

THE ANTI-
INTELLECTUAL
PRESIDENCY

*The Decline of
Presidential Rhetoric from
George Washington to
George W. Bush*

ELVIN T. LIM

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2008



PREFACE

The state of presidential rhetoric today has taken a nosedive from our founding era. The influential journalist and satirist H. L. Mencken once wrote of President Warren Harding's inaugural address: "It reminds me of a string of wet sponges; it reminds me of tattered washing on the line; it reminds me of stale bean soup, of college yells, of dogs barking idiotically through endless nights. It is so bad that a sort of grandeur creeps into it."¹ Mencken's assessment would not have been too far off in describing the speeches of Harding's successors in the White House, but his complaint also addresses a deeper problem with an ancient pedigree. Our society's disquiet toward presidential rhetoric is as old as Plato's belief that "oratory is a spurious counterfeit of a branch of the art of government," and it is as entrenched as the conventional diagnosis that presidential leadership has become too "rhetorical."² There is widespread sentiment today that the pathologies of modern presidential government derive from the loquaciousness of the office and that if presidents spent less time talking and campaigning, they would spend more time deliberating and governing. But the Greeks were not straightforwardly opposed to rhetoric. After all, their arguments were put forth in Socratic dialogues. It was a particular *type* of rhetoric that Plato decried, the type that was used to pander to and seduce the people. Already at the inception of rhetorical studies, Plato had distinguished "mere rhetoric"—words crafted to equivocate, flatter, or seduce—and meaningful

rhetoric, which facilitates rational disputation, a distinction that is at the heart of this book's (reconceived) critique of the contemporary presidency. My thesis is this: the problem of presidential rhetoric in our time resides not in its quantity, but in its quality. The problem is not that "going public" has become a routine presidential practice; it is that while presidents talk a lot, they say very little that contributes constructively to public deliberation.³ Our problem is the anti-intellectual presidency, not the rhetorical presidency.

Although presidential anti-intellectualism has become a defining characteristic of the contemporary presidency, we have been slow to call it as we see it. Perhaps scholars have assumed a synthetic link between the quantity and quality of presidential rhetoric and have focused on the former, assuming that the pressure to speechify has contributed to or is the same pressure that has given presidents the incentive to go anti-intellectual. But of course they are distinct. On the demand side of citizen-auditors, we do not lower our expectations about the substance and quality of what is communicated to us even as we insist, perhaps unreasonably, that presidents have something to say about almost everything. On the supply side, presidents today have an extensive speechwriting apparatus at their disposal. It is unlikely that problematic catchphrases such as the "axis of evil" or the "war on terror" emerged inadvertently as a result of overwhelming presidential speech loads.

Perhaps we have resisted making the charge of presidential anti-intellectualism because it is difficult not to sound elitist when laying the charge and even more difficult to prove it. Or perhaps anti-intellectualism creeps up on one. Simplifying rhetoric to make it more accessible to the average citizen is a laudable enterprise, but at some point simplification becomes oversimplification, and the line between the two is often difficult to define, especially in a polity committed to democracy. But whatever the reason, I suspect that the scholarly animus toward the rhetorical presidency would be significantly tempered if contemporary presidents spoke more like Washington and Jefferson with greater frequency and less like Ford and Carter with equal frequency. If this intuition sounds correct, then what really bothers us about contemporary presidential rhetoric is not how much is said, but what is being said. Rather than harp on the problem of the rhetorical presidency, this book addresses presidential anti-intellectualism head on. This is a critical enterprise because much that is wrong with American politics today begins with the words that emanate from the nation's highest officeholder and principal spokesperson. When presidents lie to us or mislead us, when they

pander to us or seduce us with their words, when they equivocate and try to be all things to all people, or when they divide us with wedge issues, they do so with an arsenal of anti-intellectual tricks, with rhetoric that is linguistically simplistic, reliant on platitudes or partisan slogans, short on argument, and long on emotive and human-interest appeals.

Let me state upfront what I am *not* addressing in this book as a means of clarifying what I *am* addressing. First, I am concerned with anti-intellectualism only in the political and not in the philosophical sense. I am not concerned with Kierkegaard's doctrine of anti-rationalism, the view that moral truth cannot be derived from an objective judgment of right and wrong, nor with Hume's theory of knowledge that none of our ideas are analytically prior but all are the result of sensational "impressions," nor with Henri Bergson's theory that it is more the intuition and less the intellect that is the driving force behind human thought, nor with Nietzsche's and Freud's theories of unconscious motivation in human decisions. I am interested in the political uses and consequences of anti-intellectualism as manifested in American presidential rhetoric.

Second, this book is not concerned with unintelligence but with anti-intellectualism. Intelligence, as I argue in chapter 2, pertains to the first-order functions of the mind which grasps, manipulates, adjusts, and so forth; intellect evaluates these activities and involves the activities of the mind's eye on itself, such as in theorizing, criticizing, pondering, and so forth. Apart from the conspicuous exceptions from the patrician era, it appears that most presidents were not, especially when we think of the nineteenth-century "dark-horse" candidates, been exceptionally intelligent men because the electoral process (and in particular the Democratic Party's two-thirds rule for nominating its presidential candidates) selected not for intelligence, but for bland standard-bearers who were politically inoffensive enough to garner votes at the nomination convention. In the twentieth century, a first-past-the-post two-party system militated against the selection of a person of exceptional qualities in favor of a candidate that could appeal to the median voter. Thus, Harding was described as a "second-rate provincial" and Franklin Roosevelt as "a second class intellect."⁴ What is noteworthy for my purposes, however, is that despite their alleged mediocrity, most presidents in the past preferred to appear less, not more, intellectually inclined than they actually were. And they pursued this strategy even though they had no lack of access to both intellectuals and very intelligent aides who could have been easily deployed to cultivate an image otherwise.⁵ A president who assiduously adopts, with the aid of an extensive and professional staff, an anti-intellectual posture

cannot be, at least straightforwardly, unintelligent. Indeed, it is the paradoxical fact that the anti-intellectual presidency qua institution is composed of a collectivity (and indeed, an increasing co-optation) of experts that makes my story particularly poignant.

Because anti-intellectualism denigrates the *intellect* and *intellectuals* rather than *intelligence*, I have used “dumbing down” sparingly in this book even though the phrase may appear to be an obvious signifier of the phenomenon I am tracking. Dumbing down, which I approximately understand to be some excessive degree of linguistic simplification, pejoratively supposes a “dumbness” or unintelligence presumed to be the state of the median auditor-citizen. By appropriating the term dumbing down, we implicitly endorse the idea that citizens are unintelligent and presidents are merely calibrating their messages as such. I reject the premise and therefore the conclusion of this idea. Citizens are not dumb, and they deserve more, not less, information from presidents so that they are equipped to make competent civic decisions. Though he will often be the first to make this charge, it is the anti-intellectualist who underestimates citizens and who assumes that citizens cannot digest anything more than platitudes and simplistic slogans. Further, dumbing down does not fully capture the scope of the wily anti-intellectualist’s tactics. Linguistic simplification is typically a major component of going anti-intellectual, but the former is neither necessary nor sufficient for the latter. For instance, a major anti-intellectualist strategy is to fudge and to equivocate by the use of platitudes and abstract concepts. This strategy is not accurately described as dumbing down since platitudes can be both trivially true and profound; but they are anti-intellectual in the rejection of precise argument as a basis for deliberation and rational disputation. For example, some defenders of Ronald Reagan’s soaring rhetoric have contended that his speeches, in appealing to the mythic chords of collective national identity, were not dumbed down, but recondite and even sublime.⁶ In chapter 4, I will suggest, with the different and more precise locution of anti-intellectualism, exactly what is wrong with and anti-intellectual about an excessive reliance on inspirational platitudes.

Third, my purpose is not to provide an instruction manual for presidential leadership in the way Richard Neustadt’s *Presidential Power* was written for John Kennedy.⁷ I do not expect presidents to voluntarily eschew the anti-intellectual path of least resistance; only citizens can force them to do so. I also reject institutional partisanship—a partiality toward the prospects and accretion of presidential power—because the view from behind the president’s shoulder justifies and anticipates the fulfillment of presidential

priorities, often at the expense of other branches and institutions of American government.⁸ What works, rhetorically or otherwise, for the president may not be best for the country. So my aim is not to assess the marginal political gain to the president of “going public”—a subject that has already produced an extensive and illustrious literature—but to rearticulate the systemic costs of the rhetorical presidency, which is better read, I will argue, as the “anti-intellectual presidency.” As such, this book is as much about the presidency as it is about American democracy, for in diagnosing the quality of presidential discourse, I am also offering a barometer for the state of presidential leadership and the health of American democracy.

There are three other prefatory points I want to make. First, throughout this book, I will use masculine pronouns to refer to presidents because, as of 2007 (when this is being written), there has not been a female president in American history. My second point pertains to sources. So as not to clutter the text with too many cumbersome notes, I have indicated only the titles, dates, and the *Public Papers* in which the speeches I have quoted in the twentieth century and beyond are collected, and not the full publishers’ and page citations. This is all the information a reader needs to search the solid and accessible digital record of the *Public Papers* of the presidents on the Internet and to retrieve the relevant full-page documents. In particular, I recommend the Web site of the American Presidency Project run by John Woolley and Gerhard Peters at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws>, the University of Michigan digital library at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/ppotpus>, and for newly minted presidential documents, the GPO Web site at <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/wcomp/index.html> provides a weekly compilation of presidential documents (all accessed on 8/28/2007).

Today, more than ever, it is imperative that we attend to the substance of presidential rhetoric as we observe the expansion of the rhetorical presidency into the rhetorical executive. Not only is over one-third of the contemporary White House staff engaged in some aspect of public relations or political communication, it is now routine practice for a president to deploy and coordinate his cabinet and staff to do his rhetorical bidding.⁹ The expectations for public officials to “go public” is now so heightened that for the first time in the history of the office, James L. Pavitt, chief of the CIA’s clandestine service, was called to testify in a public hearing before the 9/11 Commission. This expansion of the rhetorical executive was such a break from precedent that one of the commissioners, former senator Bob Kerrey (D-NE), observed that his “stomach’s been turning as Mr. Pavitt’s been answering questions here this afternoon.”¹⁰ Yet, more words do not necessarily mean more answers, as the

regular deployment of top administration officials to toe the White House “line of the day” evidences. My broadest aim in this book is to invite readers to look more closely at the quality of presidential rhetoric and where it has fallen short of the purpose it should serve in a democracy. We must not rest content with relegating presidential rhetoric to “mere rhetoric,” because our inattention to mere rhetoric, or our failure to pierce through it, can and has landed us into trouble.



CONTENTS

- 1 The Problem of Presidential Rhetoric, 3
 - 2 The Linguistic Simplification of Presidential Rhetoric, 19
 - 3 The Anti-Intellectual Speechwriters, 40
 - 4 The Substantive Impoverishment of Presidential Rhetoric, 54
 - 5 Institutionalizing the Anti-Intellectual Presidency, 77
 - 6 Indicting the Anti-Intellectual Presidency, 100
 - 7 Reforming the Anti-Intellectual Presidency, 115
- Appendix I The *General Inquirer* (GI), 123
- Appendix II Definitions of *General Inquirer* Categories Used, 127
- Appendix III Annual Messages, 1790–2006, 129
- Appendix IV Inaugural Addresses, 1789–2005, 135

Appendix V Presidential Speechwriters Interviewed, 137

Appendix VI The Flesch Readability Score, 141

Notes, 143

Index, 175

The Problem of Presidential Rhetoric

The title and timing of this book may suggest to some readers that my aim is to add to a hackneyed sequence of rants on the intellectual limitations of the current president or other recent presidents. It is not. The problem of anti-intellectualism in the White House has an institutional pedigree that precedes President George W. Bush, even if the culmination of these long-term trends have made the most recent incarnation of the anti-intellectual presidency exemplary. We underestimate the extent of presidential anti-intellectualism if we allow it to become a partisan critique. Indeed, this book is not about intelligence or anti-intelligence, for these are separate categories. The anti-intellectual president is certainly intelligent or at least crafty enough to recognize the political utility of publicly rejecting the “highfalutin” ruminations of the intellectual and to affirm the soundness of “common sense.” As I will argue, Bill Clinton was one such intelligent but anti-intellectual president.

The denigration of the intellect, the intellectual, and intellectual opinions has, to a degree not yet acknowledged, become a routine presidential rhetorical stance. Indeed, intellectuals have become among the most assailable piñatas of American politics. For President Herbert Hoover, intellectuals exhibited an “unbroken record of total abstinence from constructive joy over our whole national history.”¹ President Dwight Eisenhower had little sympathy for the “wise-cracking so called intellectuals going around and showing how wrong was everybody who didn’t happen to agree with them.”²

Intellectuals, according to President Lyndon Johnson, are “more concerned with style than they are with mortar, brick, and concrete. They are more concerned with the trivia and the superficial than they are with the things that have really built America.”³

Since Richard Hofstadter’s magisterial *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* was published in 1963, the subject of anti-intellectualism has been given little scholarly attention, and it survives today mostly only in the literature on education.⁴ This is partly because the phenomenon, though endemic, is hard to define and even harder to measure. Few people will disagree that elements of it pervade our culture and politics, but disagreements emerge as soon as claims are specified. In politics, observers have long noticed “the special connection between politics and the debasement of language.”⁵ Murray Edelman observes that political language is “banal . . . highly stylized and predictable most of the time.”⁶ For Kenneth Burke, democratic political language serves to “sharpen up the pointless and blunt the too sharply pointed.”⁷ More specifically, presidential rhetorical efforts have been described as “a linguistic struggle,” “rarely an occasion for original thought,” like “dogs barking idiotically through endless nights,” bordering on “demagoguery,” and “pontification cum anecdotalism.”⁸ Yet while many will endorse these declension narratives, we have yet to provide an evidentiary basis for such claims.

Most important, the declining quality of presidential rhetoric is exactly what unifies several scholarly accounts of the contemporary presidency. What connects the scholarly characterizations of the “permanent campaign,” the “sound of leadership,” the “presidential spectacle,” the “symbolic presidency,” the “public presidency,” and the “rhetorical presidency” is the consensus that the pressure on presidents to go public has created a pathology of vacuous rhetoric and imagery that has impoverished our public deliberative sphere. Democratic politics in our time, according to Hugh Heclo, passes “from degradation to debauchery . . . when leaders teach a willing people to love illusions—to like nonsense because it sounds good.”⁹ “The natural inclination of one who speaks for a living is,” according to Roderick Hart, “to become less and less inclined to examine one’s own thoughts analytically and more and more attentive to the often uncritical reactions of popular assemblages.”¹⁰ Presidential “spectacles,” which promote “gesture over accomplishment and appearance over fact,” have, according to Bruce Miroff, become the mode of governance.¹¹ Bereft of argument and substance, the language of government is now, according to Robert Denton, “the dissemination of illusion and ambiguity.”¹² “All a president can do,” according to George Edwards, “is rely on rhetoric and symbols to obscure perceptions enough to be all things to

all people.”¹³ Similarly, James Ceaser and his colleagues argue that the framers created a tripartite governmental system so that members of each branch “would be forced to deal with knowledgeable and determined men not easily impressed by facile oratory.” But in the context of today’s rhetorical presidency, “argument gives way to aphorism.”¹⁴ The anti-intellectual presidency is an underlying thesis in all of these accounts. Whereas these scholars address these similar rhetorical manifestations as symptoms of larger problems differentially specified, I address presidential anti-intellectualism as the problem itself.

These scholarly observations are, curiously enough, matched by presidential speechwriters, partners in crime with presidents in driving the alleged degeneration of presidential rhetoric. Peggy Noonan observes that “the only organ to which no appeal is made these days—you might call it America’s only understimulated organ—is the brain.”¹⁵ Another speechwriter observes, “I think there was a time when speechwriters were far more conscious of the literary quotient in their prose than is true now.”¹⁶ Landon Parvin, a speechwriter for Ronald Reagan, complains, “The reason why I don’t like most political speeches is that they don’t deal with logic at all.”¹⁷ Another speechwriter observes that rhetoric today is “much more of a matter of attempting to put your position in terms that are most familiar and appealing . . . than it is a matter of attempting to move people and to cause people to adopt a different point of view by the strength of your argument.”¹⁸ According to William Gavin, a staff assistant to Richard Nixon, “the whole question of argument is something that has been totally lost in American rhetoric.”¹⁹ Speaking in 1976, a former Nixon speechwriter and future Reagan chief speechwriter correctly foretold the future:

I’m afraid that the quality of public debate is not improving. People are not getting a more enlightened argument being presented to them. . . . Now it really is much more a matter of imagery. I think it’s an unfortunate thing and it’s going to get worse, not better.²⁰

Other speechwriters have observed our entry into an “unrhetorical age,” that political speech has become “run of the mill,” “a dying art form,” and “rose garden garbage.”²¹ That the very authors of presidential rhetoric should lament the collective products of their profession smacks of hypocrisy, but it is also a critical telltale symptom of a tyrannical decisional logic that I will examine in greater detail in chapter 3. The pressure to “go anti-intellectual” in American politics is so powerful that those who drive it also decry it.

For now, it is sufficient to note that, however one characterizes the contemporary presidency, scholars and speechwriters alike have noticed the declining

quality of presidential discourse. The aim of this book is to provide a measure of this decline beyond the anecdotal accounts already offered by demonstrating the relentless simplification of presidential rhetoric in the last two centuries and the increasing substitution of arguments with applause-rendering platitudes, partisan punch lines, and emotional and human interest appeals. I characterize these rhetorical trends as manifestations of the anti-intellectual presidency.

The Rhetorical Presidency

At least since the 1980s, presidential scholars have inverted the presidential instinct that “rhetoric is the solution to the problem” with the diagnosis that “rhetoric is the problem itself.” What exactly is this problem though? The conventional wisdom is that presidents are talking too much, in part because “deeds [are now] done in words.”²² Today, we hear the ceaseless “sound of leadership.”²³ As campaigns turn seamlessly into governance, we are told that we have entered the loquacious era of the “permanent campaign.”²⁴ To resolve the fissiparous and fragmented institutional environment of American politics, going public to reach the people directly, rather than interbranch deliberation, has become the efficient strategy of choice.²⁵ The American executive today is preeminently a “public presidency.”²⁶ Notice that all of these accounts focus on the iterative act of rhetoric, rather than its substance.

The dominant and, I think, most sophisticated account of presidential loquaciousness is Jeffrey Tulis’s theory of the “rhetorical presidency.”²⁷ The problem of the rhetorical presidency, for Tulis, is not just in the observation that presidents now talk a lot, as he had already noted in an earlier version of the theory, but in the simultaneous existence of two antithetical constitutions guiding presidential rhetorical choices: first, the original, formal constitution, which respects the equality of the three branches of the federal government and interbranch deliberation and correspondingly envisions a more reticent president; and second, an organic constitution, which has evolved into being by a combination of necessity and practice that encourages and legitimates presidential rhetorical leadership.²⁸ Tulis’s insight is in characterizing the rhetorical presidency as a “hybrid” institution that emerged in the early twentieth century. The rhetorical presidency was a product of the second constitution superimposed on the original, with the attendant “dilemmas of modern governance” emerging because of the incongruous coexistence of two antithetical constitutions: one proscribing presidential rhetoric, another prescribing it.²⁹ The dilemma emerged because

presidential rhetoric directed “over the heads” of congress toward citizens preempted congressional and interbranch deliberation during the course of routine politics, but yet was required in moments of emergency. While this insight has advanced our understanding of the processes of institutional change—which are often incomplete and layered—it has distracted us from a proper diagnosis of the pathologies of presidential rhetoric.

Beyond Rhetorical Dilemmas

Most critiques of the rhetorical presidency thesis have challenged Tulis’s bifurcation of presidential history and, in particular, the caricaturing of nineteenth-century rhetorical norms as something genuinely distinct from twentieth-century practice. Scholars tell us that presidents in the nineteenth century have in their own ways but with equal enthusiasm taken their case to the people, denying Tulis’s claim that nineteenth-century presidents were all that reticent.³⁰ They go some way in challenging Tulis’s thesis, for if nineteenth-century presidents went public as often as twentieth-century presidents did, there would be just one constitution vacillating at different times in American history, not two, and therefore no modern constitutional dilemma to speak of. Presidents would only face the dilemma of reticence versus loquaciousness if the tug of two opposing constitutional injunctions operated on them *simultaneously* rather than sequentially at different times.³¹ But these arguments, while persuasive, do not go far enough because they only challenge the empirical premise of Tulis’s argument—that there are two antithetical constitutions operating side by side—rather than challenge the argument on Tulis’s own terms, granting the author that there are indeed two constitutions, but rejecting his conclusion that the dilemmas of governance emerge from their interaction.

Tulis’s developmental insight about the emergence of a distinct, second constitution prescribing presidential loquaciousness is possibly correct, but his diagnosis of what is problematic about the rhetorical presidency is incomplete and does not go far enough because he is constrained by his “hybrid” argument. Here is how. Dilemmas are characterized by more or less equal motivational tugs from opposite directions, so that whichever way one succumbs, one pays an equal cost for the abandonment of the other. If the costs were not approximately equal, then there would be no dilemma to start with. Now, if the problem of the rhetorical presidency were derived from the tension between two constitutions, the pathologies of presidential leadership

could be removed if we could surgically remove one constitution, leaving the other intact, so that we either have the unfettered continuation of the original constitution, or a complete displacement of it with the new. *Either* hypothetical solution would remove the conditions for a dilemma. Crucially, Tulis ought to have been indifferent to either hypothetical alternative since for him, the problem of the rhetorical presidency was its *hybridity*.

Yet Tulis was not indifferent to the alternatives, but partial to the merits of reticence as prescribed by the older constitution. Tellingly, his solution to the rhetorical presidency was the deroutinization of going public, while allowing for rhetorical leadership only in moments of crisis, *and not vice versa*. When Tulis lamented that the rhetorical presidency had brought on “an erosion of the processes of deliberation, and a decay of political discourse,” he was clearly laying the blame unequally on the new constitution, rather than the old.³² Dilemma aside, Tulis was partial to the older constitution’s prescription of presidential reticence, betraying his view that there is something inherently troubling about the new constitution. And so we are back with an essentially quantitative critique of the problem of presidential rhetoric. As the title of his book tells us, the problem of the rhetorical presidency is that it is, well, too rhetorical.

If Tulis was correct in intuiting that there is something inherently troubling about the new state of affairs wrought by the rhetorical presidency, his characterization of the constitution in terms of its hybridity obscures rather than clarifies his diagnosis. Indeed, the problematic diagnosis translates into an undeliverable solution—a dilemma within a dilemma—that has made an exit from the rhetorical presidency forbiddingly difficult. It reveals the weakness of a quantitative critique of presidential rhetoric. Recall that the ideal presidential rhetorical situation, according to Tulis, would minimize routine appeals to the public while allowing for rhetorical initiative in moments of crisis. But here is the implemental dilemma Tulis himself recognized:

How would one return to an earlier polity, and who would bring us there? Wouldn’t we need to be led by one regarded as the legitimate spokesman for the nation as a whole—that is, by a president appealing to us directly? . . . Refounding or restorative leadership, even in the service of the “old way,” seems to require practices proscribed in the nineteenth century.³³

By Tulis’s own account, the rhetorical presidency cannot be silenced because, paradoxically, only a rhetorical president can rescue us from the rhetorical presidency. This is a paralyzing conclusion, and needlessly pessimistic. It

emerges from a failure to distinguish the quantity of rhetoric from its quality. This book proposes a different diagnosis of the pathologies of the rhetorical presidency by shifting our attention away from the dilemma posed by two constitutions and away from the *quantity* of presidential rhetoric toward its *quality*. The “old way” of silence or reticence that Tulis looked nostalgically toward is not a solution because the problem, I propose, is not the rhetorical presidency but the anti-intellectual presidency.

To effect this analytic shift, we need only drop Tulis’s untenable assumption that the “surfeit of speech by politicians constitutes a decay of political discourse.”³⁴ More talk does not have to mean less substance, though the assumed causal relationship between loquaciousness and vacuousness has been exaggerated to such an extent that the two have practically come to mean the same thing. Tulis may have assumed a synthetic link between more talk and less substance, between going public and going anti-intellectual, but to diagnose the problem purely in quantitative terms is to miss the essence of the pathology. What bothers us is not the fact the presidents talk a lot, but that they say very little even when they talk a lot. Conversely, if presidents talked a lot but made a lot of sense, it would be unclear what, if any, objections would remain of the rhetorical presidency. We would then be left with the problem of the unequal rhetorical balance of power between the president and congress, but then this becomes a problem of *congress* failing to talk back, not a clear-cut matter of presidential wrongdoing. Indeed, because Tulis represents the decay of political discourse as merely a function of the surfeit of presidential speech, he inadvertently exonerates presidents by characterizing them as passive actors responding to the speechifying demands exerted on them by the new constitution. I will show, in chapter 3, that the anti-intellectual presidency emerged deliberately and calculatedly, rather than inevitably from the relatively independent fact of a more rhetorical presidency.

If speechwriters and scholars alike lament the degeneration of presidential rhetoric, then it is a problem that we must confront head on. I extract the underlying critique of the anti-intellectual presidency, which is embedded in the rhetorical and public presidency literatures, and place it front and center in this book. The anti-intellectual presidency, understood as a problem of rhetorical quality, not quantity, is what properly articulates our intuitions and unifies scholarly lamentations about the rhetorical presidency.

There is another benefit to my thesis. By assigning no inherent fault in presidential appeals to the public but only, potentially, to their content, we can rehabilitate Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, who are relegated to a needlessly ambiguous station in the rhetorical presidency literature. These

presidents may have legitimated the routine recourse to going public, but they did not, on my account and by themselves, inaugurate the anti-intellectual presidency. Tulis's bittersweet characterization of TR's "middle way" of rhetorical moderation, I argue, equivocates revealingly on the founding status of TR.³⁵ Why the equivocation? Why not just concede that TR *was* a founding rhetorical president, who popularized the frequent use of "swings round the circle" and the "bully pulpit," as the conventional wisdom attests? I propose that, because Tulis recognized, correctly, that TR was inaugurating something rather new (the rhetorical presidency), he did not want to go as far as to say that this was a corrupt institutional innovation (as the anti-intellectual presidency would be). The distinction I make here allows us to properly locate the developmental innovations of TR and Wilson, both founders of the rhetorical presidency, but less so of the anti-intellectual presidency.

The experience of these two presidents reveals the distinction between the rhetorical and anti-intellectual presidencies. "Cromwell, like so many a so-called 'practical' man," Theodore Roosevelt once wrote, "would have done better work had he followed a more clearly defined theory, for though the practical man is better than the mere theorist, he cannot do the highest work unless he is a theorist also."³⁶ Insofar as the leader of the Rough Riders valorized action over reflection, the anti-intellectual impulse was latent in his presidency, but TR also knew well that the "practical man" must also be a "theorist," and this was evident in his rhetoric. TR's first communication and annual message to congress after becoming president, complained Secretary of the Navy John D. Long, "might have been shorter" and exuded "a sort of academic flavor."³⁷ This passage on the antitrust movement from the message gives us a sense of that flavor:

The mechanism of modern business is so delicate that extreme care must be taken not to interfere with it in a spirit of rashness or ignorance. Many of those who have made it their vocation to denounce the great industrial combinations which are popularly, although with technical inaccuracy, known as "trusts," appeal especially to hatred and fear. These are precisely the two emotions, particularly when combined with ignorance, which unfit men for the exercise of cool and steady judgment. In facing new industrial conditions, the whole history of the world shows that legislation will generally be both unwise and ineffective unless undertaken after calm inquiry and with sober self-restraint.³⁸

In his call for moderation, Roosevelt correlated rashness with "ignorance," "technical inaccuracy," and a lack of wisdom—all enemies of "steady

judgment” and “calm inquiry.” Here was a president who was telling members of congress that the legislative issues they faced were “delicate,” for which there were no straightforward (modern presidents would say “commonsensical”) answers. He was specifically rejecting the place of passion or the emotions in guiding policy; and he was explicitly advocating accuracy, judgment, and inquiry.

The *New York Times* praised Roosevelt’s message in ways that reveal a very different standard of appraising presidential rhetoric from today’s anti-intellectual paradigm. The following account of Roosevelt’s literary talent seems almost quaint by today’s standards:

Certainly no President’s message has ever contained better writing than some passages in the State paper sent to congress yesterday. He writes with the lucidity and the power of a man who commands his subjects and has mature ideas to express and positive beliefs and opinions to present. Moreover, he does not misuse the English language, a fault from which some very great men among our presidents have not been free. The whole range of affairs to which the President may or should invite the attention of congress appears to have been swept by the conscientious and comprehensive Executive pen.³⁹

Though TR’s “executive pen” produced rhetoric that was qualitatively very different from the one produced by his successors, there was no doubt that he was a rhetorical president. Indeed, his contemporaries tired of his speeches. On the eve of Roosevelt’s speaking tour to sell his railroad bill, an editorialist wrote:

Mr. Roosevelt has had so many opportunities to catch the public ear within the last four years and he has made such assiduous use of them that he cannot be expected to have much that is unfamiliar to offer. . . . He repeats himself in a remarkable degree, but always with the same earnestness, with the same certainty that he is right and that it is important for his countrymen to hear again and again until they heed.⁴⁰

The assumed synthetic link between the rhetorical and anti-intellectual presidencies is also tenuous in the case of another founding rhetorical president, Woodrow Wilson. The former professor and president of Princeton University definitely envisioned and practiced a more rhetorical presidency, but it would be difficult to argue that he would have unhesitatingly endorsed an anti-intellectual one. In his senior year at college, the budding scholar-statesman articulated an exacting standard of political rhetoric: “in the unsparing examination and telling criticism of opposite positions, the careful

painstaking unraveling of all the issues involved . . . we see the best, the only effective, means of educating public opinion.”⁴¹ Wilson, who was no fan of the “hide and seek vagaries” of accountability in the American constitution’s checks and balances, would have been just as unimpressed by the hide-and-seek vagaries of authorial responsibility for today’s delegated speechwriting environment, a situation I will describe in chapter 5.⁴² All this is to say, then, that there is something odd in an account of presidential history that puts Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson in the same group of presidents as Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Legitimate cases can be made for each of these four presidents as eloquent speakers and rhetorical presidents, but these judgments would conceal the qualitatively different types of rhetoric the two sets of presidents produced. TR and Wilson may have inaugurated something that Clinton and Bush inherited, but the latter two presidents transformed their inheritance into something completely different. While Roosevelt and Wilson were founding rhetorical presidents, Clinton and Bush were distinctly anti-intellectual ones.

By distinguishing the rhetorical and anti-intellectual presidencies, we can avoid the charge of flattening out nineteenth-century presidential history, rehabilitate the Roosevelt and Wilson presidencies by acknowledging that these rhetorical presidents were nowhere near as anti-intellectual as their successors, and come to a clearer diagnosis of what is wrong with contemporary presidential rhetoric. And it is important that we get the diagnosis right. We should not assume that presidential reticence alone would solve the problem of a substantively impoverished public sphere. Rather than seek self-defeating strategies by which we can silence presidents, we should seek to elevate the quality of presidential rhetoric. If we see the problem in qualitative rather than quantitative terms, we bypass Tulis’s dilemma (and the implemental dilemma within it) altogether. By zooming in on the problem of anti-intellectualism, we stand a greater chance of finding leaders who satisfy the democratic citizen’s demand for public leadership and who also refuse to coddle us with vacuous talk. A rhetorical presidency can rescue us from the anti-intellectual presidency after all.

Analyzing Presidential Rhetoric: Some Observations on Methods

To advance our understanding of the rhetorical presidency, we must look squarely and systematically at presidential rhetoric.⁴³ Part of the reason

that political scientists have tended to focus on the quantitative problem of presidential rhetoric is their understanding of presidential speeches as acts—encapsulated by the widespread scholarly adoption of the term “going public”—rather than as processes infused with meaning. Recent scholarship has treated going public as strategic acts with measurable effects on the president’s approval ratings, policy agenda, and legislative success and on the nation’s economic performance.⁴⁴ Yet the measurable impact of speeches derives not just from when or how frequently they are made, but from what is actually said.⁴⁵ To assume that the act of saying something generates a certain reaction without close attention to what is being said is to miss the most crucial stage in the causal process and the scope of its impact. Not surprisingly, rhetorical and communications scholars have taken exception to this omission.⁴⁶ Yet their scholarly enterprise is not without limitations either. Focused on textual and contextual particulars, most rhetorical scholars have not ventured beyond piecemeal accounts of individual presidential rhetorical efforts to understand the presidency and its collective rhetorical record qua institution. For many rhetorical scholars, “each speech is a problem that has to be solved by using specific kinds of rhetorical devices.”⁴⁷ This particularism coheres well with a biographical approach consisting of “a study of individual speakers for their influence upon history.”⁴⁸ The resilience of the biographical approach coupled with a bias for “great” presidents have produced a body of work heavily weighted in treatments of Lincoln, FDR, and the like, and rather thin on the speeches of Buchanan and Hoover. Paradoxically, if rhetorical scholars tell us that content matters, their selectiveness of what is deemed worthy of examination has the opposite implication that most presidential rhetoric does not in fact matter. Piecemeal approaches to presidential rhetoric that select and differentiate between “great” and “ungreat” rhetoric do little justice to the forensic potential in the entire historical record of presidential rhetoric. In this book, I invert the conventional direction of rhetorical analysis by asking what rhetoric tells us *about* the presidency rather than what rhetoric can do *for* the individual president.

This conceptual shift adds an important normative dimension to my analysis. A scholarship that only focuses on rhetoric as personal resource will tend to be uncritically focused on whatever is persuasive and will neglect the systemic costs of successful, and sometimes anti-intellectual, rhetorical acts. The extant scholarship has come almost exclusively from the former camp. As a leading authority on the subject puts it, “Presidential rhetoric is a study of how presidents gain, maintain, or lose support of the public.”⁴⁹ The predominant focus of scholarship has been on the “principles of rhetoric,

understood as the human capacity to see what is most likely to be persuasive to a given audience on a given occasion.”⁵⁰ A rhetor- and persuasion-centered approach will tend to be “institutionally partisan” in favor of the president, rather than constitutionally objective about the systemic impact of these rhetorical efforts.⁵¹ It must, ultimately, endorse the winning tactics of presidential anti-intellectualism. The anti-intellectual presidency, I argue, has arisen at least in part because of our presidents’, their advisors’, and scholars’ instrumental preoccupation with persuasion.⁵²

Content Analysis

In this book, I apply the rhetorical critic’s concern for the substance of presidential rhetoric systematically, using presidential words en masse as archaeological data to tell a developmental story about the American presidency and the changing nature of its political communication. While I will deploy a variety of methods, a general statement about computer-assisted quantitative content analysis, which is a relatively new method used in this book, is warranted here. For interested readers, a more specific note on the *General Inquirer*, which is the software I used for content analysis to measure substantive simplicity, can be found in appendix I. Readers who simply want to get on with the story I have to tell should skip ahead to the chapter synopses below.

For the content analyst, textual data are extraordinarily rich and varied, reflecting ideas, attitudes, and styles partly unique to the individual from whom the words emanate and partly derived from his or her particular cultural milieu. The question, however, is how an infinite variety of words, phrases, sentences, and styles can be converted into a basis for social scientific inference. When analyzing texts qualitatively or without the assistance of a computer, we typically use a cultural standard acquired from past experience to make sense of sentences like “It was the same old story.” But while impressionistic conclusions may satisfy the needs of day-to-day living, they do not usually constitute a reliable method for research, especially when we deal with vast quantities of text. Social scientists have developed a procedure known as “content analysis” to explicate such judgmental processes more clearly, so that a uniform set of rules is used to extract meaning from vast quantities of text.

Content analysis is the method of classifying, and thereby compressing, the words of a text into a list of content categories based on explicit rules

of coding.⁵³ For instance, a “religiosity” category, which registers a percentage of the total number of words in a text that referred to “God,” “deity,” the names of biblical prophets, and other like references made explicit in a coding rule, can explicate the religious tenor of a text in a fairly objective measure. Although there will remain a residually interpretive component to the inferential process in the construction of relevant categories, the computer has removed a principal methodological pitfall of earlier attempts at content analysis by ensuring perfect intertemporal and intercoder reliability. That is, with the computer, we ensure that the same text coded by different human operators at different times will yield the same results. More recently, advances in technology have broadened the scope of content analysis so that it is now also used to specify a fairly objective range of textual characteristics, such as grade readability or repetitiousness, which equip researchers to infer some aspect of external reality presumed to be latently encapsulated within each text, which cannot be discerned by the unaided human eye.⁵⁴

Because all presidential words, not just those of the selectively “great,” hold analytic potential, I examine rhetoric from every president, thus spanning over two centuries of presidential rhetoric in this book.⁵⁵ The computer may miss some insights that close human coding could yield, but I am interested here in discerning macroscopic patterns that require quantitative (large *N*) analysis. Indeed, a larger swath allows the computer to help us “read between the lines” in a different way, by discerning patterns across large quantities of text across time that will not be immediately apparent to the unaided human eye. Because, as James Fallows, a former speechwriter, reminds us, “a large and alarming percentage of the time the cause for a speech is the Scheduling Office,”⁵⁶ quantitative analysis allows us to examine macroscopic rhetorical patterns that have been consciously and often inadvertently transmitted from the White House, which has become a prolific prose production factory. The American presidency, in particular, lends itself to quantitative content analysis because there is probably no other public office in the world for which we have managed to keep a more comprehensive rhetorical record. As Woodrow Wilson put it, “There is no trouble now about getting the president’s speeches printed and read, every word.”⁵⁷ The systematic recording of presidential rhetoric presents a more comprehensive account of presidential history than even the sum of public opinion polls, which only began in the 1940s.⁵⁸ It is one of the very few ways by which we can generate a longitudinal data set that covers the entire span of presidential history, with minimal selection bias.

Now, there are theoretical objections to content analysis. Is my focus on rhetoric merely a romantic preoccupation with the poetry of history but tells us little about real life? Perhaps, but only if my database of presidential rhetoric systematically selects for the speeches of “great presidents.” The data for this book were constructed from over 12,000 documents produced by all 43 presidents of the United States. This is a considerable increase compared to previous treatments of presidential communication, where the predominant use of a relatively small number of cases has offered limited analytic traction. Another related objection is that rhetoric is epiphenomenal, so observations at the rhetorical dimension cannot be reliably extrapolated to enhance our understanding of the presidency. My reply is that it is itself internal and relevant to our inquiry how rhetoric has become “mere rhetoric.” The subject of our inquiry, after all, has been called the *rhetorical* presidency, and presidential loquaciousness has become the defining quality examined in an entire subfield of presidential studies. If anything, presidential rhetoric should be the first thing we study to understand the institution and not, as the objection implies, the last. If historians turn to speeches and rhetoric as primary sources with which they reconstruct the past, if politicians in a democratic republic are held accountable, assessed, and remembered for what they say (as the engraved walls of the presidential monuments in Washington amply reveal), and if the president of the United States is a public figure who “monopolizes the public space,” then it is fair to assume that rhetoric is more than epiphenomenal.⁵⁹

Rhetoric, of course, does not tell us everything. Technically, speeches and presidential statements cannot be anti-intellectual (or emotional, or inspirational, or so forth). Only persons can. So when we say that a speech has a certain quality, say, that it is anti-intellectual, we really mean to say that its speaker is anti-intellectual, and his anti-intellectual sentiments are conveyed in his speech. These sentiments may or may not be subjectively or internally felt (the speaker may not, in fact, be anti-intellectual), but that does not mean that the speaker and the content conveyed by his speech cannot be objectively or externally perceived to be anti-intellectual. And that is all that I am interested in here. Why not probe deeper? Because politics is external reality, and anti-intellectualism, in particular, is a potent political phenomenon only when it is a public stance. The content of politics is not infused with unspoken sentiments but is defined by our leaders’ public words, and these words are all we have as a basis for information acquisition, deliberation, and political accountability.

Interviews with Speechwriters

While political scientists worry that the qualitative approach of rhetorical criticism is too often inescapably subjective, rhetorical scholars worry that the quantitative approach misses the nuances detectable only by the trained human eye and ear. To supplement the quantitative analysis of the kind described above, I interviewed 42 former and present speechwriters from the Truman administration (before which there are no surviving speechwriters) through the current Bush administration to elicit their views of presidential rhetoric. Selection was determined by membership in the exclusive Judson Welliver Society, named after the first full-time presidential speechwriter, of former White House speechwriters. The society was founded by former Nixon administration speechwriter William Safire in April 1987.⁶⁰ Throughout the book, but especially in chapter 3, I register the views of almost two-thirds of the membership of the Judson Welliver Society. I also consulted oral histories to elicit the views of 12 more speechwriters whom I was unable to personally interview and to elaborate on the views of some speechwriters whom I had already interviewed.⁶¹ The oral histories provided closely contemporaneous accounts of the earlier administrations and supplemented what some of my interviewees were unable to recall several years after the fact. These primary accounts were further supplemented by memoirs and books written by other former speechwriters in order to register as many views as possible from the speechwriting community. In all, I was able to elicit the views of 63 men and women who helped to write the major speeches of every president from Harry S Truman to George W. Bush. As “eyewitness(es) to power” and the actual (co)authors of presidential rhetoric, these speechwriters are uniquely qualified to shed light on presidential rhetoric.⁶² The interviews will corroborate that the conclusions drawn in this book are not just artifacts of the quantitative analysis. They recover the human texture of the process and institution of rhetorical invention, which we cannot fully capture just with quantitative analysis.

Chapter Synopses

The argument of this book proceeds in seven chapters. I present, in chapter 2, evidence of the relentless linguistic (syntactic and semantic) simplification of presidential rhetoric that occurred between 1789 and 2006. In chapter 3,

I reverse the prior chapter's direction of inquiry to examine the source, rather than the output, of presidential rhetoric. I show that presidents' and speechwriters' exceptionless and deliberate drive to simplify presidential rhetoric since the mid-twentieth century has been the linguistic underpinning of the anti-intellectual presidency.

In chapter 4, I supplement the evidence of linguistic simplification presented in chapter 2 with evidence of substantive anti-intellectualism. I chart the relative demise of argument and explanation against the corresponding surge of applause-rendering platitudes, partisan punch lines, and emotional and human interest appeals in contemporary presidential rhetoric—all of which have contributed to the impoverishment of our public deliberative sphere.

In chapter 5, I step back from the data again to examine the evolution of the White House speechwriting office and the institutional apparatus of the anti-intellectual presidency. I track the institutional changes that have accompanied and reinforced the rise of the anti-intellectual presidency, namely, the creation and expansion of the speechwriting function and office, the legitimization of delegated speechwriting, and President Nixon's separation of speechwriting from the policymaking function in 1969. Insofar as there was a precise birth date of the anti-intellectual presidency, it was 1969.

I evaluate the findings of the preceding chapters with an explicitly normative lens in chapter 6 by tackling and ultimately refuting a cluster of arguments deployed to justify anti-intellectualism. I call the phenomenon what it is in this chapter and show why presidential anti-intellectualism is a threat to our democracy.

I conclude, in chapter 7, with a solution to the problem of presidential anti-intellectualism by articulating the pedagogical purpose of rhetoric as theorized and practiced by the founding rhetorical presidents, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt, and as implied in scholarly criticisms of the contemporary presidency. I offer the model of a presidential pedagogue as the solution to the problem of presidential anti-intellectualism.