the listener than to force them to conclude the speaker has no idea what he or she is talking about. Obviously, this is not the kind of impression a leader should want to make. The second major mistake he makes is with his defensive, even whiney tone of voice. Sounding like a whiner diminishes all remaining credibility. No one wants to follow a whiner. Imagine George Bush using that defensive tone of his for a line like, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." Again, it's less about what you say, and more about how you say it that wins the hearts and minds of the listener. The United States has had many great leaders who were poor presenters. We've also had many great presenters who were poor leaders. Yet the only ones that seem to leave a legacy worth remembering are the few that manage to achieve both. We are grateful that our Constitution and its First Amendment allow us to criticize our leaders like this without fear of prosecution, thus making this article possible. But the "right to free speech" is being underutilized when it doesn't encourage the "right to great speech" as well. The next leader that is able to both lead and make a great speech might once again earn the legacy of "great orator." Heaven knows, we could use one. (Jeanette Henderson is author of the book, *There's No Such Thing as Public Speaking*, recently published by Penguin. A top speech coach, teacher, writer, and speaker, she is Special Correspondent for the public radio talk show Viewpoints on WCPI-FM in Middle Tennessee, and co-founder of Podium Master, a nationally-recognized presentation consulting firm. She may be contacted through www.podiummaster.com.)

