

Chapter 4

Rhetorical Negotiation and the Presidential Press Conference

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ABSTRACT

This chapter traces the language of presidential press conferences, keying particularly on three axes said to distinguish journalistic and presidential behavior: (1) the interrogatory-protective binary, (2) the clinical-promotional binary, and (3) the grounded-transcendent binary. While theory suggests that such differences exist, empirical studies have not yet confirmed them. The present study does so, showing that reporters and presidents use language quite different from one another and that those distinctions remain constant over time. The press conference presents unique generic opportunities (and challenges) for the president. That is also true for reporters but in much different ways. The chapter also traces how the press conference has tipped increasingly in the president's favor over time, especially when matters of foreign policy have been discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The presidential press conference shows what happens when institutions collide. The presidency vs. the mass media, the First Estate vs. the Fourth Estate, the baiters vs. the baited, the insiders vs. the outsiders, the power-holders vs. those suspicious of power – all come together in the presidential press conference. Franklin Roosevelt liked these affairs, Harry Truman did not, but Jack Kennedy liked them well enough to have them televised. If the choice were theirs, however, most presidents would forego these ritualistic grillings. Lyndon

Johnson had to be “gimmicked” into participating in them by his press secretary (Powell, Reedy, & terHorst, 1983), while Dwight Eisenhower bravely declared, “I will mount the weekly cross and let you [the press] drive the nails” (quoted in Kumar, 2003a, p. 221). Journalists, too, are often unhappy with such events. “Too many of the questions are lobbed setups and blooper balls,” declared *Des Moines Register* reporter Clark Mollenhoff (quoted in Kernell, 2007, p. 96), a statement reflecting popular laments about reporters who fail to stand up to the president. Still, the press conference persists.

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The press conference is a preeminently institutional affair but it is also a human thing. The ever-cautious Richard Nixon particularly disliked them so he moved them to prime-time in an attempt to talk over the heads of the press. Dan Rather of CBS News once tried to beard Mr. Nixon for such manipulations. Rather introduced himself during a March, 1974 press conference and was immediately applauded by his colleagues. Nixon (1974, March 19) then asked, “Are you running for something?” To this, Rather replied, “No, sir, Mr. President. Are you?” Although such sharp exchanges are comparatively rare, an undertone of disquiet is often present, with the president, attempting to answer the questions he wished had been asked and the press trying to get a response to the query actually posed.

This chapter examines the presidential press conference to tease out its institutional complexities. Oddly enough, while considerable historical commentary exists about the press conference, very little textual work has been done. That is strange since the press conference is, first and foremost, a rhetorical event featuring thrust and parry. To examine how the press and the president “language” their relationship is to discover not only what they say but also what they think but cannot say. Why these tensions? Why such holding-back? We attempt to answer such questions here.

The Press Conference as Institutional Practice

The presidential press conference is shot-through with complexity. It is, at once, an interrogation but also a performance. It is a two-person exchange watched by millions, a public event played against a backdrop of private relationships. The press conference spotlights one person – the president – but standing behind him in the dark is a communications staff numbering 350 strong (Kumar, 2007). Reporters present themselves as ordinary folks from Topeka but they are, in reality, well-known celebrities employed by multi-billion

dollar media corporations. The presidential press conference, then, is not a simple thing. Instead, it is these things:

- **A Theatrical Event:** Technically speaking, the press conference is a spectacle that, in the words of Miroff (2010), “is not designed for mass participation” and is therefore “not a democratic event” (p. 211). Instead, it is rather like professional wrestling, where “a larger-than-life main character and a supporting team engage in emblematic bouts with immoral or dangerous adversaries” (p. 212). The press conference lets the president “become” the president – on a grand stage, attended by minions, his every word measured and recorded. It is hard for the press not to be manipulated in such environs, to be turned into bit players in the president’s show (Edwards, 1983). As in the theater, the hero – the president – will decide which other players can tread the boards. As in the theater, the main character will “practice” being president off-stage, well before he hears the sound of ruffles and flourishes on stage.
- **A Performative Event:** As J. L. Austin (1970) might observe, the press conference is also a “doing,” a bringing-into-being of some important plan of action. The president does more than read a script. What he says about Iraq can create new hostilities; what he says about the deficit can undo the Wall Street rally. The press conference puts “words on the record” and, just as often, it “makes news” (Kumar, 2003b). Via the press conference, the president also “assumes responsibility” for actions taken (Manheim, 1979) and, when it goes well, the press conference can “add legitimacy” to administration policies (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008). The press conference features words in action.

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