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The Masculine Image of Presidents As Sporting Figures: A Public Relations Perspective

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Abstract

This article explores the role of the president identifying himself as a sporting figure, which can be successful as well as detrimental in the presidents' overall public relations strategy, through an ideological criticism lens. To make this argument, the authors start by examining the role of sports in American popular culture and its relationship to a strong masculine image. Recognizing the value of publicity in the mediated political world, they then trace the evolution of the president from Eisenhower to Obama identifying himself as a sporting figure through the mass media. The article specifically focuses on the two most recent presidents' use of sports and its effect on their masculine image. The authors conclude by addressing the implications of a future female president's strategic use of sports.

Keywords

public relations, president, masculinity, sports

Introduction

Kenneth Burke's major contribution to understanding public discourse is that identification is persuasion; this approach has been called the new rhetoric. The old rhetoric was attributed to Aristotle, who taught that to persuade required careful attention to logos, ethos, and pathos in an attempt to persuade one's interlocutor. For example, a salesman, following an Aristotelian approach to persuasion, would have a sound logical argument and make that argument correctly in good faith while touching on appropriate emotional aspects. Burke, however, sees persuasive value in the salesman being similar or, as Burke would say, consubstantial, to the buyer; that is, a buyer would be persuaded, in part, due to the similarities shared with the salesman. Those similarities may include sex/gender, race, age, political affiliation, social mores, where they live, hobbies, and many other aspects, including sports.

To many men, sport is a topic that allows for identification and, by extension, persuasion. A car salesman, for example, might bring up the topic of sports to dispel the buyer's apprehension of the traditional quick-talking salesman who is making the most of every opportunity to get the buyer's money. In essence, sport is a medium that allows for identification primarily between men. As Carroll (2003) states, "Sports have been intertwined with American ideals of (and fears about) masculinity" (p. 435). Masculinity studies is a social scientific discipline that "refers most commonly to socially constructed expectations of appropriate behaviors, beliefs, expressions, and styles of social interaction for men" (Sills & Merton, 1968, p. 5). One particular area of focus for masculinity studies scholars is premised on the ideology that sports "position(s) some men as superior to other men" (Sills & Merton, 1968, p. 5). As such, there is tremendous potential value for men to engage in sports activity to rise or, if they are unsuccessful, to lower themselves on the social hierarchy. This concept applies to men from peewee football to the president, who identify with the masculine ideal that "physical strength, assertiveness, emotional detachment, [and] competition are the markers of masculinity" (Sills & Merton, 1968, p. 5). Here, our emphasis is on the United States president. In a hypermediated political world, a United States president can benefit from successfully engaging in sports. This may be due, in part, to the notion of civilian leadership of the military. The president, who is often referred to as the "most powerful *man* in the free world," is the ultimate commander-and-chief of the United States military and is constitutionally charged to "take care the laws be faithfully executed." Such titles and responsibilities reflect an authoritarian, militaristic image. In the past, a military head of state's masculine image came from personally leading troops in battle. Images of Napoleon leading troops on his white horse and Alexander the Great in the thick of battle were important means of relating with the public.

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Times, however, have changed, and civilian military leaders such as the U.S. president do not engage directly in modern warfare. But this is not to say that presidents have lost the ability to display their masculinity and, by extension, their ability to lead, by appearing physically tough, assertive, and competitive. Engaging in sports allows for the president to depict his masculinity and by extension his ability to be an assertive, decisive leader. This article explores the role of the president identifying himself as an athlete, which can be successful as well as detrimental in the president's overall public relations strategy. To make this argument, we start by examining the role of sports in American popular culture and its relationship to a strong masculine image. Recognizing the value of public relations in the mediated political world, we then trace the presidents from Eisenhower to Obama who identified themselves as sporting figures in an attempt to display a masculine image. We then focus exclusively on the two most recent presidents, Barack Obama and George W. Bush. We conclude by addressing the implications of a future female president's strategic use of sports.

Method

We use a case study method in this article to explore how presidents have used sports to display masculinity for strategic public relations. Case studies are "not a methodological choice, but a choice of what is to be studied" (Stake, 2000, p. 435). In other words, a case study is not a hermeneutic that one uses to examine texts but rather a method that organizes the example in a holistic and context-sensitive manner (Patton, 2002). That is, an effective case study examines how the ontology and axiology of the parts are interconnected and explicable to the whole. Consequently, as this article examines presidential use of sports as strategic public relations, we explore a number of specific presidents, who have used sports during the mass media era, to draw conclusions about the larger image of presidential masculinity. In addition, a case study approach is ideal, given that by looking at a number of specific examples, we are able to construct a larger context of the nexus among sports, presidents, public relations, and masculine images, which will have rhetorical significance.

The media coverage for these cases studies was a result of a nearly exhaustive search of articles in the popular and scholarly press that addressed the president as a sporting figure. The search was conducted during the summer of 2011. Relevant articles were obtained from ProQuest and LexisNexis searches. The most used search terms were *President and Sports, George W. Bush and Sports, Barack Obama and Sports*, and *Sports and Masculinity*.

Literature Review

A long-standing relationship exists between sports and the notion of masculinity (Anderson, 2009). From the ancient Greeks to modern times, researchers have seen sports as one of the most dominant signs of masculinity across numerous cultures (Burnett, 2001; Mosse, 1996; Van Nortwick, 2008). The current mediated environment continues to reinforce the connection between sports and masculinity. An abundance of masculine images in the media also possess a persuasive element (Davis, 1997). The power and persuasion of imagery is nothing new in American politics, particularly for presidents and candidates for the office. George Washington campaigned as a war hero of the French and Indian War and was adept at the art of persuasion. He placed great importance on his appearance and in the way the public viewed him (Bailey, 1978; Ferling, 2010). Whereas Washington was often seen in extravagant stagecoaches, Thomas Jefferson, underscoring his simplistic approach, arrived at his first inauguration by himself on foot without any fanfare (Ellis, 1998). Abraham Lincoln campaigned on being a self-made man from rugged beginnings and a former wrestler back in Illinois (Winkle, 2000).

Although the images of these three famous American presidents' exploits were communicated through newspaper accounts, paintings, and word of mouth, persuasion through appearance can take place even more in today's mediated political world. Bennett and Entman (2001) wrote, "Mediated political communication has become central to politics and public life in contemporary democracies" (p. 1). These authors contend that because the political institutions and parties place so much emphasis on publicity and public opinion, it is creating adverse conditions for a quality democracy. Current political managers value greatly the strategies of publicity and promotion. The use of advantageous images provides them with the most visibility and can help reduce any negative issues that candidates might face (Corner, 2007). In the current political environment, public relations plays a vital role in terms of gaining success, votes, and reelection (Yates, 2010).

As the vast majority of the American population grew up with television and the younger generation with the Internet, the general public now relies on images, more than text, to understand stories and current events. Quick and convenient images tell easy-to-consume stories and can generate different emotions from those who come in contact with them. Living in this mediated world can even close people off from the real world around them (de Zengotita, 2005). Although, as Bennett and Entman (2001) wrote, this might have negative ramifications for the functions of a democracy, it provides those behind political candidates a more malleable environment in which to persuade voters. The media capture public attention in regard to politics because they are the primary means by which citizens experience public discourse. Often, because a profit-seeking media outlet drives this discourse, the content tends to be centered on entertaining images that can maintain viewers' attention (Warnick, 2007).

As it relates to presidential candidates, the image of masculinity is a recurring theme. Researchers have demonstrated the centrality of masculinity as an ideology in the American

presidency. For example, following the September 11 attacks, President George W. Bush enacted a highly masculine ideology through his brusque and direct treatment of the press. Bush emphasized masculine themes such as strength and dominance that then facilitated wide circulation of his masculine discourse in the press (Coe, Domke, Bagley, Cunningham, & Van Leuven, 2007). In whatever manner a president may publicly demonstrate his masculinity, the resulting images create a symbiotic effect. The news media are provided with valuable content that can be particularly engaging when it relies on imagery to tell the story, and the candidate earns coverage that puts him in a position where he looks strong and masculine, attributes voters often associate with leadership (Alexander & Andersen, 1993).

A common correlation between masculinity is athletic performance and prowess (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000). American presidents have routinely used their sporting endeavors as a method to promote their masculinity. John F. Kennedy was one president constantly concerned with "toughness" and the presentation of his masculine persona. He used this imagery of masculinity and its accompanying rhetoric during his 1960 campaign by stating that the country under the previous Republican administration had "gone soft—physically, mentally, spiritually soft" (Dean, 1998, p. 30).

Often through photo opportunities for the media, or narratives they repeat to the press, most presidents throughout the past, and especially in the television and Internet age, have identified themselves as masculine figures who immerse themselves in sporting activities. The image of a masculine sporting figure has proven to be an effective public relations strategy for a number of presidents. If a president is seen performing in an athletic manner, it helps to create the image of a "man's man." Males relate to him, because they are sharing in a male ritualistic behavior that creates an "elective affinity," and it also helps create an ideal character that women often look up to and admire (Messner, 1990; Yates, 2010). In conformance with the fundamental principles of public relations, the art of subtle persuasion, public shows of masculinity by presidents allow them to dictate the flow of information in the news media as they provide entertaining content that gains coverage, possibly at the expense of another story that might be damaging to their reputation. Emotionally laden symbolism in the form of acts of masculinity can replace critical dialogue about them (Ewen, 1996).

Presidents and Presidential Candidates As Masculine Sports Figures

Among 19th century presidents, John Q. Adams, Chester A. Arthur, and James Garfield were known to spend their free time playing billiards, whereas Rutherford B. Hayes enjoyed playing croquet on the White House lawn (Winkler, 2008). Grover Cleveland often left the pressures of the White House to relax and go fishing (Collins, 2006). One of the first presidents to capitalize on a rugged sporting figure was Theodore Roosevelt. His reputation first as a war hero during the Spanish American war and then as a rugged outdoorsman propelled his presidential candidacy. It is still a major component of his historical legacy. The 26th president's main interests were strenuous outdoor activities such as hiking, fishing, and shooting. He often discussed his fondness for exercise and boxing during interviews and was often pictured outdoors wearing hiking gear. He wrote about the subject in a famous article in *The North American Review* in August 1890, where he communicated his view about the difference between sport as healthy exercise or pastime and sport as big business (Roosevelt, 1890). Because of his appearance as an avid sportsman, Theodore Roosevelt, first as governor of New York and then president of the United States, became a model for 20th century rugged manhood ("A Gallery of 'Macho' Men and the 'Sensitive' Male," 1993).

The First Pitch

From an image and masculinity standpoint, William Howard Taft, who weighed more than 300 pounds, was certainly not considered athletic; however, he wisely attached himself to the American national pastime of baseball and became the first president to throw out the ceremonial first pitch at the start of the 1910 baseball season. Taft is also part of the legends on the origins of the seventh inning stretch at baseball games. There is a belief that while attending a game in 1910, Taft stood up to stretch out his large frame from the small seat he sat in during the game. When others witnessed the president standing, they did likewise (Goldman, 2007).

The ceremonial first pitch remains an effective publicity tool that presidents often call on. As a newly elected governor of California, a lean and athletic Ronald Reagan threw out the first pitch of a California Angels and Detroit Tigers game in April 1967. As president, he threw out the first pitch on three opening days (two for the Baltimore Orioles and one for the Chicago Cubs). The pitches gave a smiling Reagan plenty of television and newspaper coverage while also reinforcing the image as a strong American "Gipper" who remains passionate about the national pastime.

This sporting public relations technique can backfire, although. Vice President Joe Biden threw out an opening day pitch for the Orioles in 2009. The next day, a United Press International (UPI) story about his pitch was less than flattering, "Biden tosses high, fluttery opening pitch" (UPI.com, 2009). Although presidents use sports as a way of demonstrating their masculinity, this headline is an example of having the opposite effect; the tone demeans the vice president's masculinity. The research in this article will demonstrate that the use of sports and masculinity as a publicity tool for presidents can work effectively or backfire in terms of the media/public reaction.

Because of baseball's Americana associations, presidential demonstrations of masculinity through this sport are

common occurrences. It figures in the case studies of Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, who used baseball imagery and association with the game repeatedly. As for Bush, this is no surprise, because his father, George Herbert Walker Bush, commonly referenced during his presidential campaigns his history as a baseball player at Yale.

Eisenhower and Golf

Dwight D. Eisenhower is a modern president often associated with sports. The former West Point football player often judged people in a positive manner if they played sports, football in particular (Wukovits, 2009). The war hero turned president was such an avid golfer that famed golf club Augusta National named a tree in his honor. He often played Augusta National and many other courses during his presidency; it is estimated he played 5 to 8 times a month. Eisenhower even had a pilot bomb a large field during World War II so he could practice bunker shots (Silkunas, 2007). He was photographed so often playing golf that it led John Kennedy to question whether he and the republicans had gone soft. Kennedy used Eisenhower's love of golf to his advantage and tied the republicans to the game of golf, which was seen as a leisure sport only for the rich.

Kennedy's criticism of Eisenhower was ironic because he was also an avid golfer and possibly the best presidential golfer in history. Kennedy hid his passion for golf from the public due to his previous condemnation of Eisenhower. He wanted to improve his game so much that in August 4, 1963, the president enlisted White House chief photographer Cecil Stoughton to film him swinging the club while playing in Hyannisport, Massachusetts. The film was to be reviewed by golfing legend Arnold Palmer in a future meeting with the president. However, that meeting never took place as Kennedy was assassinated a few months later (Duca, 2011).

Other golf-loving presidents included Gerald Ford, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. *Links Magazine* named Ford, a former Michigan University football player, the second best presidential golfer behind only Kennedy. That is in contrast to the perception many people had of Ford, the golfer. His friend and regular golf partner Bob Hope told many jokes of Ford's wayward shots that wound up hitting spectators on the course (Hope, 1986). Although it brought Hope many laughs, it hurt Ford's public relations efforts as it perpetuated his clumsy image. The golf jokes made the public see him as a type of jester even though he was an accomplished athlete.

To help bolster his image as a masculine sporting figure, Kennedy received a public relations boost in December 26, 1960, when he was on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. The cover photo of the president and his wife Jacqueline on a boat corresponded with an article about Americans becoming soft and in need of more physical education and activity (Kennedy, 1960). This sports-themed article assisted the American public in viewing their president as a masculine athlete.

Bowling

Bowling is another sport in which a number of presidents actively participated in while in the White House. Eisenhower during his tenure as president had a two-lane bowling alley installed at Camp David. This generated so much attention that in 1959, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev visited the president and made it a point to ask him to see the alley's automatic pinsetter (Hightower, 1959). Eisenhower's visible and noted affection toward bowling helped increase national attention for the game. Setting this trend for public interest in bowling was much like what Eisenhower also did for golf.

Eisenhower's vice president, Richard Nixon, also publicly attached himself to bowling once he was elected president. Nixon, who bowled to an average of 165, felt the game improved his coordination. He also saw bowling as a mean to improving his stiff, out-of-touch image. Nixon urged his press secretary, Ron Ziegler, to mention to the press that he bowled in an effort to have him appear more likable and less rigid (Nelson, 1995).

Poker

The "sport" that Nixon was most adept at was card playing, poker in particular. Although not always regarded as a sport, card playing, poker especially, is considered a masculine ritual (Mamet, 1986). Nixon was known for his flair for poker and won a good deal of money from fellow soldiers during his time in the military (Bochin, 1990; Mazon, 1978). Harry Truman was another president who excelled at poker (Donovan, 1977). Truman used poker as a personal and political means of expression. His motto, "The buck stops here," refers to the dealer's button or placeholder, because during the 19th century hunting knives with buckhorn handles often served that function. It was the president's folksy way of letting Americans know that he was responsible for what happened on his watch (McManus, 2009).

Presidents have also gravitated toward other nontraditional sports that still showcase their masculinity. Reagan, much like Theodore Roosevelt, was known as an outdoorsman who was often photographed at his ranch in Santa Barbara wearing flannel shirts and jeans while riding horses, chopping wood, and clearing trails. Jimmy Carter joined the jogging craze of the 1970s, as did Bill Clinton. George W. Bush was a runner and bicyclist who made a number of public riding appearances with Lance Armstrong. George H.W. Bush and Kennedy were proficient boaters.

Case Studies

The two most recent presidents, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, have capitalized on their athleticism and the relationship to a masculine image. News coverage relating to their sporting activities was integral to their overall public relations campaigns. Obama and Bush serve as the case

studies for this article as their use of sports and its effect on their masculine image is examined.

Based on their interviews, public appearances, and campaign material, Bush and Obama often used their interest in sports as a means of promoting themselves. From a public relations perspective, this "story line" has meant both success and failures. Another reason to use Bush and Obama as the basis of cases studies is that they are two presidents who at times had approval ratings dip below 40% (McNulty, 2011; Muskal, 2010).

George W. Bush

George W. Bush, the 43rd president, played baseball at Yale for a brief period when he was an undergraduate from 1964 to 1968. His father, President George H. W. Bush, was a much more accomplished baseball player at Yale during the early 1940s. The younger Bush excelled at rugby while in college. Certainly, the violent sport of rugby corresponds to masculinity, and as a result, Bush made references to it on the campaign trail, and it helped show off his sports background. During the 2004 campaign when Bush squared off against fellow Yale alum John Kerry, a photo from Bush's rugby playing days appeared in the media. In the game action shot, Bush is shown landing a punch to the face of an opposing player. The manner in which the picture became available to the press nearly four decades later is unclear; still it proved to be an effective public relations ploy timed correctly (Sleeper, 2004). The mainstream media discussed the photo as well as bloggers on the left and the right. No matter whether the picture was praised by a Bush supporter or criticized by someone on the left, the picture was a public relations success, as it showed the president in a masculine setting.

Following the September 11 attacks, Bush capitalized on the need for a strong leader to help the country through a violent time. The Bush campaign portrayed the erudite Kerry as weak and ineffectual. The rugby picture helped reinforce the idea that Bush was tough and masculine figure. Around the same time this picture became available, a photo of John Kerry windsurfing in Nantucket was also distributed by the mainstream media. Although requiring intense athletic skills, windsurfing is not recognized by the masses but is a sport associated with the elite. Using this picture to their advantage, the Bush campaign created a television advertisement that began, "In which direction would John Kerry lead?" Its substance is less notable than its artwork, which features a video image of Kerry windsurfing for the duration of the spot. In response to the ad, Vice President Dick Cheney added a comment that underlines masculinity, something Kerry did not show in the windsurfing picture: "John Kerry gives every indication . . . of someone who lacks the resolve, the determination, and the conviction to prevail in this conflict" (Kornblut, 2004).

The rugby picture presented a strong juxtaposition of masculinity in favor of Bush. Sleeper (2004) wrote,

> I think it explains one reason why Bush hasn't slid in the polls since John Kerry reported for duty: He owes more than a little something to the "bad boy" vote that no pollster captures as well as this photo and caption do.

Even though Kerry by all accounts was a standout athlete, having played soccer at Yale and been officially decorated as a Vietnam War Hero, the sport of windsurfing did not have the same masculine resonance from a public relations standpoint as Bush's rugby picture presented. The power of a less than masculine image had the same negative effect on Kerry as it did two decades earlier for Michael Dukakis who was photographed sitting awkwardly in a tank. Dukakis lost the 1988 election to the elder Bush in some part due to the negative publicity surrounding the picture of him in a masculine setting looking unnatural with an odd-fitting helmet (Barbatsis, 1996).

Bush's masculine sporting image was a predominant theme throughout his two terms in office. His sporting activities—running, biking, golf, and baseball—worked in concert with a theme that has become very important in presidential elections. The question is commonly presented to voters in subtle and outward means, "What candidate would you rather have a beer with?" Bush, as a direct talking Texan with a folksy dialect and love of sports and the outdoors, did well with voters asking themselves that question. Tom Grieve, who was the Texas Rangers general manager while Bush was the team owner, reinforced this image with an interview with Public Broadcasting System leading up to the 2000 election.

> George chose to sit right next to the dugout, with the fans, every day . . . I mean, it's a hundred degrees down there. He's there from before the game, half an hour before the game, didn't leave his seat except to go to the bathroom, cheering for the ball club, signing autographs, listening to hecklers, accepting well-wishes from season-ticket customers. (Frontline, 2000)

Although the aforementioned literature demonstrates a long lineage of sports-minded presidents, Bush appears to be the most devoted one in terms of being an athlete and fan. His ownership of a major professional team, a job no other president had before taking office, gave him valuable sports media coverage. The apathy many voters, particularly younger ones, have for the political process turns them away from the news media that cover such events. Bush, the sporting figure, was able to gain entry into their media usage in a subtle way, the essence of successful public relations. During his 8 years in office, the readers of *Sports Illustrated* and the

viewers of ESPN were exposed to a number of stories about Bush in a sports setting. The president not only gained exposure but also was associated with a masculine story line.

Prior to the 2004 election, *Sports Illustrated* did a question and answer session with Bush. The premise of the article was "The President discusses Aggies and Horns, his Rangers days and his sports idol" and the President talks "about sports and the Lone Star State" (Yeager, 2003). The feature also had a picture of a smiling Bush about to throw the first pitch of a professional baseball game. Not only does the article identify Bush as a sports fan but the picture is also reinforcement that he is athletic and comfortable in a masculine environment. In the 2000 election, ESPN.com did a historical timeline of Bush's career in baseball (Farrey, 2000). During the 2001 World Series in New York following the September 11 attacks, Bush threw out the first pitch in front of a thunderous audience. The successful pitch he threw reinforced his athletic acumen and leadership.

The biking and running Bush did as well gained media coverage and reinforced his masculine image. As a successful runner, Bush looked at ease while running. His actions looked authentic and natural, not an attempt at a publicity stunt. In 2002, *Runners World Magazine* featured Bush and his running accomplishments. Once again this sports-based article highlighted a picture of a sweating Bush wearing an athletic shirt and shorts. It also quoted him talking about his running regimen: "I'll go for a hard, morning run—these days about 20:30 to 20:45 for 3 miles on a tough course—and then I'll go walk 2 to 4 miles with Laura [the first lady] afterward" (*Runners World*, 2002). Bush also received positive national media attention in 2006 when he ran around the White House grounds with a wounded veteran who lost his leg in Iraq. This photo opportunity led to pictures of a trim Bush, smiling while running around with the vet who used an artificial leg. The president emphasized his athleticism with the run and an outfit of shorts and an under armor running shirt (Associated Press, 2006; Travers, 2006). An athletic activity with a war veteran carried strong masculine imagery.

In conventional methods of public relations, this run with a soldier provided Bush with the ability to appear compassionate and dictate the conversation of the media and public. Although the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were not going well for the United States, this story provided Bush with some positive images and news. His being an accomplished runner strengthened the plot line.

Like running, Bush excelled as a golfer. "Ranking the Golfing Presidents" (2009) ranked him as the sixth best golfing president with a handicap in the area of 15. As was the case with baseball, Bush also received positive media coverage connecting him and his father's sports background. In a favorable CNN.com piece that discussed only sports, the golf games of father and son were detailed. In what could be seen as positive public relations and persuasion in the imagery sense, the article stated, "And I think we can look forward to, if elected, George W. Bush extending the image of the presidential golfer." To add to the masculine idea of sports, this article contained the anecdote

> George W. Bush and his father, President Bush, play what they call polo golf, cart golf, electric golf there are lots of different names for it, but basically its blindingly fast play, Hurt said. They don't wait or dawdle between shots. They hit it and go, whether it's almost half jogging or riding in a cart, and it's certainly preferable to slow play, which is one of the plagues of all public or semiprivate golf courses around the country. Golfers will know what I mean when I say that. ("Ranking the Golfing Presidents," 2009)

While this article would only appear to help Bush prior to his defeat of Al Gore in 2000, his golf game later created negative publicity. His combative relationship with the press coupled with two different war fronts heightened the antagonism between the president and press during his second term. The mainstream media criticized Bush for being too lax and preoccupied with vacations and golf. One of his biggest public relations fiascos came in 2003 when on the golf course talking to reporters about the wars in the Middle East, Bush quickly addressed the issues and then abruptly said to reporters, "Now watch this drive" and went right back to his golf game (Eggen, 2008). This video then became more fodder for Bush critics who felt he was lacking interest in the war and more focused on his golf. Due to the negative media reaction Bush faced from this video, a public relations effort resulted. Bush then publicly stated that he would no longer play golf while in office. Even though golf gave Bush an opportunity to display his athleticism and masculinity, first the video and then his game became a public relations liability.

Golf eventually created negative publicity for the next president as well. This is a reoccurring theme of presidents using sports. Golf serves as a lightning rod of criticism. It is a sport enjoyed by many presidents and a masculine activity; however, the game's appearance of relaxation and elitism can be detrimental for a president's overall public identity.

Barack Obama

As Bush propelled the image of a sporting masculine president to his advantage, Obama did likewise once he campaigned and won the 2008 election. For the first time, a president became most identified with the sport of basketball. Obama's love and participation in basketball was a key element in the manner in which he attracted younger voters. It gave the 48-year-old the appearance of being youthful and energetic. He was not only playing golf and riding in a cart but also running up and down a court, driving to the basketball, and playing hard defense. The images of a presidential candidate competing against others on a court

were unique and to Obama's advantage in his campaign against the 73-year-old John McCain. Proper public relations techniques are based on the creation of an easy-to-understand image. Obama playing basketball on the campaign trail was simple; he was young and spry, and McCain was old.

The Associated Press took a picture on May 8, 2008, of Obama that became widely seen throughout the media. The picture was of a smiling Obama, looking fit in his white dress shirt and tie, with his sleeves rolled up shooting a basketball. The rolled up sleeves created the sense of someone hard working, able to mix business with pleasure, and Obama's proper shooting technique represented someone well versed in basketball. The nonsports fans see the picture as a masculine figure, whereas the sports fans see someone who is not putting on a show but a real basketball player. To reinforce the image, the caption of the picture reads, "U.S. Democratic presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama (D-IL) plays basketball during an impromptu stop at Riverview Elementary School in Elkhart, Indiana" (CLNSRadio.com, http://clnsradio.com/2011/08/17/shaq-blames-obama-for-rondos-poor-shooting/u-s-presidential-candidate-obama-shoots-a-basketball-in-elkhart/).

Basketball was central to Obama's public relations campaign that focused on him being different from any other president and someone who would reinvigorate the voting public. The video of him playing basketball represented this uniqueness and displayed his athleticism to voters clamoring for a change in the White House. Obama was able to reinforce the direction his campaign was taking that he was not part of the political establishment. He was a unique candidate who played a game other presidents did not. He also used basketball as a means of connecting with African American voters, a constituency associated with the sport because of its popularity in urban environments (Axthelm, 1999).

The media sensed the unique story line of a basketball-playing presidential candidate and helped Obama become identified as a sports figure. Like Bush as the Texas Rangers owner, Obama was the recipient of media coverage from sports outlets, which offer the functionality of subtle persuasion. If sports media consumers were unaware or disinterested in Obama's political message, they were exposed to him as an athlete. For two straight years, ESPN did lengthy features on the president filling out his National Collegiate Athletic Association Basketball Brackets. Not once was any political talk involved; it all centered on the president as an expert on college basketball.

Prior to the 2008 election, Obama's basketball playing got him headlines such as "Obama hoops it up with North Carolina players," "Basketball buddy remembers years with Obama," and "Barack Obama plays basketball in Kokomo" (Indianapolis Star, 2008; McGann, 2008; NBC Sports.com, 2008). Each of these articles contained an action shot of Obama shooting or playing basketball. The images were straightforward in their persuasive value—Obama looking comfortable and masculine in a sporting arena. As previously stated, basketball is a sport that prior presidents were not commonly seen playing. This gave Obama a distinct quality, but it required him to look "presidential" while playing basketball. In each picture of the aforementioned article and others as well where Obama is playing basketball, he is wearing long sweatpants, not shorts, as is customary. Wearing pants is also part of persuasive identification; he does not want to appear less than dignified by wearing shorts, which some might view as not presidential and too casual.

Alexander Wolff (2009) of *Sports Illustrated* stated, "His usual getup of black sweatpants and gray T-shirt (call it the Police Academy Trainee look)." The article also contextualized the president's basketball playing style by comparing him to NBA stars such as Tony Parker and Manu Ginobili. These complimentary comparisons certainly reinforced his athletic image.

In November 2010, Obama injured his lip while playing a game of basketball. This injury turned out to have significant public relations value as it provided Obama with another story line regarding his basketball play. This time, he appeared even more masculine as he was injured but then still came back quickly to play once again. The president received 12 stitches, and in stories that followed, it was determined that Rey Decerega, the director of programs for the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, was the one who injured him. Decerega's statements certainly helped frame Obama as a masculine athlete. Decerega said in a statement that the game was all in good fun (and didn't apologize): "I learned today the president is both a tough competitor and a good sport. I enjoyed playing basketball with him this morning. I'm sure he'll be back out on the court again soon" (Huffington Post, 2010).

In the November 26, 2010, article "Obama's Lip Busted in Basketball Game" in the *Los Angeles Times*, his injury is discussed along with the president's aggressive style of basketball play: "Players who have competed against Obama say they jockey for rebounds and challenge him when he drives the lane" (Nicholas, 2010). Three days later, the *New York Magazine* ("Barack Obama, Basketball Badass?" 2010) referred to the president as a *badass* and wrote,

> But Obama's staff is trying to re-spin the incident in their boss's favor. A White House official with knowledge of the incident, and eager to make the president look as tough as possible, said that [Reynaldo] Decerega required a hospital visit after the collision and received some stitches himself.

Most likely as a way to capitalize on the publicity the president was earning from his sports-related injury, he made a public appearance 2 days later and shot baskets with his daughters. Not only did Obama get another story that identified his athletic play, but also, coming back so soon after an injury certainly increased the notion of his masculinity. *The New York Daily News* in an article by Meena Hartenstein

(2010) gave the event the headline: "Obama back on basketball court two days after busting lip, shoots hoops with daughters Malia, Sasha."

Obama's use of athleticism was beneficial to his public relations during his candidacy in 2008 and early on in his term. However, it came back to hurt him in 2010 and 2011 as his poll numbers dropped, the casualty counts continued to mount in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a sluggish economy never improved as he said it would (Shepard, 2011). In April 2011, Donald Trump, one of the president's loudest critics and possible presidential candidate blamed the poor economy on Obama's devotion to basketball. The famed businessman said that Obama needed to "get on the phone or get off his basketball court or whatever he is doing at the time and pressure OPEC to lower gas prices" (Malcolm, 2011).

The president also received mixed reviews from critics with his "golf summit" in June 2011. As a way to create a sense of bipartisanship, the president played a round of golf with Republican House speaker John Boehner. Don Van Natta, Jr. (2011) wrote,

> Perhaps Mr. Obama was motivated in part to try to neutralize the criticism leveled by some right-leaning commentators about his Sunday devotion to golfing with his buddies; they see him benefiting from a media double standard that hurts Republican presidents who take to the links.

First, it was criticism about Obama and basketball, and then it turned into criticism about golf, the same type of media pressure Bush and other presidents have taken in the past. In August 2011, the president played golf during an earthquake that rocked the northeast of the country. *The Washington Post* responded with an article titled "Obama Plays Through on Golf Course During Earthquake, Inspires Critics" (Nakamura, 2011). In addition in 2011, republican presidential candidate Rick Perry looked to raise some money off President Obama's golf game. "In an e-mail to supporters, Rob Johnson, Perry's campaign manager, asked potential donors to open their pocketbooks to the amount of US$76—exactly the number of rounds of golf Obama has played since entering the White House" (Saenez, 2011). Overall, it took Obama 9 months to play as many rounds of golf as George W. Bush played in his first 2 years in the White House (Gavin, 2009).

Discussions and Implications

Research of prior presidents and case studies of the two most recent White House occupants, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, find significant public relations impact on a president's athleticism. Participating in sports usually generates free publicity that is often favorable, because the sports angle rather than political partisanship is the story line. This coverage then assists in the persuasion process. Being involved in sports carries the presentation of masculinity, a trait the president must exhibit outwardly and often. The research demonstrates that this involvement has recurred from Lincoln to Obama, and there is no reason to believe it will stop being a large factor in a president's public relations campaign.

Future researchers should have ample opportunities to examine how other presidents advantageously use their sporting activities and masculine behaviors. As Obama used basketball to associate himself with, it is likely there will be a president in the near future who will also incorporate a new sport or activity into his or her overall image. Presumably, this sport will be attractive and representative to a younger audience. One such possibility is mixed martial arts, one of the fastest growing sports in the country.

A sporting president does receive backlash from the media when he is participating during times of crisis. Instead of the story line being masculinity in the White House, it turns to disinterest in the White House. The president then is framed by the media to be lacking involvement of government affairs at the expense of his sporting activities. Golf seems to draw the largest amount of criticism. Eisenhower, the older and the younger Bush, and Obama saw negative headlines in association with their golf game. This was the reason John Kennedy tried to hide his successful golf game from the media and public. George W. Bush said,

> I don't want some mom whose son may have recently died to see the commander in chief playing golf. I feel I owe it to the families to be in solidarity. And I think playing golf during a war just sends the wrong signal. (Pilkington, 2008)

This research demonstrates the public relations duality of presidents as sporting figures. Sports can quickly turn from a public relations boost to a public relations liability. As a result, when presidents are facing criticism from the press, they should refrain from outwardly participating in sports. No matter how masculine they may appear, that identification seems to be usurped by the story line of a distracted president.

This proposed public relations strategy will become even more of a necessity in the near future as the political environment, like the rest of society, continues to be scrutinized under a mediated microscope. In addition in the near future, the concept of a president being sporting and masculine will be reexamined. The impact of Sarah Palin's entrance on the national stage following her vice-presidential nomination in the 2008 election demonstrates that conditions are in favor for a female president in the not-so-distant future. Palin's performance on the campaign trail and her resulting widespread popularity also support the idea of masculinity still remaining a key element in presidential politics.

The former Alaska governor relied heavily on her sports background and masculine rhetoric. The one-time standout

high school basketball player and sports reporter became famous for her talk about being a "hockey mom." She was also introduced to the public as a lover of the outdoors and an aficionado of guns, hunting, and fishing. This imagery resonated with large segments of the population. Even though she lost the election and later stepped down from her government post in Alaska, Palin remained a highly visible political figure. In 2010, she became a noted member of the Tea Party movement and parlayed her sports and masculine image into a television program on The Learning Channel, *Sarah Palin's Alaska*. In a manner similar to the media coverage Theodore Roosevelt garnered a century before, Palin used the program to highlight her outdoor sporting activities. These sports such as hunting and fishing are decidedly masculine in nature and also represent the idea of killing one's prey. Palin is not the traditional female standing off to the side, in this program and in her speeches; she is identified as the one leading and destroying her competition.

Even though Palin's sporting behavior might not propel her to the presidency, it is creating a template that future females running for the highest office will follow. Just as male presidents often show off their masculinity via sports, females will have to do as well. Palin's ascension is based around her strong appearance and the identification people have made because of it. Strong, sporting, masculine qualities are now even more important for female politicians because of Palin. To be regarded as viable candidates, female politicians must use persuasive techniques surrounding their sporting exploits.

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