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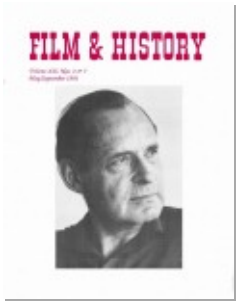


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# The "First Rough Draft"? Reflections on Presidential Politics, Journalism and History

Michael Cornfield

I've been asked to talk about how media historians can make better use of declassified documents and other archival materials, as can be found at the nation's presidential libraries and in such widely distributed publications as the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series. I'm going to start where Mary Ann Watson left off, with David Susskind.

David Susskind and Merle Miller interviewed Harry Truman in the early 1960s for a documentary series. They were unable to sell the series to the networks, however, and Miller wound up publishing the transcripts a decade later as an oral biography, which he called *Plain Speaking*. The book became a best-seller. It served as the centerpiece for a Truman revival during the mid-1970s.[1] Some criticized the book for perpetuating falsehoods beneath a mask of candor.

I did my doctoral dissertation on feature stories about President Truman, and when I visited the Truman Library in 1986, I knew there were more oral transcripts in existence. Edward R. Murrow also interviewed Truman after his presidency for television. These interviews took place at Key West a few years before the Susskind-Miller interviews. Truman's memory was probably clearer then, and who better to elicit the truth from him than Murrow?

The Truman-Murrow conversations were aired in a one-hour program, condensed from nine hours of transcripts. I asked the librarian for the Murrow transcripts, and out came a slender file folder with the script from the one-hour show. "No," I said to her (Elizabeth Safly, I believe), "I've read that there are nine hours' worth of transcripts. Could you please check again?" I sat and waited and a half hour later my heart began to pound, because she rolled out this cart upon which sat a big box that evidently had never been opened. I had found a treasure. I was going to be the first person in who knows how long to revisit a record of a dialogue between the nation's most famous broadcaster and a former President of the United States. I plunged inside--and there was nothing there, except some banal comments about Adlai Stevenson and a few other 1950s figures.

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The experience taught me two lessons. One was that journalists may be better editors than political scholars think. The other--reinforced by the hundreds of press texts I sifted through during a week in Independence--was that journalism alone provides few clues to the interplay of forces about which political scientists seek general knowledge. I returned home with material that made little sense to me except as a collection of news stories and commentaries that belonged to the same genre of popular literature. The idea that genres exist in a culture's news just as they do in a culture's fictions became the core of my dissertation.[2] But I hadn't learned anything about the powers of the press in relation to those of the presidency. And I had no scoop, no discovery that revised or confirmed Truman's current reputation as a "near-great" president.

Five years later, I remained curious about the contrast between public affairs as the news represents it--call that "current events coverage"--and public affairs as it is depicted by participants and scholars in works of political history. Surely there was something to learn in the contrast of descriptions. I started out again, and I chose as my starting point an aphorism coined by a man who used to own a newspaper in this town. Phil Graham once said (and journalists at the *Post* and elsewhere love to repeat it) that journalism is "the first rough draft of history."[3] White House correspondents endeavor to narrate current events with limited access to presidential thoughts and activities, under severe deadline constraints, and in the shadow of the mystique the office casts over their readers. Given these imperfect conditions, what kinds of polishing gets done by the other three kinds of describers? And what of value in the news accounts gets dropped or distorted, given the different, but just as imperfect conditions in which the political historians work?

A fellowship at the Media Studies Project at the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars gave me the opportunity to pursue these questions in a case study. I chose to look at the Quemoy-Matsu crisis of 1954-55. I selected it because it involved the ultimate presidential decision, not only to go to war but also to use nuclear weapons. And I chose it because President Eisenhower admitted in his memoirs that he had flummoxed the press in discussing the crisis with them at the time. Before one of his conferences, he assured his press secretary James Hagerty that if the question of nuclear options arose, he would "just confuse them."[4] To my general questions, this case added three more: Did Eisenhower succeed in confusing the press? If so, how? And what, if anything, justified such willful public deception?

I obtained transcripts of all the press conferences. I examined coverage in seven newspapers, two newsweeklies, and seven current events magazines, focusing in particular on the columns of one of the best foreign policy correspondents of the day, Joseph C. Harsch, who wrote for the *Christian Science Monitor*. I set these accounts next to Eisenhower's and (taking a shortcut here) alongside several fine studies of the policymaking events by political scientists and historians, studies which have drawn on declassified documents and interviews with the principals.[5] I wanted to see how far off the press was, how "rough" the draft was. And while I haven't quite completed the study, I've obtained what I think are better results than with my foray into the Truman Library.

Quemoy and Matsu are outcroppings of rock dignified with island names, located between what was then known as the Nationalist Chinese island of Formosa and the mainland, Communist China. For nine months, it appeared that the United States might go to war to back Chiang Kai-Shek's forces against Mao Tse-Tung's and Chou En-Lai's over who controlled Quemoy and Matsu. Throughout the period, Harsch frequently asked President Eisenhower about the possible use of nuclear weapons should war occur. Eisenhower would say things like, "Well, it depends on whether it's going to be a police action or a major war." And then Harsch would say, "As you see it now, which does it look like?" and the President would reply, "It depends on whether we're talking about strategic or tactical nuclear weapons." This dialogue would often be interrupted by other questions, and by intervening weeks where other matters occupied the press conference times.

Eisenhower's evasive technique was what I call the "undifferentiated distinction." He never specified the general and generalized about the specific in the same utterance. Harsch kept pressing him, and with even greater frequency (three times a week) wrote a column about American foreign policy. The climax to their dialogue came in March, 1955, and here I quote verbatim. Harsch has been pursuing a clear answer and says, "Sir, I am a little stupid about this thing." Eisenhower says, "Well, I'm glad you didn't say I was!" Everybody laughs. Then Harsch asks one more time, "If we got into an issue with the Chinese, say over Matsu and Quemoy, that we wanted to keep limited, do you conceive of using this specific kind of atomic weapon in that situation or not?" Eisenhower replies (and this is the press conference where he told Hagerty he would just confuse them), "Well, Mr. Harsch, I must confess I cannot answer that question in advance. The most changeable factor in war is human nature, but the only unchanging factor in war is human nature, and the next thing is that every war is going to astonish you in the way it occures and in the way it is carried out."[6]

The Persian Gulf War took place while I was doing this research. Time after time I read or heard words to the effect that, "You know, Dwight Eisenhower, who was great on war, always used to say that 'every war will astonish you.'" The irony lost in the sound bite, of course, is that he said it in order to avoid answering a tough question. But restoring the remark's original context should not invalidate its general profundity and specific utility. What we now know about the politics or the situation, from the documents that have been declassified, as well as from the results, in my judgement vindicate Eisenhower's approach. He sowed confusion to keep militants at home and abroad off balance. Had he been clearer in stating what he would and would not do, the China lobby, the Communists, and the nuclear weapons enthusiasts in the Pentagon could have manipulated him by meeting or defying his conditions. He confused the press and the American public to preserve, if not create, a space for presidential diplomacy.

I also give Eisenhower a high mark in this instance because he did not lie. And he kept the national faith in democracy: first, by keeping to his weekly schedule of press conferences even during the "height" of the crisis; second, by obtaining a resolution from Congress in advance of possible action concerning Formosa; and third, by writing a more

open account of his behind-the-scenes thinking and acting in his memoirs. It is not an ideal performance, to my Madisonian eyes. But it is as good (in every sense of that word) a Cold War-era exercise of presidential power as I have studied.

My grade to Joseph C. Harsch was also much higher than I had anticipated. He set forth much of the situation that was technically secret. To summarize my findings, Harsch gave his readers the "who," "what," "where," "why" and "how" with admirable accuracy. The only aspect of the crisis in which his account runs astray of subsequent versions is in the "when." President Eisenhower manipulated public knowledge (and perhaps the knowledge of other governments, too) about when the risk of nuclear conflict was rising or falling. The reporting was out of phase with the sense of crisis as the President assessed it; even as the papers approached understandable frenzy, given what they could see and hear, the president was confiding to his diary that the worst had passed. And earlier, the reverse was true.

While I cannot expand one case to a rule of political communications, it seems to me a plausible generalization that presidents retain a discretionary power to shape the national mood through the media by disguising the degree of tension in diplomatic negotiations. Eisenhower and Harsch, bear in mind, were about as forthcoming and perceptive, respectively, as can be expected; their forum of communication, the press conference, has degenerated as an information exchange since its conversion to televised theater. In the case uppermost in the current mind, I would venture that President Bush was able to make the nation feel anxious or secure over Saddam Hussein pretty much as he wanted, while not letting on what he and his advisors felt at the time. (And I speak only about the diplomatic period; the manipulativeness of press and public concerning military operations is much greater.)

Where I do feel confident about generalizing is in the value of this approach to media history. I've learned that comparing journalism and history texts ought not to be confined to determining what information the reporters missed or misinterpreted. Journalism, history, and for that matter political rhetoric should be viewed as distinctive discourses, each of which generates public narratives and related information at a constant rate.

"The first rough draft of history" conception may serve journalists well as an article of faith for their work. But the idea distorts the world of political communication. When compared to the other discourses, it becomes clear that "the news" is not the first version of public affairs--the White House and other news "sources" write that. It's not really adequate to term the news a "rough draft of history," either. While journalists, especially columnists and editorial writers, do try to explain events as they happen, they also commemorate the times by recording how people behave at the debates, ceremonies, votes, speeches, and conferences where events are discussed and even constituted. Neglecting the second, ritual function of news coverage, in my view, makes it that much easier for presidents to manipulate "the times" for the very instrumental purposes that journalists try to explain.[7] No one reported how Eisenhower looked and sounded when he philosophized about war to Harsch. Had one correspondent done so (and some did

capture the scene at other times), public knowledge of the situation would have been enhanced.

Finally, the phrase "the first rough draft of history" articulates a belief in political and intellectual progress. There is nothing wrong, and much right, with that myth. But it is but one of three possible myths that guide people through public affairs. Immanuel Kant wrote that "the human race exists either in continual regression toward wickedness or in perpetual progression toward improvement in its moral destination or internal stagnation in its present stage of moral worth among creatures."[8] As I tell my undergraduates, that means things are either getting worse, getting better, or staying the same.

Awareness of which myth supervenes a text goes a long way toward illuminating the criteria by which a journalist, scholar, or politician includes, arranges, and interprets information to account for public affairs.[9] Journalism need not be progressive to be good. More generally, the existence of several myths reinforces the lesson that a multitude of authorial choices exist every time a president speaks, a correspondent comments, and a historian reflects. The distinctions and connections among these discourses cannot be reduced to an aphorism, whether by Eisenhower, Graham or Kant. They must be studied.

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## NOTES

[1]See the preface to Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Berkley Medallion, 1974).

[2]Michael B. Cornfield, "Presidential Copy: Feature Stories about Harry S. Truman," Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Government, Harvard University, May 1989. An expanded and revised work, *Narrating the Presidency: White House News Stories from Truman to Bush*, will be published by New York University Press in 1993. Also see Michael B. Cornfield, "The Press and Political Controversy: The Case for Narrative Analysis," *Political Communication and Persuasion*, forthcoming 1992.

[3]For example, David Halberstam, profiling Graham in *The Powers That Be* (New York: Knopf, 1979), treated the phrase as a mantra: "There is no better description of the profession at its best" (p. 161). Don Oberdorfer dubbed books by journalists such as himself "the second rough draft" in "Reagan and the Russians: Revising History's 'First Draft'," *Washington Post*, September 29, 1991, p. C5.

[4]Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: The White House Years, 1953-1956* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1963), p. 478.

[5]In chronological order: Bennett C. Rushkoff, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and the Quemoy-Matsu Crisis, 1954-55," *Political Science Quarterly* 96:3 (Fall 1981); Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); Richard K. Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1987); John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988); George H. Chang, "To the Nuclear Brink: Eisenhower, Dulles and the Quemoy-Matsu Crisis," *International Security*, 12:4

(Spring 1988), pp. 96-123. Chang draws notably on documents from the Chinese government archives, in the first of what will undoubtedly be an intellectually invigorating slew of studies in, and of, the post-Cold War era.

[6]The President's News Conference of March 16, 1955, *Public Papers of the Presidency: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1955* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), p. 358.

[7]On the instrumental-ritual communications dichotomy, see James W. Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," in his *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

[8]Immanuel Kant, "An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?" in L. W. Beck, ed., *On History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), p. 139.

[9]I do not think it excessive to add that in the years since Eisenhower yet a fourth kind of discourse has become important as well as interesting: the entertainment or popular-fiction versions of public affairs. There was no miniseries about Quemoy and Matsu that I know of, but it seems every presidential crisis since those of the Kennedy administration has been given the "docudrama" treatment.