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Description

NBC's Katie Couric looks at the styles that various presidents, including FDR, Harry Truman, and Dwight Eisenhower, used to communicate with the American people.

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Transcript

History of Presidential Communication

KATIE COURIC, co-host:
Tonight, President Clinton travels to Detroit for the first town meeting of his presidency. Vice President Gore also will be holding a similar forum in California. Mr. Clinton hopes the town meeting format will set the standard for presidential communication in the '90s, just as every president in modern times has tried to find his own way of getting his message across.

Before the dawn of broadcasting in the 1920s, presidents could only address the public through written statements and speeches to relatively small gatherings. But radio brought the presidency to the entire country, and presidents jumped at the chance to give a nationwide speech. This is Herbert Hoover in 1932:

President HERBERT HOOVER: We are told by the opposition that we must have a change, that we must have a New Deal.

COURIC: But it wasn't until Franklin Roosevelt came along in 1933 that a real master of the art of presidential communication took to the airwaves. This rare footage shows the scene in the White House basement as he prepared an address to the nation.

Unidentified Announcer: Ladies and gentlemen, the president of the United States.

President FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT: My friends...

COURIC: FDR's fireside chats were friendly and fatherly. They helped put America at ease during the depths of the Great Depression.

Pres. ROOSEVELT: I want to talk for a few minutes, and I know that when you understand what we in Washington have been about...I want to talk with you very simply...I want to talk with you about a number of subjects...My friends...
Professor MARTHA PUTNEY (Howard University): He put a lot of confidence in the people that, ‘We’re going to come back.’ That man had a--he had the power to move people with his voice.

COURIC: And FDR frequently used humor to get his point across. In 1944, when the Republicans accused him of sending a Navy ship to Alaska to pick up his dog, Roosevelt shot back.

Pres. ROOSEVELT: Well, of course, I don't resent attacks, and my family don't resent attacks. But Fala does resent the attacks. He has not been the same dog since.

COURIC: Harry Truman himself admitted it was tough to follow in FDR's footsteps. Somehow, his communication skills seemed lacking.

President HARRY TRUMAN: I think there are some things that Congress has not done that they should have done.

COURIC: But during the 1948 campaign, underdog Harry Truman found his stride. He crossed the country on a whistle-stop tour and brought his case directly to the American people.

Pres. TRUMAN: I've been in politics a long time, and it makes no difference what they say about you if it isn't so. If they can prove it on you, you're in a bad fix indeed. They've never been able to prove it on me.

Pres. TRUMAN: I, Harry S. Truman, do solemnly swear...

COURIC: Truman was the first president of the TV age, and his 1949 inauguration was the first to be telecast.

Professor J. FRED MacDONALD (Northeastern Illinois University): It is a major development for Americans to sit down and see the person they voted for, or they voted against, to see this person sworn in, as part of the process. So I think it helps to add to the democratization that television, I think, is very responsible for since the late 1940s.

Campaign Commercial for Dwight Eisenhower: You like Ike, I like Ike, everybody likes Ike, for president…

COURIC: Dwight Eisenhower was the first president to use television regularly. In fact, his ’52 campaign was the first to use TV commercials.

(Campaign Commercial for Dwight Eisenhower)

NARRATOR: Eisenhower answers America.

Unidentified Woman: You know what things cost today. High prices are just driving me crazy.

Mr. DWIGHT EISENHOWER: Yes, my Mamie gets after me about the high cost of living. It’s another reason why I say it’s time for a change.

(Campaign Commercial for John F. Kennedy)

Senator JOHN F. KENNEDY: In the election of 1960 and with the world around us, the question is whether the world will exist half slave or half free”

COURIC: But Kennedy was the first to master television. His favorite form of communication: the live news conference. His knack for detail and quick sense of humor played well.

Ms. MAY CRAIG (Reporter): Would you accept a change in the Civil Rights Bill to accept small boarding houses like Mrs. Murphy?

Pres. KENNEDY: The question would be, it seems to me, Mrs. Craig, whether Mrs. Murphy had a substantial impact on interstate commerce.
COURIC: Presidents Johnson, Nixon and Ford frequently used formal White House addresses, going over the heads of the press to state their cases to the public. Jimmy Carter tried to make the presidency seem less formal and less removed. He wore a sweater during one speech.
President RONALD REAGAN: I ask for this time to tell you of some basic decisions which are yours to make.
COURIC: President Reagan earned the nickname ‘The Great Communicator’ for his skill in popularizing his conservative philosophy.
President GEORGE H.W. BUSH: This guy's crazy. He's way out, far out, man.
COURIC: President Bush had it a little tougher. His public speaking manner seemed forced compared to Reagan's, and his lack of a simple, coherent message hurt.
Professor ROBERT DALLEK (California Institute of Technology): One of the great problems that Mr. Bush had was he never articulated a vision. He even demeaned the whole idea. He called it the 'vision thing.'
COURIC: Now, it's President Clinton's turn to find an effective way of getting through to the public. For the first couple of weeks, though, it's been more the public getting through to him.
Unidentified Woman: Good afternoon, the White House comment line. May I help you?