

AS3238/HY3238
The Political History of the U.S.

Week 10 (The Presidency in the Age of
Television)

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Masako Hattori, Ph.D.

TV and US Presidents



- ▶ 1952: the first use of television "spot" advertising (short commercials generally running between twenty seconds and a minute) in the presidential election.
 - ▶ <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1952>
 - ▶ 1960: the 1st televised presidential election debate
- TV turned presidential elections & P's press conferences into public spectacles

Agenda for Today

- ▶ The Civil Rights Movement and TV
- ▶ JFK
- ▶ LBJ

What did the US Presidency look like in the 1960s? How did TV change the Presidency?

The Sixties



- ▶ A decade of political activism (↔the slow pace of social change & cultural conservatism in the 1950s)
- ▶ Civil rights activists engaged in nonviolent activism, demanding integration, equal political & economic rights
- ▶ Inspired other challenges to the status quo (students, women, other minority groups)

Mass Media and the Civil Rights Movement

- ▶ Little Rock, AR, 1957: highlighted white resistance to the enrollment of African American students in Little Rock Central High School (including the Governor's use of the National Guard in support of the white residents)
- ▶ Eisenhower's dispatch of federal troops: Cold War concerns



Birmingham Campaign, 1963



- ▶ Birmingham, AL=center of segregationist politics (Governor George Wallace: “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!”)
- ▶ A desegregation campaign launched in Birmingham: mass meetings, sit-ins, marches, etc.
- ▶ Images of children and other peaceful protesters being blasted by fire hoses & attacked by police dogs appeared on TV and in newspapers= triggered international outrage.

JFK and Civil Rights



- ▶ The events in Birmingham forced white Americans and JFK to confront the gap between the rhetoric of freedom/democracy & the reality of segregation/racism.
 - ▶ JFK had been preoccupied with foreign policy & considered civil rights a local issue
- June 1963: the civil rights speech (broadcast on TV)

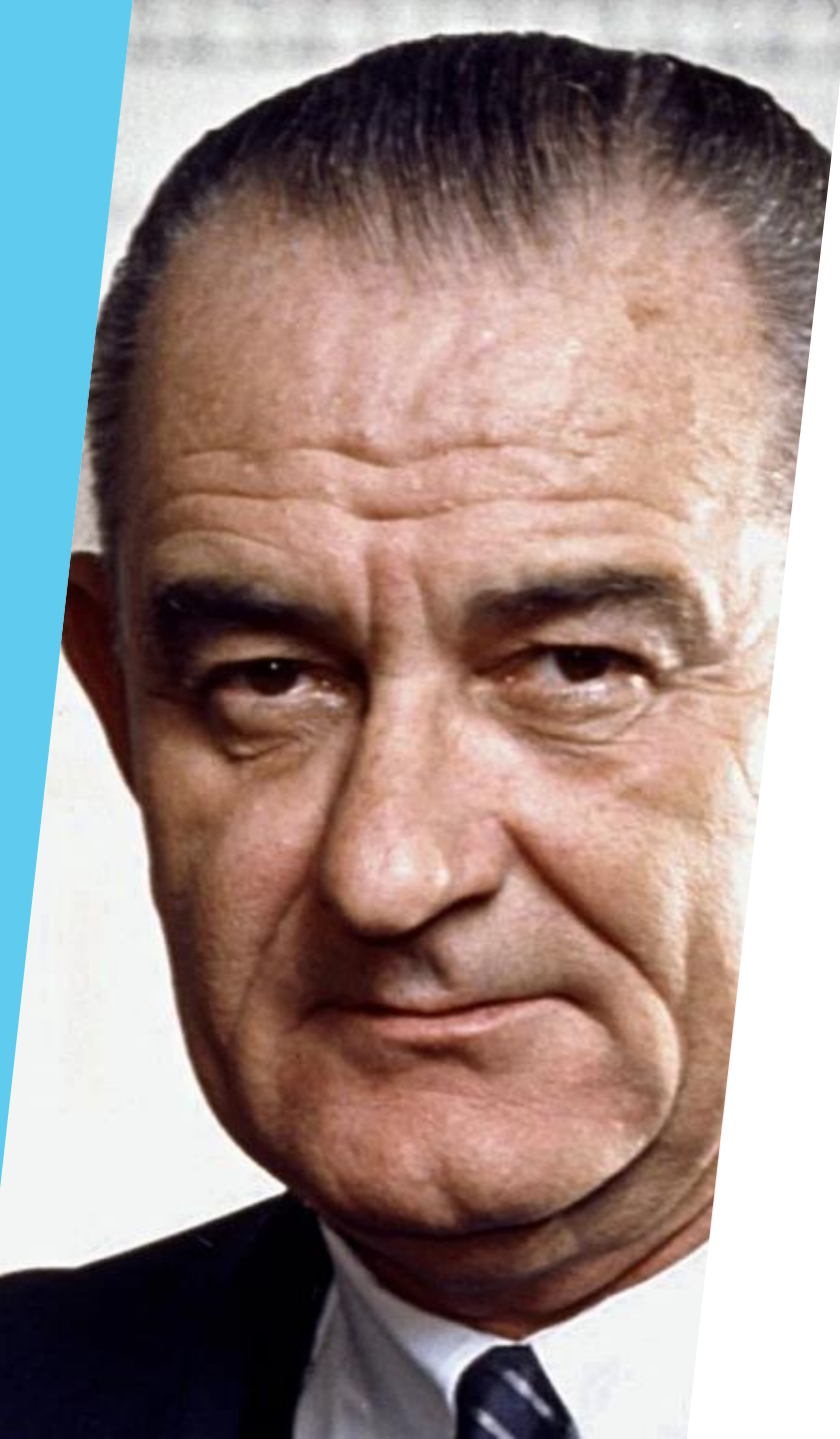


John F. Kennedy (35th President: 1961-1963)

- ▶ Born into a wealthy family of Irish descent in MA, served in the Navy during WWII, became a democratic Congressman in 1946 (Senator in 1953).
- ▶ Became the youngest *elected* president in US history (43 years old).
- ▶ Assassinated in Nov. 1963.
- ▶ Foreign policy: Bay of Pigs incident (1961), Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), sought a new relationship with the Soviet Union
- ▶ Domestic: no major accomplishment (though laid the foundation for reform in later years)

Why Was/Is JFK So Popular?

- ▶ ① the Cold War context: the willingness of the public to grant power to P, tolerate secrecy & broad use of executive power; the tolerance of the press corps
→ The last “great” president in terms of popularity (David Greenberg)
- ▶ ② Personal charm: JFK’s skillful use of TV (presented himself as youthful & energetic, held press conferences *live*), “international superstar” (Gould)
→ JFK’s “biggest contribution to the modern presidency was glamour and celebrity” (Gould)
- ▶ ③ Assassination: visible (filmed); a martyr status (“How would JFK have handled this situation?”)



Lyndon B. Johnson (36th President: 1963-69)

- ▶ Born into a family of modest means in Texas, worked as a schoolteacher, became a Democratic Congressman in 1937.
- ▶ Became a Senator in 1948=a successful career (one of LBJ's strengths as a P=rich experience/knowledge of the legislative process)
- ▶ One of his weaknesses: ill-treatment of the mass media (a poor public speaker; never understood how TV was changing the Presidency)

The Great Society

- ▶ LBJ: more passionate about civil rights than any of his predecessors; wanted to establish himself as the heir of FDR
 - 1964: the Civil Rights Act (prohibited racial discrimination in employment, public institutions, and privately owned public facilities; banned discrimination on the grounds of sex)
 - 1965: Voting Rights Act (abolished voting discrimination in federal, state, and local elections)
- ▶ 1965-67: the “Great Society”
 - a collection of governmental actions to promote the general welfare (health services to the elderly, federal funds into education, policies to eradicate poverty [“War on Poverty”])
 - The most sweeping social welfare effort since the ND

The “Rights Revolution” & Backlash



- ▶ The changing nature of the civil rights movement: political equality to economic equality (more difficult to define/measure); the rise of Black Power (rejected white norms, called for black self-determination)
- ▶ Other movements: counterculture (youth revolt), feminism (women's liberation), other minorities
- ▶ Resistance by conservatives (LBJ, after signing the Civil Rights Act: “I think we delivered the South to the Republican Party.” 1964 election=LBJ's victory but also saw the rise of conservatism in the West and the Southwest)

Vietnam War

- ▶ Aug 1964: Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, authorizing the P to take “all necessary measures to repel armed attack” in Vietnam.
- ▶ LBJ had promised voters during the 1964 campaign that he would not send US troops to Vietnam (saying one thing & doing another =TV undermining presidential authority)
- ▶ The 1st televised war: most mass media reporting had been supportive of the U.S. effort in Vietnam at first
 - Turning point: 1968. Tet Offensive (January) + the spread of the antiwar movement (in response to the rising number of US troops in Vietnam and US casualties)
 - LBJ's presidency marked a shift in the long-term accretion of presidential power that had begun earlier in the century

Conclusion

- ▶ In the 1960s, the American public started to question the expanding power of U.S. presidents. The reasons had to do with both domestic and foreign policy.
- ▶ The rise of television as a powerful medium contributed significantly to the shift in public perceptions of the President.

Tutorial:

Please come prepared to offer two discussion questions.

Next week (film screening):

Venue: Seminar Room at CLB (Level 4)