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Radio's Political Past

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Radio's Political Past

Abstract
The history of radio is inextricably suffused with politics. Though licensed experimental stations were transmitting as early as 1916, the first scheduled and advertised radio program in America-broadcast on November 2, 1920, from Pittsburgh's KDKA-was an 18-hour marathon on the election returns of the Harding-Cox presidential race. Over the following months, KDKA broadcast numerous other civic-oriented programs.

In November 1921, radio beamed the voice of the .U.S. president overseas for the first time when RCA's powerful Port Jefferson, Long Island, station went on the air with an international address by President Harding that was heard by radio listeners in Europe, Japan, Australia and Central and South America. While Harding was the fi rst president to use radio as a means of political communication, Calvin Coolidge - who succeeded Harding on his death in August 1923 - was more adept at it, a fact Coolidge recognized. "I am very fortunate that I came in with the radio," Coolidge commented. "I can't make an engaging, rousing or oratorical speech...but I have a good radio voice, and now I can get my message across to [the public] without acquainting them with my lack of oratorical ability."

Comments
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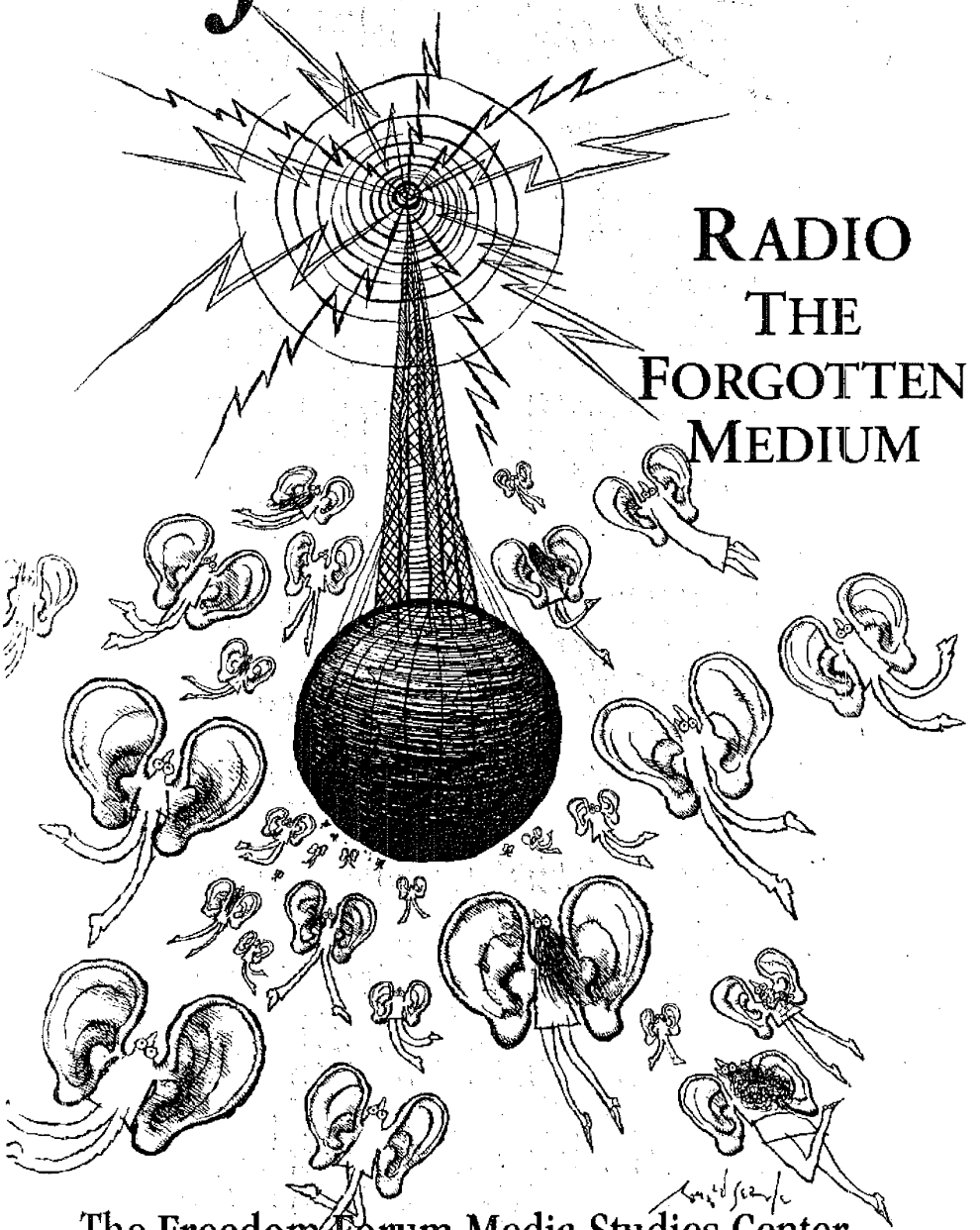

RADIO
THE FORGOTTEN MEDIUM

The Freedom Forum Media Studies Center
At Columbia University in the City of New York

Radio—The Forgotten Medium

xi Preface

INTRODUCTION

1 *Resilient Radio*
MARILYN J. MATELSKI
"Once the marvel of the age, the glue that held a nation together through war and economic depression, radio is now perceived as occupying a corner chair at media family gatherings—a maiden aunt, beloved but past her prime. Not so," contends the author, a Boston College professor, offering a context for the oldest broadcast medium, then and now. Radio is as vital today as it was 50 years ago.

15 *Looking Back at Radio's Future*
B. ERIC RHOADS
If nothing else, radio has proven itself able to adapt, Phoenix-like, to whatever comes—television, format wars, contests and worse, argues the publisher of Radio Ink magazine. So satellites, digital broadcasting and other new technology don't mean a thing—challenges have always meant opportunity for radio.

23 *Radio's Political Past*
MICHAEL X. DELLI CARPINI
"The history of radio is suffused with politics," observes a political scientist at Barnard College. Similarly, political history is suffused with radio. From the 1920 Harding-Cox presidential returns on Pittsburgh's KDKA to the Clinton-Bush-Perot fight in 1992, radio has been at the center of American politics—"the people's university."

37 *News Radio—More Than Masters of Disaster*
DAVID BARTLETT
When the *Titanic* sank in 1912, radio was there. And that role—providing information in times of trouble—is still just one of the things that radio

does best, observes the president of the Radio-Television News Directors Association. "When hurricanes hit, when traffic is snarled, when the World Trade Towers are bombed, when the Orioles are in town—give radio 22 minutes (or less) and get the world."

RADIO AS CULTURAL EXPRESSION

51 *Triumph of the Idol—Rush Limbaugh and a Hot Medium*
TOM LEWIS
Some say talk shows are the expression of democracy in the 1990s. "But irksome questions remain," muses a radio historian. "Is our 'Doctor of Democracy' really serving *us?* Is it a victory for electronic democracy, or is this glut of hot air more along the lines of Pyrrhus' sentiment: 'Another victory like that and we're done for.' "

63 *Talking Over America's Electronic Backyard Fence*
DIANE REHM
"Americans used to be able to talk over the backyard fence," observes a Washington, D.C., talk show host. "Now, talk shows have expanded the nation's back yard." Talk radio makes an important contribution to the social discourse, she says, one essential to the functioning of democracy.

71 *You Are What You Hear*
ADAM CLAYTON POWELL III
If you are what you eat, you are what you hear, suggests the author, a longtime radio connoisseur. "Just as our physical bodies are the sum of the meals we have eaten, our minds are a sum of what we have heard, read and thought." Tasty stuff, radio.

77 *Ear on America*
AL STAVITSKY
America's airwaves reflect all the idiosyncracies, diversity, qualities and quirkiness of a nation. This sampling of eight of its 11,338 stations from across the country—country, sports, Christian, rock and more—are a sound snapshot of the customs, values and foibles of radio in America, 1993.

93 *Music Radio—The Fickleness of Fragmentation*
SEAN ROSS
"If music radio were truly fragmented, Miami would still have an easy-listening station, Seattle would still have commercial jazz and Detroit would still have R&B oldies," writes the author, a record industry executive and longtime radio observer in this critical tour of the fragmented music scene.

105 *Whither (Or Wither?) AM?*
MICHAEL C. KEITH
"In the broadcasting marketplace, as in other jungles, it comes down to survival of the fittest," contends a broadcasting scholar. "AM radio is not exactly a finely tuned athlete—either in technological or programming terms—so its slow fade may simply be Darwinism at work."

THE GLOBAL AIRWAVES

113 *The BBC–From Maiden Aunt to Sexy Upstart*
ASA BRIGGS
The onslaught of television in the 1950s had backed radio against a wall and the BBC found it necessary to argue for the "maiden aunt of broadcasting." But soon, observes the premier historian of British broadcasting, people were "panting" to start up radio stations in Britain.

123 *Devoted to "Auntie Beeb"*
SUZANNE LEVY
In case there was any question of the importance of BBC's Radio 4 in England's daily life, response to a plan to shift schedules was answer enough, thank you very much. "The British public had its knickers in a twist," recalls a BBC producer. "The calming inevitability of Life As We Know It was under attack."

129 *Clandestine Radio and the End of the Cold War*
LAWRENCE SOLEY
For decades, as East and West eyed one another over the Iron Curtain, one weapon in the struggle was radio. "Ironically, the easing of Cold War tensions and the spread of democracy have not meant fewer clandestine radio operations but more," a scholar of international radio observes. There may be more struggles now, not fewer.

THE STRUCTURES OF RADIO

139 *Public Policy and Radio—A Regulator's View*
ANDREW C. BARRETT
Serving local interests and diversity in a tightening radio marketplace is the challenge facing both radio and those charged with its regulation, explains an FCC commissioner. In the face of new political, economic and technological imperatives, regulators committed to localism and diversity have their work cut out for them.

151 *Riding Radio's Technological Wave*
RICHARD V. DUCEY
New technology may alter how radio functions, but it won't alter one immutable fact about the industry, argues an officer of the National Association of Broadcasters. "In no other media business do competitors expend proportionately so much time, effort and money to so thoroughly research and strategize over the audience's psyche."

159 *On the Business Side, an End to Radio Romance*
RICHARD J. MacDONALD
"For most financial analysts, the days when the radio industry stood center stage have long passed," writes a media analyst and investment banker. "Few have anything more than oral history to generate even the vaguest images of radio's preeminence in the media field."

169 *Public Radio—Americans Want More*
ANNA KOSOF
The creation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 1967 meant that 86 percent of the U.S. population would be reached by public radio. Even today, argues a public radio station manager, "people want more from radio than top 40, Limbaugh, the same news and endless ads. That's where America—and public radio—live."

176 *Monopoly to Marketplace—Competition Comes to Public Radio*
STEPHEN L. SALYER
In the 10 years since American Public Radio was born, the system has become a premier distributor of programming for public radio stations. The president of APR recounts how competition has enriched the public radio market.

BOOKS

185 *"Seems Radio Is Here to Stay"*
MARY ANN WATSON
From comedy to jukeboxes, drama to war coverage, politics to social commentary, radio has been central to American life in this century, observes a broadcast historian, in reviewing seven books on radio. It's time to recognize radio's role, "a dependable companion and friend," she writes. "To overlook radio is to miss the big picture."

198 FOR FURTHER READING

201 COMMENTARY

Radio's Political Past

MICHAEL X. DELLI CARPINI

THE HISTORY OF RADIO is inextricably suffused with politics. Though licensed experimental stations were transmitting as early as 1916, the first scheduled and advertised radio program in America—broadcast on November 2, 1920, from Pittsburgh's KDKA—was an 18-hour marathon on the election returns of the Harding-Cox presidential race. Over the following months, KDKA broadcast numerous other civic-oriented programs.

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Radio was initially viewed as a public, democratic medium. In May 1922, the premiere issue of *Radio Broadcast* heralded radio as "the people's university," a public resource that would make govern-

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ment "a living thing to its citizens." Media historian Erik Barnouw said the new medium symbolized the "coming of age of the enlightenment.... It would link rich and poor, young and old. It would end the isolation of rural life. It would unite the nation."

For a few years following KDKA's initial broadcast, American radio came remarkably close to this utopian vision. The 400 stations that quickly arose around the country were run largely by public, civic and religious institutions. Broadcasts ran the gamut from culture to politics, but the idea of mass and continuing education was paramount: in 1922 alone, 70 college and university stations went on the air. And since the profits from radio were assumed to derive from the sale of radio receivers, none of these first 400 stations sold airtime for any purpose. Indeed the idea of selling the air—of "ether advertising"—was, for a brief period at least, inconceivable.

THIS "GOLDEN AGE" WAS SHORT-LIVED. In August 1922, AT&T went on the air in New York City with WEAF (later to become WNBC), the first of several "toll broadcast" stations. Based on the logic of telephones, WEAF was viewed as a kind of phone booth (a "radiotelephone") in which anyone could—for a fee—broadcast a message to a listening audience. These messages could be commercial or noncommercial, entertainment or educational. Initial reaction to this approach was almost universally negative. The government of New York City, when told that it would have to pay to broadcast civic messages, refused, opting instead to purchase its own transmitter. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, given responsibility to regulate radio by way of a vague 1912 statute, said, "It is inconceivable that we should allow so great a possibility for service...to be drowned in advertising chatter," and later warned that the civic value of broadcasting would be lost if presidential messages became "the meat in a sandwich of two patent medicine advertisements." Nonetheless, the commercial value of the airwaves became obvious when a real estate developer reported increased sales of $127,000 after paying $50 for a 10-minute promotional spot on WEAF.

The shift from a medium dominated by public interests to one dominated by private ones was inexorable as commercialization made

it difficult for nonprofit stations to compete for talent or audiences. Commercial stations, bolstered by profits and corporate backing, literally drowned out public stations with their more powerful transmitters. AT&T's extensive cable hookups allowed it to "network" stations around the country, thus creating regional and then national audiences. Government regulation during this time also worked to the disadvantage of the noncommercial stations, which were viewed as "less public" than "toll" stations that were theoretically available to anyone willing (and able) to pay for airtime. Thus, commercial stations such as WEAF were granted "clear channel" frequencies (assuring signals that were free from interference and that allowed the use of powerful transmitters), while educational stations were given "local" frequencies with severe restrictions in power and, in some cases, in the hours when they could broadcast. Noncommercial stations were unable to compete in this environment. By 1927, only 90 of the 732 radio stations in operation were run by educational institutions and two years later, 44 of those had gone off the air. Despite several efforts during the Roosevelt administration to reorient the radio industry toward the public good, by the 1930s the idea of radio as "the people's university" was dead.

THROUGHOUT this period, radio's more explicitly political value continued to evolve, often with mixed results. The broadcasting of the 1924 Democratic Convention proved a public relations nightmare, taking an unprecedented 103 ballots to nominate John W. Davis as the party's compromise presidential candidate. The listening audience also suffered through a bitter battle over the relationship of the Ku Klux Klan to the Democratic Party and the unsuccessful attempt of vice presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan to translate his significant oratorical skills to radio. Radio proved a poor medium for Davis as well—as one observer noted, "Mr. Davis...has a voice which to the direct auditor has that bell-like quality of his delightful rhetoric. Via radio, however, this muffles and fogs...." By campaign's end, Davis commented that radio "will make the long speech impossible or inadvisable...the short speech will be in vogue."

Both the promise and the limits of early radio could be found in

the 1924 presidential campaign of Progressive Party candidate Robert LaFollette, who wrote that radio "will undoubtedly serve to minimize misrepresentation in the news columns of the press." His campaign made frequent use of the airwaves and his Labor Day address is credited as the first political speech delivered exclusively for a radio audience. Nonetheless, LaFollette also charged that the "radio trust" conspired during the campaign to keep him and his progressive, anti-monopoly message off the airwaves.

Not surprisingly, the most effective use of radio in the 1924 presidential campaign was made by Republican Calvin Coolidge. "Silent Cal's" broadcasts "went straight to the popular heart." one observer commented. "During the campaign he had little to say and said it well." This approach was no coincidence. The Republicans understood better than either the Democrats or the Progressives that radio changed the way in which a campaign should be structured. They largely abandoned the traditional "barnstorming" technique in favor of radio addresses broadcast simultaneously by several stations (Coolidge's final campaign speech was broadcast by a then-record 26 stations). They also saw that radio provided greater flexibility to campaign strategy and allowed for a "big push" late in the campaign. An internal memo prepared as an outline of the party's strategy for using radio presciently noted that "broadcasting requires a new type of sentence. Its language is not that of the platform orator.... Speeches must be short. Ten minutes is a limit and five minutes is better."

The Republicans outspent Democrats 3-to-1 on radio broadcasts in the 1924 election. The "Grand Old Party" even opened its own radio station in New York, broadcasting all day and evening from late October until election day. In addition, radio stations (especially those with the most powerful transmitters) were disproportionately owned by conservative business interests and so were especially sympathetic to the Republicans' message. As a result, Republicans were heard on the airwaves three to four times more often than Democrats and eight to 10 times more often than Progressives. In the end, Coolidge won the presidency with 382 electoral votes and nearly 16 million popular votes—twice Davis' total. The age of the electronic campaign had arrived.

COOLIDGE MADE EVEN GREATER USE of radio during his second administration than he had during his limited first term. His 1925 inaugural address was heard by a record 15 million Americans and during that year he averaged 9,000 words a month over the airwaves. Thanks to this new medium, "Silent Cal" was heard by more citizens than all the prior presidents combined. Indeed, the president came in fourth in a poll of most-liked "radio personalities," ahead of consummate radio entertainer Will Rogers. Despite his frequent use of the radio, however, Coolidge limited his addresses to prepared speeches and formal events such as the State of the Union address, eschewing more extemporaneous exchanges or informal conversations. "I don't think it's necessary for the president periodically to address the country by radio," he announced at one press conference.

The 1928 presidential race pitted Republican Herbert Hoover against Democrat Alfred Smith, neither particularly effective radio speakers. Radio stations began charging candidates for airtime, but both campaigns still employed radio fairly extensively, including several innovative uses of the medium. The Republicans, for example, created a half-hour radio address that summarized the party's major positions. This prepared speech was then delivered by well-known local citizens (from public officials to a neighborhood butcher) on 174 community radio stations around the nation. The Democrats opted for a mix of low-brow and high-brow culture, with one broadcast featuring vaudeville stars extolling Smith's virtues to the tune of "East Side, West Side," and second a more serious broadcast of a radio play based on Smith's life. The 1928 campaign also featured a series of nonpartisan programs sponsored by the League of Women Voters. Called the "Voter's Campaign Information Service," these weekly broadcasts reached about 20 million voters over a 22-station hookup and were intended to give citizens information ranging from how the nominating process worked to the candidates' stands on issues. Although Democrats outspent Republicans for radio advertising, Hoover won a landslide victory in 1928, and for all the attention paid to radio advertising, total spending amounted to only 18 percent of the Democratic National Committee's total campaign budget and only 10 percent of

the Republicans', even though radio was able to reach 40 million listeners by 1928, as compared to only a few million in 1924.

BY THE LATE 1920s AND EARLY 1930s, radio had become a standard part of public officials' communications arsenal. More than 100 congressional speeches aired during the 1929-1930 term, with Hoover adding 37 of his own, and that number increased as the nation plunged deeper into economic depression. By the end of his term, Hoover had made 95 radio addresses, only nine fewer than FDR would make during his first term of office. While not a particularly effective radio speaker, Hoover's long-term involvement in the development and regulation of radio gave him a keen understanding of the medium's power.

"Radio has become a social force of the first order," Hoover reflected. "It is revolutionizing the political debates that underlie political action under our principles of government.... [It] physically makes us literally one people upon all occasions of general public interest." Toward the end of his presidency, however, aware that even the power of radio could not restore public confidence in his administration, Hoover commented that "it is very difficult to deal with anything over the radio except generalities."

Hoover's 1932 reelection bid began with a radio address broadcast over a record 160-station hookup. Overall, the Republican presidential campaign used a total of 73 hours of network broadcasting time, up from 1928's 43 hours. In contrast, the cash-poor Democrats could buy only 52 hours of airtime, slightly *less* than they had purchased four years earlier. Even so, Hoover was no match for Franklin Delano Roosevelt as a radio orator, the latter having been selected by broadcasting officials as the best political speaker in the nation. Broadcasters lauded FDR's "ability to create a feeling of intimacy between himself and his listeners, [and] his adroitness in presenting complicated matters in such simple terms that the man in the street believes he has full mastery of them." But Hoover sounded like "an old-fashioned phonograph in need of winding."

In many ways, the 1930s and '40s marked the zenith of radio's political impact. Central to this impact were FDR's "fireside chats," a

UPI/BETTMANN

"A day which will live in infamy...." Crowds listen to President Roosevelt's War Declaration broadcast, December 1941.

series of 28 radio addresses spread over his three full terms in office. These addresses, pointed attempts to rally public support for pending legislation as well as more discursive reviews and explanations of government actions, ranged in length from 15 to 45 minutes, usually broadcast on weeknights between 9 and 11 p.m. The audience varied, though a 1940 opinion poll indicated that 60 percent of the adult population had listened to a Roosevelt radio broadcast at least once during his first two terms in office. One address, in which he proclaimed a bank holiday (as a way of slowing the run on money) was heard on 64 percent of the radios around the country—a record that still holds today.

The political use of radio during the 1930s extended well beyond the fireside chats, however. For example FDR's eight chats delivered from 1933 to 1936 represent less than 8 percent of his radio addresses during his first term; over the first 10 months of that term alone, Roosevelt made 20 radio addresses, Eleanor Roosevelt made 17, and members of his cabinet made more than 100 addresses. Nor was this extensive use of radio limited to members of the executive branch—in 1934, NBC and CBS provided free airtime to U.S. senators 150 times, to congressmen 200 times, and to governors more than 50 times. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of these broadcasts spoke in favor of the New Deal, bringing charges from Republicans of partisan manipulation of the airwaves.

THROUGHOUT THE 1930s, political debate was enlivened by the radio commentary of progressives like Hans Von Kaltenborn, Dorothy Thompson and Edward R. Murrow, and of conservatives such as Boake Carter, Upton Close and Fulton Lewis Jr. While FDR remained king of the political airwaves, several other "radio personalities" emerged during the 1930s to challenge his reign. Most prominent among these were U.S. Sen. (and former Louisiana governor) Huey Long and Father Charles Coughlin, the "radio priest." Long, a firebrand populist whose "share our wealth" philosophy advocated a radically redistributive tax policy, combined earthy language, biblical references and working class vernacular to appeal to the masses. A master at the use of political slogans (for example,

"every man a king!"), he seemed destined to have a major impact on national politics until his assassination in 1935. Nonetheless, the "Kingfish's" effective use of both local and national radio and the resulting growth in his popularity are viewed by many as having pushed Roosevelt farther to the political left than might have been his natural proclivity.

Less easily categorized but no less skilled a radio orator was Father Charles Coughlin. From an obscure beginning broadcasting over a local Detroit radio station in 1926, Coughlin built a national following for his eclectic, often inconsistent, mix of populism, socialism and religion. At base, however, was an appeal similar to that of Long and, in a different way, to FDR: the promise of a better life for the many "common folk" who had been devastated by the Depression. Coughlin's radio style was dramatic. "He manages always to speak as though his words of warning were being uttered just two jumps ahead of the crack of doom," a contemporary observed. Initially a supporter of Roosevelt and the New Deal, he broke with FDR in 1935, charging him with being "in love with the international bankers" and "wedded basically to the philosophy of the money changers." In 1936, the "radio priest" backed the third-party candidacy of William Lemke, and also applied pressure on Congress; for example, the Senate was deluged with 200,000 telegrams after Coughlin attacked the World Court in one of his radio addresses. By the late 1930s Coughlin's influence had waned, however, due in part to negative reactions to anti-Semitic remarks he made during his broadcasts. Partly as a result of these remarks, the National Association of Broadcasting ruled that he had violated a ban on purchasing airtime for discussing "controversial public issues." In 1940, unable to persuade enough stations to sell him time for commenting on the upcoming national elections, the "radio priest" was forced from the airwaves.

Local radio was also swept up in the populist sentiments of the 1930s. During the 1932 elections, Madison, Wis., station WHA gave free airtime to the Democrats, Republicans, Progressive Republicans, Socialists and Prohibitionists. More remarkably, each party was given equal time regardless of its relative electoral strength. In 1932, WHA also began broadcasting "Your Wisconsin Government," a regular

program aimed at educating citizens about state politics, government and policy concerns. Even floor debates of the state legislature could be heard over the Wisconsin airwaves.

ROOSEVELT'S THREE REELECTION campaigns provided little drama regarding their outcome but did introduce several innovations in radio politicking, many by the Republicans. In 1936, the GOP aired a "debate" between a live Sen. Arthur Vandenberg and recorded FDR excerpts. Twenty-one of the 66 stations that had agreed to carry the "debate" cut it off, apparently unaware it had been staged until air time. The Republicans also made extensive use of the first campaign "spots" in 1936. "Make it brief and people will remember what you've said" was their operating principle (by the 1940s both parties were making extensive use of one-minute campaign spots, often employing Hollywood talent to produce them). And Chicago's WGN broadcast a Republican-inspired radio drama called "Liberty at the Crossroads," in which historical and fictional characters expressed thinly veiled criticisms of the New Deal.

By the 1940s radio had become the dominant political medium in America. A 1940 poll by the American Institute of Public Opinion found that 52 percent of the public used radio as their main source of political information, compared to 38 percent who depended mainly on newspapers. Some 80 million citizens gathered around their radio sets as FDR recounted "the day that would live in infamy" when Japan attacked. Throughout the war Roosevelt used the radio, first to build public support for American involvement and later to both inform the public and boost morale, and continued—though in reduced fashion—to address domestic issues.

With Roosevelt's death in 1945, Harry Truman assumed the presidency. As a radio speaker, Truman was no FDR, as he himself noted: "I don't think there is anybody in the country who had as rotten a delivery as I to begin with." Careful coaching and recorded dry runs improved Truman's style, but even at his best he was only an average public speaker. The 1948 presidential campaign, the last to take place prior to the introduction of television, provided few new wrinkles,

although Truman's first (and only) full term in office also introduced the first prerecorded broadcasts of presidential press conferences.

THE EARLY 1950s MARKED the end of radio's political reign, with television quickly emerging as the dominant form of political communication. While many of the "great moments" in political broadcasting (for example Joe McCarthy's anti-communist tirades or Richard Nixon's "Checkers" speech) were aired on both radio and television, sound alone was no match for TV's arresting images. The experience with radio also made television's introduction into the world of politics a rapid one—Edward R. Murrow's "Hear It Now" quickly became "See It Now," and the first television "polispots" were aired by Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson during the 1952 presidential campaign. As with the rise of radio, the new medium meant a change in what defined a good communicator. The classic example of this was the first presidential debate of the 1960 campaign. By most accounts—including several formal studies—a majority of radio listeners thought Richard Nixon clearly "won" the debate, but television viewers, apparently reacting to Nixon's sweating brow, darting eyes and inappropriately colored suit, thought the "cooler" John F. Kennedy carried the day.

That television has dominated politics since the 1950s is indisputable. Television advertising is the largest single budget item in national campaigns and is increasingly dominant in state and local races as well. The television is on in the average home for more than eight hours daily, watched by adults an average of two to three hours a day. Watching television is the most preferred evening activity among Americans, even over spending time with the family. It is also the most "trusted" source of information for most Americans. The "great moments" of American politics and society over the past four decades are captured by images, not words or sounds: Kruschev at the United Nations, pounding the table with his shoe while boasting that the Soviet Union would "bury" America; peaceful civil rights protestors being attacked by police dogs and water hoses; the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald; the civil rights and anti-war marches in Washington; buddhist monks

AP/WORLDWIDE PHOTOS

President Bill Clinton continues a tradition of Oval Office radio addresses.

self-immolating and American soldiers using pocket lighters to set fire to Vietnamese huts; a human being setting foot on the moon; the Challenger space shuttle exploding before a nation's eyes; a high-tech war carried live 24 hours a day; Los Angeles' finest unmercifully beating a black citizen.

It would be a mistake, however, to discount the continued power and promise of radio. In the United States today there are more than 11,000 radio stations, the majority of them independently owned. Political and social commentary continues to reach large radio audiences, and talk radio has become an important outlet for the *vox populi*, having played a role in shaping public policy in areas ranging from congressional pay raises and catastrophic health care,

and having fueled the candidacies of Ross Perot and Bill Clinton. Presidents Reagan, Bush and Clinton have made effective use of nationally syndicated weekly radio broadcasts (it was prior to one live broadcast that Ronald Reagan, unaware that his microphone was on, joked that he was about to order a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union). Public radio networks such as National Public Radio and Pacifica provide alternative slants on the news of the day, as do two black-oriented networks (Sheridan and the National Black Network) and one latino network (Caballero).

Radio's mix of networks and independents give it a unique ability to reach both large audiences and yet still cater to diverse cultural and political interests. On the one hand network broadcasts like the Larry King show can be heard by millions of listeners over more than 1,000 affiliates. On the other hand, low-power radio stations allow for extremely localized community programming. Radio may never fulfill its promise as "the people's university" and may never dominate political discourse the way it did in the 1930s and 1940s. But it remains a critical source of information and important stimulus for public discourse.