

# CHIEF OF STYLE: PERSONAL APPEARANCE AND PRESIDENTIAL POWER

*David O'Connell\**

Dickinson College, Pennsylvania, USA

## ABSTRACT

This article shines light on style's underappreciated role in presidential politics. By mining secondary accounts, first person memoirs and historical news sources, it argues that presidents can accomplish three goals through their style: they can communicate messages, enhance their political position, and identify with important political constituencies. The primary focus is on the modern presidency, but connections will also be made to presidents who served in an earlier age in order to establish the continuity of these patterns. Further, the article explores some of the complexities behind each of usage of style, such as how clothing can send unintentional messages, or the problems that arise when a president chooses not to dress like their supporters. Finally, it concludes that better dressed presidents are more likely to be better presidents since they will avoid the kinds of negativity that have historically greeted presidents who dressed more informally.

## INTRODUCTION

“Yes We Tan.”  
“The Audacity of Taupe.”  
“Taupe and Change.”

On a late August day in 2014, President Barack Obama arrived at the White House briefing room for a midday appearance. The subjects of the President's remarks were serious ones—Russian aggression in Ukraine, and rising Islamic extremism in Syria. Obama delivered a somber message to the country. He told reporters in attendance that the United States was not prepared to take action in Syria because, “We don't have a strategy yet [1].”

But no one really listened. Instead, the discussion of Obama's remarks fixated on his curious attire. The President had chosen to wear a tan summer suit, somewhat poorly tailored, which nearly everyone thought said something more than it was hot outside. Vanessa Friedman of the *New York Times* wrote that “there had to be a reason for his choice” of suit, but she felt Obama was sending mixed signals through his clothes. “Khaki is a sort of wishy-

---

\* Corresponding Author's Email: [oonnell@dickinson.edu](mailto:oonnell@dickinson.edu)

washy color, neither white nor brown, and hence seemed a particularly odd choice for a discussion of wishy-washy military policy..." she noted [2].

Political consultant Patsy Cisneros agreed with Friedman that the suit was problematic. However, for her, the issue was that the suit undermined the President's image as a forceful leader. "The power persona? Gone in that suit," said Cisneros. "Everything below his neck was blah. That's not conducive to him being listened to [3]."

Others even found the suit offensive. In an interview, New York Republican Rep. Peter King suggested that Obama's suit showed he was not taking the threat of ISIS seriously: "You have the whole world watching, you have a week, two weeks of anticipation of what the United States is going to do and then for him to walk out- I'm not trying to be trivial here- but in a light suit, light tan suit... It was just a terrible performance by a commander-in-chief [4]."

It is likely Obama did not put much thought into his attire that morning. Obama has explained that choosing what to wear is one more choice than he can afford to be bothered with. As he told *Vanity Fair* in a 2012 interview: "You'll see I wear only gray or blue suits. I'm trying to pare down decisions. I don't want to make decisions about what I'm eating or wearing. Because I have too many other decisions to make [5]."

As the above anecdotes suggest, this article contends that the choice of a suit is a much more important presidential choice than Obama thinks it is. The article will attempt to prove that what I will call "style"- clothes, haircuts, hats, shoes and so on- has meaningful consequences for presidential power.

Almost no political scientists have analyzed the political implications of style. But it is also no secret that groups in society often make political statements through what they choose to wear, or not to wear. Consider Eugene McCarthy's 1968 presidential campaign. McCarthy's New Hampshire campaign was fueled by thousands of out-of-state college students—the so called "Children's Crusade." These students were not going to look like your stereotypical 1960s campus protestor, though. McCarthy did not want to be associated with the radical fringe of the anti-war movement. So canvassers had to look different, they had to be presentable. Men had to shave their beards and cut their long hair. They wore shirts and ties. Women wore dresses. All of these students were told to get "Clean for Gene" or else they would be stuck working in the basement of the Concord campaign headquarters [6].

The "Clean for Gene" movement was no different than the civil rights activists of the 1960s who showed up for sit-ins wearing jackets and ties or blouses and skirts. By dressing respectably, they were intentionally trying to send a message about their dignity when contrasted with the racist hatred they encountered [7]. On the other side of the spectrum, Black Power activists used their clothing to send a different message. The Black Panthers favored a standard outfit of a black leather jacket, powder blue shirt, black pants, black shoes and a black beret. The embrace of the beret, inspired by a film about the French resistance to the Nazis, became the group's trademark, symbolizing their militant nature. In one of the iconic posters of the 60s, founder Huey Newton sports a black leather jacket and a beret as he lounges in a wicker chair, a spear in one hand and a rifle in the other [8].

Many feminists have used style as a political tactic as well. These women have argued that societal expectations for female dress- make-up, skirts, shaved legs, high heels, etc. - serve to transform women into sexual objects for male pleasure. According to this line of thinking, fashion is a mode of oppression, and potentially worse since these styles of dress

also may make women more vulnerable to harassment [9]. Some feminists have chosen to protest by making different choices when it comes to their own appearance. Writer Andrea Dworkin, for instance, wore asexual denim overalls nearly every day [10].

This is obviously an abbreviated discussion, but it is a discussion that leads to an important observation. If clothes, hair and shoes can be used to make political statements- as campaign workers, civil rights activists and feminist thought leaders all clearly have done- it stands to reason that we ought to consider more closely how these things impact presidential leadership.

A focus on style is particularly justified when one takes into account the heightened visibility of the modern president. Recent chief executives have increasingly tried to achieve their goals by “going public,” using campaign style activities in an attempt to mobilize the public [11]. Although the number of national addresses has remained relatively constant—between 1960-2009 presidents only averaged 3.5 national addresses per year - the number of local appearances has grown dramatically [12]. Accordingly, the White House has been redesigned in order to help the president play this new public role. Based on one conservative estimate, roughly 350 staffers in the George W. Bush White House had responsibilities connected to public communications at the start of the President’s second term [13].

These developments mark a fundamental change in the nature of the presidency. Today, we are witnessing the culmination of what some have called the “image-is-everything presidency,” where symbolism is valued more than substance [14]. The thinking goes that presidents cannot hope to fulfill the unrealistic expectations of the public, so instead they focus on at least creating an impression of leadership. Hence, presidents govern in a “Hollywood” style, taking cues from movie stars when it comes to their gestures and vocal inflection [15].

The problem is that too often style is a footnote to these larger discussions. And yet style choices are clearly integral to the construction of these presidential images and to the establishment of the cinematic narratives of modern leadership. In May 1993 two of the four runways at Los Angeles International Airport were closed for around an hour so President Bill Clinton could have his hair cut on an idling Air Force One by Christophe, a Beverly Hills hairstylist with whom the Clintons had a “personal services contract” to cover haircuts that ran around \$200 each [16]. When a president is willing to shut down the operations of one of the country’s biggest airports all for a trim, shouldn’t we be asking why?

This article will try to shine light on style’s underappreciated role in presidential politics. By mining secondary accounts, first person memoirs and historical news sources, the article argues that presidents can accomplish three goals through their style: they can communicate messages, they can enhance their political position, and they can identify with important political constituencies. Although the primary focus is on the modern presidency, connections will also be made to presidents who served in an earlier age in order to establish the continuity of these patterns. Along the way, the article explores some of the complexities behind each of usage of style, such as how clothing can send unintentional messages, or the problems that arise when a president chooses not to dress like their supporters. Finally, the article concludes with an important takeaway, arguing that better dressed presidents are more likely to be better presidents since they will avoid the kinds of negativity that have historically greeted presidents who dressed more informally.

## COMMUNICATING A MESSAGE

Style can be a valuable tool of presidential communication. This section will show that presidents have signaled differences from their predecessors through their pants and sweaters, and they have announced breakthroughs in foreign affairs through their ties. However, this section will also show that these are not easy things to do. Presidents have been equally as likely to have been wounded by something like their choice of footwear, and sometimes a president's style has communicated a message that did serious damage to their image without ever intending to.

A good starting point to investigate the ways style can communicate a message might be the presidencies of Gerald R. Ford and James E. Carter. Ford and Carter wanted to be seen as welcoming, accessible presidents, something Richard Nixon was not. Ford recalls in his autobiography: "One thing I wanted to do right away was to eliminate the trappings of an 'imperial' Presidency..." [17]. Likewise, Carter's press secretary Jody Powell struck a similar note when he spoke of his boss's plans for "depomping the Presidency [18]."

Both presidents went about accomplishing this goal through a variety of symbolic changes. Ford had his press secretary, Jerald terHorst, introduce a new seating arrangement for press conferences. Now the president would stand before the great White House hallway, the doors of which were meaningfully left open [19]. Ford also had the Marine band play "The Victors," Michigan's fight song, instead of "Hail to the Chief" when he entered a room [20]. Carter went a step further when it came to stripping the presidency of its glamour when he hopped out of the presidential motorcade and walked the sixteen block parade route home to the White House following his swearing in. Carter sold the *Sequoia*, the presidential yacht. He would carry his own luggage. In one of his most powerful symbolic actions, the President would from time to time eat cheeseburgers with staff in the White House mess hall [21].

This history is well known. But that fact makes these examples perfect illustrations of how style is often treated as ancillary to presidential leadership. If clothes are mentioned as part of these discussions, they have merited a sentence or two at most. Yet the reality is that style was an essential part of these two presidencies.

Ford's style meshed perfectly with his other gestures. As the *New York Times* reported, "he dressed the way Midwestern Congressmen dress... like a man of the people [22]." Ford wore no make-up for his press conferences [23]. He liked lightly colored suits paired with "sporty" ties [24]. He embraced more unconventional options like plaid sports jackets and brightly striped shirts [25]. As he worked in his office or on Air Force One, Ford favored a relaxed appearance- no jacket, and a loose tie [26]. Most famously, during the transition period before he moved to the White House, the President would walk out the front door of his Alexandria home and pick up his newspaper while still wearing pajamas.

Given that Carter was trying to communicate the same message, it makes sense that his style was almost a mirror image of his predecessor's. There is little question Carter's style was a strategic choice. In another briefing, Powell admitted that the Administration's habit of "dressing down" was done because "It may make us more approachable. One message is that for Carter, clothes aren't part of the trappings of formality and power. They aren't important [27]." Reflecting his Southern origins, Carter frequently wore jeans as president. Instead of fancy dress shoes, he often opted for workmanlike boots. He was photographed in printed sportshirts. Even his underwear was causal; Carter indicated that he preferred to wear old

fashioned long underwear, leading a New York company to quickly release a sleepwear line called “Jimmy’s Jammies.”

Of course, Carter’s most famous foray into fashion was his choice to wear a wool sweater while delivering a televised address on energy on February 2, 1977, just two weeks after taking office. This was believed to be the first time an American president had appeared before the country in a sweater. When viewers tuned in, Carter was seated in the White House Library next to a roaring fire while clad in a beige cardigan [28]. Although not a particularly fashionable choice—cut in a V-neck, this type of cardigan was called a “grandfather sweater” since they were marketed to older men—Carter’s sweater successfully constructed the image of informality that he sought.

While Ford and Carter used all their clothes to distinguish themselves from Nixon, even minor style choices can be a tool of public communication. One example of a president who communicated a message through a small style choice would be Bill Clinton. Clinton often fretted over what conclusions people might draw from the type of tie he wore. His strategist Dick Morris knew Clinton paid attention to this kind of detail, and so whenever he met with the president he was always sure not to wear a boring tie which might, in his words, “smack of staid thinking [29].” Morris encouraged Clinton to learn from his example. In a memo he sent to the President, Morris noted that Clinton would too often wear ties with distracting patterns. According to Morris, this kind of tie didn’t “look presidential.” Instead, he urged Clinton to stick to “a red tie and navy suit as standard.” While abroad in Paris a short while later, Morris bought Clinton a collection of bright red power ties that fit his vision of how the president should dress [30].

As usual, Clinton was a quick study. In September 1993 Clinton arranged for an historic meeting on the South Lawn of the White House between Israeli Prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat. Clinton woke up at 3 A.M. the night before, worried about his speech and whether this tense diplomatic exchange would all unravel at the last moment. With so much on his mind, Clinton nevertheless devoted time at dawn to picking out his tie. He later told his aides that the tie he chose— a blue and yellow number with little trumpets on it— was meant to communicate a Biblical message [31].

The trumpets were to recall the story of Jericho as told in the Book of Joshua. In this chapter of the Old Testament, God commands Joshua to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land following the death of Moses. When Joshua arrives at the city of Jericho, however, he finds it fortified by strong walls. But God tells him that if priests were to march around the city sounding trumpets of ram’s horns the walls would fall. Clinton picked this particular tie with trumpets on it, he said, to celebrate how the walls between Israel and Palestine were falling, too.

Ford, Carter and Clinton are examples of presidents who effectively and intentionally communicated specific messages through their style. Whether these were the “right” messages is a question we will return to. For now, though, one must also be aware that if presidents are not careful, their style can say something other than what they want.

A case in point might be Richard Nixon’s misguided forays into casual beachwear. On June 14, 1968, Bobby Kennedy appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine. The famed photojournalist Bill Eppridge captured Kennedy running just along the edge of the water on an Oregon beach. His shoes are off, his pants are rolled up, and there are traces of mud on his bare feet. Kennedy was photographed skipping through the air as his dog, Freckles, happily

sprinted behind. This one image seemed to perfectly telegraph the effortless cool of the Kennedys.

By then, Nixon had been engaged in a long-standing rivalry with the Kennedy family [32]. The roots of that rivalry stemmed from Nixon's defeat in 1960, but the scrappy California kid in Nixon also resented the privilege of the silver spoon Harvard graduates. Worse still, the Kennedys always seemed to get better press than Nixon. Nixon ordered his staff to study the Kennedys, to learn the secrets to their success [33].

Thus, two years later, Nixon regrettably tried to recreate Bobby's *Life* cover [34]. His team planned for weeks before inviting the press to a beautiful bluff in San Clemente for a special photo opportunity. However when the media arrived, instead of finding a president at ease, they saw Nixon walking the beach.... in dress pants and black wingtip shoes.

Nixon's photo is more famous than Kennedy's, but for the wrong reasons. What wound up happening is that Nixon's awkward style choice represented a lot of what bothered people about him as politician. As Arthur Hoppe wrote in the *Boston Globe*, "no one really likes a man whose idea of a fun-filled time is walking on a private beach in shined shoes, white shirt and necktie [35]." Nixon struck many of his critics as odd, the quintessential loner who somehow still wound up choosing politics as a career. Nixon himself admitted to a reporter that he could not "really let my hair down with anyone [36]." Due to the strained nature of Nixon's social interactions, the public often speculated about who "the real Nixon" was [37]. And when it came to this photo, how could you not wonder about the kind of person who would wear dress shoes on the beach? Consequently, the message of Nixon's wingtips- that the president was incapable of being authentic- was a lasting one. Even three years after Nixon left office, Jim Squires of the *Chicago Tribune* was still pointing to his "stroll down a sandy beach in a suit, complete with immaculate white shirt, tie, and freshly shined shoes" as proof of Nixon's "strangeness [38]."

What presidents have to realize is that even when they are not consciously trying to send a message through their style they still might do so. Like Obama, Herbert Hoover did not invest much time or effort in how he looked. He typically rotated between just three or four identical blue suits. When these suits became tattered, Hoover would use them for fishing. The signature of Hoover's look, however, was a high, stiff, starched shirt collar that covered his entire neck. In the past, ready-to-wear dress shirts featured a thin banded collar to which an assortment of collar types could be attached by means of a button in the back. Collars could run as high as three inches. This design prolonged the life of a shirt since collars tended to soil and fray easily [39]. Hoover stockpiled dozens of these removable collars.

This was not a good look for the President. High collars were already seen as old-fashioned by the 1920s. Yet Hoover persisted in wearing them because they served a practical purpose. The collars were convenient (because they were easier to launder) and they saved him money, two qualities Hoover valued above all else [40].

Hoover's opponents had a more insidious interpretation of the collars. Despite taking steps to maintain wage rates, prevent strikes, and secure money from Congress for public works, Hoover was viciously attacked for not grasping the magnitude of the Great Depression [41]. And something as small as his shirt collar contributed to this impression. To some, his stiff, outdated collars were evidence of a person who occupied a different world than they did. As people around the country had nothing to wear, Hoover dressed with the formality of the previous century. A new generation of young men had grown up wearing only unstarched soft collar shirts [42]. How could they relate to someone who looked like Hoover did? So it is

unsurprising that Hoover's look was enough to prompt one magazine writer to wonder aloud, "Is Hoover Human?"[43] Hoover's policies *and* his dress forced people to ask questions like this.

## ENHANCING THEIR POLITICAL POSITION

In addition to communicating a message, style choices can also be used to enhance the president's political position. Both President John F. Kennedy and Ronald W. Reagan were liked for their sense of style. These reputations translated into more influence for each man. Kennedy used his style to convince the public that he was a man of refined taste, thereby at least somewhat alleviating concerns about his age. Reagan used his style to restore public respect for his office, thereby increasing his power over his opponents. Both men improved their chances of getting what they wanted by paying attention to how they looked.

With all the glamour that surrounds his family, one might think that style came naturally to Kennedy. But for most his life Kennedy could not be bothered with trying to look nice. By the time he was thirty, Kennedy was still dressing with the awkwardness of "a Harvard Ph.D. candidate in political science [44]." As a House member, Kennedy would appear disheveled as he wandered through the halls of Congress. He was known to show up on the floor in a wrinkled seersucker jacket with his shirttail exposed. He would wear "ratty" sneakers to the cafeteria [45]. Favorite items included khaki pants and baggy sweaters. Kennedy refused to wear suits, and when he did, "He wore the most godawful suits," according to his secretary, Mary Davis [46].

Kennedy dressed like a different man by the time he became president. By then, he was maintaining a collection of twenty suits, all of which were cut in a European style with two button jackets, as opposed to the three button standard worn by almost all American men. New York tailor Sam Harris made Kennedy's suits twice a year, sending him a half-dozen new ones each time [47]. The President's suits were complemented with crisply pressed, custom dress shirts that were imported from world famous Parisian shirt-maker Charvet [48]. To ensure he always looked put together, Kennedy would change his clothes three to four times a day, often wearing as many as six shirts in one day [49]. When Kennedy wasn't formally attired, he perfected a casual, classic look marked by items that remain fundamentals of American sportswear today- button-down shirts, crew-neck sweaters, and Ray-Ban sunglasses [50]. As a result, Kennedy was able to look equally at home in front of a podium as he was sitting on the beach in Hyannis.

Even beyond the basics, Kennedy was an adventurous dresser who bucked the style conventions of his time. For a July 1961 dinner held at Mount Vernon to honor the President of Pakistan, State Department invitations asked attendees to wear white dinner jackets. White had been the custom at summertime formal events during the Eisenhower Administration. However, Kennedy and his brother, Robert, broke the rules, and arrived wearing lightweight black jackets instead. Kennedy did not shy away from wearing a dark blue suit to a black-tie dinner, or from skipping an overcoat in freezing weather [51].

There was one attribute of his style that Kennedy was most proud of: his wavy, chestnut brown hair. Kennedy always kept a hair brush close by in a desk drawer. Jackie Kennedy has said that her husband was so invested in how his hair looked that he would meet with a hairdresser on an almost daily basis. Secretaries in his office were trained to give him regular

scalp massages, which he credited with keeping his hair looking full. Given that he didn't want to appear as vain as these anecdotes might suggest, Kennedy would furtively comb his hair while his motorcade was going through an underpass or tunnel, thereby concealing his grooming practices from any nearby photographers [52].

All of this work paid off. Within months of his election, Kennedy had been named one of the ten best dressed people in America, and he would soon grace the cover of *Gentleman's Quarterly* [53]. Yet this turn of events begs an obvious question—if Kennedy did not instinctively care about fashion, why did he ultimately become so interested in it, up to the point where he would critique the appearance of his friends and staff, too? The explanation for Kennedy's evolution can be traced to the fact that his early lack of style made it difficult for other members of government to take him seriously. Once, while serving in the House, Kennedy was mistaken for a Congressional page by a fellow representative. On another occasion, someone confused Kennedy with an elevator operator [54]. His sloppy dress was unbecoming of an aspiring leader.

Gradually, Kennedy realized this and became a great dresser to emphasize his maturity. Kennedy was only forty three years old when he won the presidency. His youth and inexperience had been the major argument made against his candidacy by Richard M. Nixon. Some Democrats shared these concerns, following the lead of Harry S. Truman who had pleaded with his party to select a more seasoned nominee [55]. Style became a way to counter concerns that he was too young to be president. Kennedy could no longer dress like a student. He had to look serious to be taken seriously. Occasionally Kennedy would even wear items he hated like hats and vests in order to, in the words of his alter ego Ted Sorensen, "lessen talk about his youth [56]."

Of course, Ronald Reagan's sense of style is admired nearly as much as John Kennedy's. The Fashion Foundation of America named Reagan to their "Best Dressed" list for four consecutive years in his second term, while the *Boston Globe* praised him as "the Ralph Lauren of the White House [57]." Reagan had the trademark figure of a former leading man—6'1", 184 pounds with a 36 waist and a 44 chest— and he accentuated his classic features with a timeless look. Calling to mind the Hollywood of the 1940s, he wore custom two-button suits with fabric imported from France or Italy. He would wear French cuff dress shirts during news conferences. On other days, he would vary his appearance by opting for traditional items like tweed or glen plaid sport jackets. Outside of Washington, Reagan cultivated a glamorous Western style featuring jodhpurs, turtlenecks, cowboy hats and chambray shirts. Bear in mind this was not the attire of your average rancher, though; Reagan's boots were personally made by Tony Lama and cost \$1,500 [58].

Reagan's appearance had a dramatic impact on the way American men dressed in the 1980s. There is no better evidence of this than the return of the brown suit. Brown suits had been avoided since John T. Molloy wrote in his 1975 guidebook *Dress for Success* that they were inappropriate for younger executives. Suits in shades of blue and gray accounted for more than half of all suits in the U.S. Since men wanted to look like they "belonged," Molloy argued they should follow the lead of higher-ups in their office. Reagan was the first president in memory to wear brown suits, which he did often. In response, sales picked up, leading Molloy to admit, "If brown does catch on it will be because of Reagan [59]."

What is interesting is that, like Kennedy, Reagan won respect despite having little interest in fashion. His style was far from perfect. Designers criticized him for favoring spread collars, which were not in fashion at the time, and for the excessive width and clunky

Windsor knots of his ties. His jackets erred on the side of being loose, and they were not tapered enough at the waist. Reagan's oversized, padded shoulders could be too big. As Norman Karr, director of the Men's Fashion Association of America said, "He's not a trend-setter [60]." Indeed, the personal suit and polo preferences of the former movie star could appall his public relations staff and his stylish First Lady. Reagan's image specialist, Michael Deaver, recalls that one Reagan favorite was so bad that "Around the office, whenever you (Reagan) wear that suit everybody says 'If he had to be shot, why couldn't he have been wearing that suit?' [61]"

Therefore, it is important to note that Reagan was willing to ignore his own tastes when it came to his appearance. He knew that how he looked mattered. For Reagan, his style choices were made to add to the power of his office. Reagan had a profound respect for the presidency, and he felt that anything that seemed ordinary detracted from it. So, he set about protecting the presidency through a conscious process. "These things didn't just happen. You didn't have people coming to work in blue jeans one day under Carter and then dressing in suits and ties the next day," remembered Reagan aide John F.W. Rogers [62]. Reagan and his team took great care to ensure his appearance maximized his potential. This required discipline. For instance, Reagan absolutely refused to take his coat off whenever he was in the Oval Office [63].

The discipline that marked Reagan's style meant that his clothing had its intended effect. Designer Bill Blass said at the time "He (Reagan) dresses like the man in charge, the chairman of the board [64]." This, of course, was the entire point. And even Reagan's critics had to acknowledge the power of his style. In a piece attacking Reagan for "crassness," Jon Margolis still acknowledged "Most people probably feel it is more dignified for their President to bring them bad news dressed in a suit and tie, as Reagan did recently, than to have him perform the same function wearing a cardigan sweater, as Jimmy Carter did four years ago [65]."

## IDENTIFYING WITH A CONSTITUENCY

Finally, style can be used by a president hoping to identify themselves with an important political constituency. The president dresses like the target group to make him seem as if he is part of that group, too. A modern illustration would be President Bush's attempt to use cowboy attire to identify with people from humbler backgrounds. However, an examination of Martin Van Buren's experience will also reveal the difficulties presidents encounter when their style is drastically different from their backers'.

When President George W. Bush wanted to, he was actually a sophisticated dresser. His well-tailored suits in rich colors like midnight blue earned him a spot on *Esquire's* 10 Best Dressed Men in America list [66]. Yet, this does not change the fact that Bush was most known for cultivating a different kind of look. Bush spent 490 days of his presidency at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, the so-called "Western White House." While on the ranch, Bush wore jeans, short sleeve shirts, cowboy hats and boots as he cleared brush around his property- quintessential cowboy attire. Although Bush was more likely to wear this type of clothing at home, he would also wear similar outfits from time to time in Washington, too [67].

Surely Bush personally liked this look. That does not mean his style was not strategic, though. In fact, Bush's embrace of a cowboy style had long term roots, dating to a 1978 run for the House of Representatives. In that unsuccessful campaign, Bush had been branded as an outsider. His opponent gleefully showcased Bush's birth certificate- which listed his place of birth as Connecticut—and ran radio ads drawing attention to the fact that Bush had been educated at Andover, Yale and Harvard.

His defeat in this race made a lasting impression on Bush. Vice President Dick Cheney has acknowledged that the two men spoke often of it. "We talked on more than one occasion about his campaign for Congress. I could identify with that because I always believed, and still do to this day, that I benefitted politically when it was time for me to run for office by virtue of the fact that I had graduated not from Yale but from the University of Wyoming," Cheney said. As a result of this experience, Bush's close friend Joe O'Neill said that the future president decided "never to get out-countried again [68]." When seen in this light, Bush's cowboy style is understandable as part of a conscious attempt to identify with a specific constituency. Bush came from an elite family. That could make him difficult to relate to. Except, perhaps, if he looked the part of your average Texan.

Bush had the right idea. An example from the pre-modern presidency showcases the dangers that surround presidents who adopt styles dramatically different from those favored by their constituencies. Martin Van Buren was arguably the boldest presidential dresser of all time. His interest in style was deep-rooted and personal. In 1796 Van Buren started an apprenticeship with a Kinderhook, NY lawyer named Francis Silvester. According to an old campaign biography, on his first day working for Silvester, Van Buren appeared in "coarse linen and rough woolens his mother had spun and woven." These clothes dirtied over the day, leading Silvester to lecture Van Buren on the importance of good clothing. Two days later, Van Buren returned with both a new commitment to style... and the same tricornered hat, buckled shoes and knee breeches that Silvester himself had been wearing [69].

Descriptions of Van Buren's dramatic and colorful style are nothing short of astounding. Henry Stanton's detailing of Van Buren's "exquisite... personal appearance" during a visit to church bears quoting in full:

His complexion was a bright blond and he dressed accordingly. On this occasion he wore an elegant snuff-colored broadcloth coat, with velvet collar to match; his cravat was orange tinted silk with modest lace tips; his vest was of pearl hue; his trousers were white duck; his silk hose corresponded to his vest, his shoes were Morocco; his nicely fitting gloves were yellow kid; his hat a long-furred beaver, with broad brim, was of Quaker color [70].

As much as Van Buren may have liked the way he looked, the problem remains that his style was too forward thinking for the people he hoped to lead. The era in which Van Buren served was a democratic era [71]. Indeed, Van Buren himself had facilitated these changes through his meticulous work building a novel party organization around "the people's president," Andrew Jackson. Van Buren needed to identify with the common man who had supported Jackson. In contrast with the Bush example, Van Buren's style alienated him from this constituency.

Van Buren's antagonists fixated on his style, seeing in Van Buren's clothes alarming signs of femininity. In a biography of Van Buren supposedly written just before his death at

the Alamo, frontiersman Davy Crockett claimed that while Van Buren was in the Senate other lawmakers could not even distinguish his gender: “laced up in corsets, such as women in a town wear, and, if possible, tighter than the best of them. It would be difficult to say, from his personal appearance, whether he was man or woman, but for his large red and gray whiskers [72].” Crockett called the President “Aunt Matty.” Similarly, authors and artists took liberties with their depictions of Van Buren. Cartoonists portrayed him using perfumes on his sideburns [73]. Novelists followed the example of Nathaniel Beverly Tucker, who in his 1836 book *The Partisan Leader* skewered Van Buren as someone who wore a “delicate slipper” on each foot and whose hands were “richly jeweled [74].”

But no more devastating caricature of Van Buren can be found than the diatribe delivered by Whig Congressman Charles Ogle on the floor of the House over the course of three consecutive days in April of 1840 [75]. Outraged by a budget request that had been made for \$3,665 for White House improvements, Ogle sought to mock Van Buren’s royal pretensions, as he saw them. Though Van Buren’s appearance was not Ogle’s main concern, he still saw fit to attack Van Buren’s style, sneering that the President was “vain enough to spend his money in the purchase of rubies for his neck, diamond rings for his fingers, Brussels lace for his breast, filet gloves for his hands.” Rhetorically, Ogle asked “What would the frugal and honest ‘Hoosiers’ think were they to behold a democratic peacock, in full court costume, strutting by the hour before golden framed mirrors, nine feet high and four feet and a half wide?” Unfortunately for the Little Magician, Ogle was not the only one making sly digs about his style; the reporters who covered the speech could not help from piling on, too. One Louisville newspaper winkingly observed that Van Buren was so aggravated by Ogle’s speech that “he actually *burst his corset*” [76].

## DISCUSSION

These brief studies offer an important lesson. Certainly presidents cannot be too extravagant in their style. Such luxury will open them up to the kind of attacks that were part of Van Buren’s undoing. Yet, in general, history shows that better dressed presidents-presidents like Kennedy and Reagan- will increase their chances of being influential. Despite the tendency of certain presidents to dress down, either to communicate a message or to identify with a given constituency, this style typically damages the prestige of the leaders who adopt it.

Indeed, if we revisit some of the earlier examples in this paper, we will find plenty of support for this conclusion. For example, Ford’s everyman attire was popular at first. However, after his pardon of Richard Nixon, doubts grew about Ford’s preparation for the job. Ford’s fundamental problem was that he struggled to appear “presidential” [77]. Comedians were delighted when he fell down a set of airplane steps in Austria, or when he wiped out while skiing in Vail. More problematically, stumbles like these often led to questions about Ford’s intelligence. When these liabilities are considered, wearing plaid, working without a jacket, stepping outside in pajamas and the like was probably unhelpful. As proof, bear in mind that John Molloy publicly advised the Watergate defendants to dress like Ford because “nonauthoritarian clothes” like his would allow them to “visually communicate... that you weren’t the man in charge [78].” Ford needed to be seen as the man in charge, but he was failing to look like it in more ways than one.

The reception to Carter's style was much the same. At first, people found Carter's dress a welcome change. But soon opinion turned as the informal clothing of his White House began to represent not approachability, but incompetence. "The approval that greeted Carter's refreshing unpretentiousness- his suitcase toting, his sweaters and jeans, his curbing of White House pomp- waned when it began to erode something that many people seemingly also wanted: a magisterial Presidential presence," Jack Anderson wrote at the midpoint of Carter's term [79]. It is safe to say that most agreed with the *Boston Globe's* concluding assessment of his presidency that "wearing a cardigan" was an "appropriate gesture for an 'outsider,' but not for the chosen leader of 220 million Americans [80]." For as Meg Greenfield admitted later, "The sweater hasn't been invented that can inspire voters' confidence [81]."

Finally, George W. Bush also would have been better served abandoning his cowboy clothes because, much like Nixon, his style came to represent larger concerns his critics had about his policies. Bush's western clothes became inextricably linked to his aggressive international policies. For those opposed to these policies, criticisms of his leadership often were made by including his look as part of the attack. For instance, cartoonists mocking Bush's foreign policy consistently drew him wearing a cowboy hat, intending to suggest that Bush was reckless [82]. For people like this, the President became "Dan Quayle in cowboy boots [83]."

Yet even beyond the examples that have already been covered, additional presidents must be added to the list of those who hurt their standing with poor style. Like Herbert Hoover, Harry Truman had a signature element to his style: bold, Hawaiian style sport shirts. Often these tropical short-sleeve shirts would be marked by patterns of fish and birds. Whenever he could, Truman would retreat for a working vacation in Key West, FL. [84] In Key West, Truman abandoned the formality of Washington. "While he was off duty he was Harry Truman and would wear what he liked," wrote *Life* [85]. At the start of one trip in March of 1951, the *New York Times* reported that Truman had changed into one of his sport shirts within fifteen minutes of arriving [86].

It is fairly clear that wearing what he liked was not a great idea. Although today his presidency is widely admired, while in office Truman was the country's most mocked president since Andrew Johnson [87]. Critics made fun of his lack of education, his penchant for putting his foot in his mouth, his attachment to his mother, and his Midwestern mannerisms. His sport shirts were problematic for precisely this reason- because they gave his opponents even more ammunition.

The words most commonly used by the press to describe his shirts were words like "loud," "gaudy," and "wild." People snidely noticed that the shirts did not flatter Truman's body, and instead showcased "a slight presidential paunch" that signaled "Truman was getting too fat [88]." Samuel King, the Governor of Hawaii, found Truman's appearance so undignified that he issued an order forbidding his own state's employees from wearing similar aloha shirts while on duty [89]. The distaste for Truman's shirts was so fevered that it even crossed oceans, leading one British trade journal to humorously suggest that it was Truman's style that forced him from office: "Mr. Truman, due doubtless to political pressure arising as a direct result of the Key West shirts he affects, is not to run again [90]."

Truman is not the only "great" president who ran into trouble due to his choice of clothes. In many ways, Thomas Jefferson aimed to use his style in order to communicate a message

much like the ones Ford and Carter wanted to send around 175 years later [91]. Jefferson was irritated to no end by the Federalist Party's insistence on ceremony and their antiquated rules of etiquette. These trappings of power smacked of monarchy to Jefferson, and so he sought to be more egalitarian in how he presented himself.

Contemporaries of Jefferson consistently remarked on his uninspiring appearance. His friend Margaret Bayard Smith wrote that "his dress was plain, unstudied and sometimes old-fashioned [92]." His granddaughter Ellen Coolidge agreed, recalling that "His dress was simple, and adapted to his ideas of neatness and comfort. He paid little attention to fashion, wearing whatever he liked best... He made no change except from motives of the same kind, and did nothing to be in conformity with the fashion of the day [93]." Daniel Webster saw the same things but was harsher, claiming "His whole dress is neglected [94]."

While this might have seemed like good politics, Federalist newspapers lampooned his too small-clothes, his preference for corduroy, his red-plush waistcoats, his threadbare coats and all the other ways he rejected the fashions of the time. Others believed Jefferson's informal style- which meant that he would receive guests to the White House in his morning robe- was disrespectful, sometimes personally so [95]. When he first met the American president, British minister Anthony Merry was astounded to find Jefferson so casually attired: "I, in my official costume, found myself at the hour of reception he had himself appointed, introduced to a man as president of the United States, nor merely in undress, but *actually standing in slippers down at the heels*, and both pantaloons, coat, and under-clothes indicative of utter slovenliness and indifference to appearances, and in a state of negligence actually studied [96]." It is easy to conclude that Jefferson would have had a smoother time in office had he taken his appearance at least a little more seriously.

To be clear, no one, including myself, would make the case that what clothes a president wears, or how a president combs his hair, are the *most* important things to know about presidential power. Rather, the argument of this paper is more circumspect. I only wish to prove that style is significant and worth thinking about systematically.

This article provides plenty of evidence that presidents and their advisors strategically modify their appearance to further their political goals, whether that came in the form of Jody Powell's explanation for Carter's informal style, Dick Morris' memos to Clinton about ties, or George Bush's determination not to be "out-countried" again.

This article also proves that style can be used to accomplish three key goals. The reader has seen how presidents use their style to communicate messages, to enhance their political position, and to connect with important political constituencies. The complications behind these tasks were also revealed, as readers saw how presidents like Hoover and Nixon sent the wrong messages through their style, and how presidents like Van Buren lost touch with important constituencies through theirs.

Ultimately, this article proves that scholars would be wise to consider style more closely in their analyses. Researchers conducting interviews might ask White House staffers to reflect on why presidents chose to look as they did, particularly at key moments. There is powerful evidence that appropriately fashionable presidents like Kennedy and Reagan have helped their causes, while the style faux pas of Truman, Jefferson and others have done damage to theirs. It is said that one can never be overdressed. So, too, when it comes to the presidency.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Peter Baker, "Obama Urges Calm in Face of Crises in Ukraine and Syria," *New York Times*, August 28, 2014.
- [2] Vanessa Friedman, "Obama Wore a Tan Suit (and Spoke About World Crises)," *New York Times*, August 28, 2014.
- [3] Associated Press, "Obama's Tan Suit Buzzed around the World," *New York Times*, August 29, 2014.
- [4] "Rep. Peter King: No Excuse for Obama Admitting No ISIS Strategy," *Newsmax*, accessed June 30, 2016, <http://www.newsmax.com/Newsmax-Tv/Peter-King-Obama-ISIS-Iraq/2014/08/29/id/591648/>.
- [5] Michael Lewis, "Obama's Way," *Vanity Fair*, October, 2012.
- [6] George Rising, *Clean for Gene: Eugene McCarthy's 1968 Presidential Campaign* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997).
- [7] Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Random House, 2013), 163.
- [8] Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 116-119.
- [9] Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 228-247.
- [10] Astrid Henry, "Fashioning a Feminist Style, Or, How I Learned to Dress From Reading Feminist Theory," in *Fashion Talks: Undressing the Power of Style*, eds. Shira Tarrant and Marjorie Jolles (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012), 15-16.
- [11] Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1993).
- [12] Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha, "The Public Presidency: Communications and Media," in *New Directions in the American Presidency*, ed. Lori Cox Han (New York: Routledge, 2011).
- [13] Martha Joynt Kumar, *Managing the President's Message* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 5.
- [14] Richard W. Waterman, Robert Wright and Gilbert St. Clair, *The Image-Is-Everything Presidency* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).
- [15] Burton W. Peretti, *The Leading Man: Hollywood and the Presidential Image* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).
- [16] Dana S. Calvo, "Cutting It, Coast to Coast," *New York Times*, December 5, 1993; Thomas L. Friedman, "Haircut Grounded Clinton While the Price Took Off," *New York Times*, May 21, 1993.
- [17] Gerald R. Ford, *A Time to Heal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 126.
- [18] Hedrick Smith, "Carter So Far: Mix of Symbol and Substance," *New York Times*, March 6, 1977.
- [19] Yanek Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 29.
- [20] Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 126-127.
- [21] Julian E. Zelizer, *Jimmy Carter* (New York: Times Books, 2010), 57.
- [22] Eli N. Evans, "All the Candidates' Clothes," *New York Times*, September 19, 1976.

- [23] *Time*, "Ford: Plain Words Before an Open Door," September 9, 1974.
- [24] Marji Kunz, "Clothes Make the Defendant," *Boston Globe*, October 12, 1974.
- [25] Evans, "All the Candidates' Clothes."
- [26] *Time*, "A Sure Touch in Ford's Second Week," September 2, 1974.
- [27] Marian Christy, "Carter's Casual Couture," *Boston Globe*, February 15, 1977.
- [28] Nina S. Hyde, "President Carter, the Sweater Man," *Washington Post*, February 5, 1977.
- [29] Dick Morris, *Behind the Oval Office: Winning the Presidency in the Nineties* (New York: Random House, 1997), 24.
- [30] *Ibid.*, 182.
- [31] Maureen Dowd, "President's Tie Tells It All: Trumpets for a Day of Glory," *New York Times*, September 14, 1993.
- [32] Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician, 1962-1972* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 33-34.
- [33] *Ibid.*, 250.
- [34] David Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), xxix, 222.
- [35] Arthur Hoppe, "Committee to Re-Erect the President," *Boston Globe*, May 11, 1973.
- [36] Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence, KN: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 215.
- [37] Tom Wicker, "One of Us," in *Richard M. Nixon: Politician, President, Administrator*, eds. Leon Friedman and William F. Levantrosser (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991), 23-25.
- [38] Jim Squires, "Being Nixon Is Never Being Able to Say You're Sorry," *Chicago Tribune*, May 9, 1977.
- [39] Daniel Delis Hill, *American Menswear: From the Civil War to the Twenty-First Century* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2011), 53.
- [40] Kendrick A. Clements, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: Imperfect Visionary, 1918-1928* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 32.
- [41] William E. Leuchtenburg, *Herbert Hoover* (New York: Times Books, 2009), 103-116.
- [42] Hill, *American Menswear*, 136.
- [43] Leuchtenburg, *Herbert Hoover*, 76.
- [44] Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), 4.
- [45] Thurston Clarke, *Ask Not: The Inauguration of John F. Kennedy and the Speech That Changed America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), 126.
- [46] Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 5.
- [47] John L. Steele, "Well Suited for the White House," *Life*, October 13, 1961.
- [48] Neil A. Lewis, "Presidential Chic, From Jabots to Polyester," *New York Times*, January 19, 1997.
- [49] Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York: Touchstone, 1993), 314.
- [50] Lee Konstantinou, "The Camelot Presidency: Kennedy and Postwar Style," in *The Cambridge Companion to John F. Kennedy*, ed. Andrew Hoberek (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 152.
- [51] Steele, "Well Suited for the White House."

- [52] Clarke, *Ask Not*, 125; Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 24.
- [53] James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence, KN: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 276; Steele, "Well Suited for the White House."
- [54] Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 5.
- [55] Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, 18.
- [56] Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 24.
- [57] Julie Hatfield, "The Styles of a President," *Boston Globe*, November 23, 1981; Richard Reeves, *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 447.
- [58] Hatfield, "The Styles of a President"; Marvin Scott, "Will the President's Clothes Alter the Way You Look?" *Boston Globe*, November 1, 1981.
- [59] Sharon Stangenes, "For Some Men, Brown Suits Their Success," *Chicago Tribune*, March 4, 1984.
- [60] Scott, "Will the President's Clothes Alter the Way You Look?"
- [61] Michael K. Deaver, *Behind the Scenes: In Which the Author Talks About Ronald and Nancy Reagan... and Himself* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987), 34.
- [62] Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 149.
- [63] *Ibid.*, 148.
- [64] Scott, "Will the President's Clothes Alter the Way You Look?"
- [65] Jon Margolis, "Indications of Crassness in Washington's New Style," *Chicago Tribune*, February 19, 1981.
- [66] Toby Harnden, "Giving George Bush a Cutting Edge," *Daily Telegraph*, March 12, 2003.
- [67] Karen S. Hoffman, "Visual Persuasion in George W. Bush's Presidency: Cowboy Imagery in Public Discourse," *Congress & the Presidency* 38 (2011).
- [68] Peter Baker, *Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), 34.
- [69] Ted Widmer, *Martin Van Buren* (New York: Times Books, 2005), 27-28; Major L. Wilson, *The Presidency of Martin Van Buren* (Lawrence, KN: University Press of Kansas, 1984), 24.
- [70] Donald B. Cole, *Martin Van Buren and the American Political System* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 172-173.
- [71] Widmer, *Martin Van Buren*.
- [72] Cole, *Martin Van Buren and the American Political System*, 265.
- [73] John Niven, *Martin Van Buren: The Romantic Age of American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 462.
- [74] Cole, *Martin Van Buren and the American Political System*, 265.
- [75] Charles Ogle, "Speech of Mr. Ogle, of Pennsylvania, on the Regal Splendor of the President's Palace: Delivered in the House of Representatives, April 14, 1840."
- [76] Wilson, *The Presidency of Martin Van Buren*, 197.
- [77] Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s*, 47-55.
- [78] <sup>1</sup> Kunz, "Clothes Make the Defendant."
- [79] Jack Anderson, "The Jimmy Carter Balance Sheet," *Boston Globe*, January 14, 1979.
- [80] *Boston Globe*, "The Carter Presidency," January 11, 1981.

- [81] Meg Greenfield, "'Just Folks' Pantomime," *Washington Post*, October 3, 1994.
- [82] Susan Page and Bill Nichols, "Overseas, Bush Viewed With Respect, Skepticism," *USA Today*, May 21, 2002.
- [83] Philip Gailey, "Conservatives Bail On 'Quayle in Cowboy Boots,'" *Augusta Chronicle*, April 12, 2007.
- [84] David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 735-736.
- [85] *Life*, "The President's Clothes," December 10, 1951.
- [86] Anthony Leviero, "Truman in Florida for 3 Weeks Rest," *New York Times*, March 3, 1951.
- [87] McCullough, *Truman*, 520.
- [88] *Life*, "President Has Tough Week," March 28, 1949.
- [89] *Chicago Daily Tribune*, "Shirts, Stuffed and Otherwise," July 16, 1953.
- [90] *New York Times*, "Stevenson's Style Suits Britain's Tailors, Who Doubt Clothes Can Make a Candidate," October 4, 1952.
- [91] Robert M.S. McDonald, "The (Federalist?) Presidency of Thomas Jefferson," in *A Companion to Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Francis D. Cogliano (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 164-168.
- [92] Margaret Bayard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society: Portrayed by the Family Letters of Mrs. Samuel Harrison Smith from the Collection of Her Grandson, J. Henley Smith* (Washington, DC: Scribner, 1906), 386.
- [93] Sarah N. Randolph, *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1871), 392.
- [94] Merrill D. Peterson, *Visitors to Monticello* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 98.
- [95] Joyce Appleby, "Thomas Jefferson," in *The American Presidency*, eds. Alan Brinkley and Davis Dyer (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 42.
- [96] Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 731.