

PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR
DAVID HALBERSTAM



THE POWERS
THAT BE



The Powers That Be

David Halberstam



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Prelude

ON SEPTEMBER 10, 1960, Samuel Taliaferro Rayburn arrived somewhat early in El Paso, Texas, for a Democratic Party rally. The particular rally featured Rayburn's personal protégé, Lyndon Johnson, the Democratic candidate for Vice-President, and the young man about whom Rayburn had considerable personal misgiving, John F. Kennedy, the presidential nominee. Rayburn at the time was seventy-eight years old and in his sixteenth year as Speaker of the House of Representatives. His health was already slipping, he was in fact dying of cancer, though he did not yet know it. He had not been feeling well in recent months but he steadfastly refused to see a doctor. He had a rural suspicion of doctors in general, and, in addition, he feared that any report that he had even seen a doctor might quickly spread through the House and spur rumors of his declining health and thus weaken his mandate and inspire challenges to his rule. At the time he thought he was suffering from no more than a severe back problem. In addition, his eyesight was fast failing, he could no longer read, and this too was a closely guarded secret; only his most trusted associates were allowed to read to him in the privacy of his own chambers. Those around Rayburn who cared deeply for him realized that as his body failed his political control was probably ebbing as well; more, that he had probably stayed on as Speaker too long, that he was living off his past reputation and strength, and that it was only a matter of time before Sam Rayburn had to give up what he prized above all else, the Speakership of the House. (Once, a few years earlier, traveling back from a Sunday picnic with his good friends Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson, he had pointed to the Capitol Dome as they first saw the Washington skyline and he had said, "Lady Bird, how do you like *my* building?" saying it modestly, more as a matter of love than of ego; this was what he had done with a half century of his life, this and nothing more.)

On that day in El Paso while waiting for Kennedy and Johnson to arrive, however, he was restless, he had a half day on his hands and precious little to do, and so he turned to the people with him and said that he wanted to go over and see Mexico, would that be all right? Are you sure? one of them asked, feeling the trip might be a strain, but he said yes, he had a notion to go over there to see Mexico. Which was unusual, for though Sam Rayburn had helped marshal the Congress of the United States to play its role as this nation sprang to world-power status, he had never been interested in foreign travel or the world outside. He had hated junkets and mocked those members who regularly went on junkets. To his mind, the rest of the world was outside his realm of competence, he did not need to travel to see it. He accepted what the President said the world was like, since the President knew more about these things and the President of the United States would have no need to lie. The world outside, he believed as an act of faith, did not relate to domestic politics. He had, for the record, as a young congressman, once visited the Panama Canal, and it was also believed, though this was a question, that he had once attended dedication ceremonies of some sort in Mexico many years earlier.

So, depending on the count, this was—after forty-eight years of national service, many of them at the most crucial and sensitive level—this was to be either his second or third trip outside the United States. With him that day as guides were the El Paso congressman J. T. (Slick) Rutherford; his assistant, Larry L. King, later to be a nationally known writer; and one of Rayburn's nephews, then stationed at Fort Bliss. So they drove over to Juarez, and there the old man sat and stared, his eyes fixed on the wonders of Juarez, until finally it was time to go back. At which point they turned the huge car around and headed back across the Rio Grande, and as they crossed the river and reached the checkpoint, the American immigration officer waved them to a halt and asked them to declare their nationality. Rayburn, who was also becoming hard of hearing, could not hear the guard, and so the guard yelled, a little more angrily this time. After all, he was simply dealing with another very bad man. *Declare your nationality*, he shouted, and there was again a pause, and this time the guard shouted again, not unlike a drill instructor, and this time the Speaker answered back, not his nationality, but his identity, *Sam Rayburn! Sam Rayburn!* and he yelled it with the same ferocity that he had used in gaveling down countless demonstrations at countless Democratic conventions, and it was like a gavel flashing in the El Paso air, and the officer looked and there was a flash of recognition and a flash of fear, and he quickly waved the car through. So they drove back over the Rio Grande and into El Paso and drove through that city, and finally Rayburn, who had been very silent, turned to Rutherford and King and said, "Well, it looks pretty much like I thought it would," and suddenly King realized that the old man still thought he was in Juarez.

He seemed in a somewhat grumpy and sour mood in the car, but that was not surprising, he had been that way on and off for several weeks. He was still bothered by the forthcoming election campaign. Everyone knew he hated Nixon, he had never made any secret of that, Rayburn was a man of the party and of old-fashioned loyalties and he believed that Nixon had slandered the Democratic Party and some of his friends. But Rayburn was still wary of Kennedy, he had not completely accepted him as a man of presidential stature. Kennedy represented much of what he was coming to distrust in politics. Jack Kennedy had served under Rayburn in the House, but he had not been a particularly diligent member; he had stayed around only long enough to run for the Senate, and when he had been elected to the Senate, he had used that body primarily as a base from which he could run for the presidency. Rayburn disliked this, it was a sign of the younger man's fierce ambition. Worse, Kennedy was someone who was closer to many journalists than he was to most of his colleagues in the Senate.

Sam Rayburn, that year, had of course been for Lyndon, but Lyndon was a reluctant and petulant presidential candidate; his grand design called for everyone else to take a risk and stop Kennedy in the primaries while he stood on the sidelines. Rayburn and others had pushed for Lyndon to run a more active campaign, they had in fact put together a campaign complete with an opening announcement and then, at the last minute, Johnson had reneged. Rayburn, furious, had turned to Horace Busby, Johnson's speech writer, and had asked, plaintive and exhausted, "Why is Lyndon always like this?"

Johnson's campaign had, of course, failed, since it was never a campaign, and Rayburn had hated the way that Kennedy forces had controlled the convention in Los Angeles. They seemed to be cold and merciless young men. He was still uneasy about the idea of a Catholic running for the presidency, the South that he knew had too much racial and religious hatred and he was afraid that Kennedy's candidacy would simply stir things up. When Kennedy had first offered the vice-presidency to Johnson, Rayburn had been one of those most opposed to the idea. But then overnight he had changed his mind and he had told Lyndon to take it, not out of love for Jack Kennedy but out of hatred for Richard Nixon. He had told Lyndon the ticket could win only if he was on it, and it was imperative that Nixon not be President.

That day in El Paso they finally got the old man back to his hotel room, and Rayburn asked Larry King to turn on the television set because Richard Nixon was about to make a speech. Nixon was Rayburn's personal *bête noir* in politics. Now, as King was fiddling with the dials, he began his diatribe against the Republican candidate. "Look at that face, that hateful face. Boys," he confided, "a few years ago I made the mistake of saying that Richard Nixon had the most hateful face of the five thousand people I served with in the House and someone violated that confidence and it got into the papers and it embarrassed me and I had to apologize. But it's *true*, he has a hateful face, the worst face of anyone I ever served with." The Speaker normally liked all politicians, finding even in their weaknesses and idiosyncrasies a sign of their humanity, but Nixon was different, Nixon had not only attacked friends of his, Presidents and Secretaries of State, but accused them of a lack of loyalty.

Now, as he watched Nixon speaking on the tube, he turned to King and asked him to see if he couldn't fiddle with that machine so they could hear the voice but not see the face. Could he please remove the picture? So King poked around with the dials until he made Richard Nixon a nonperson and finally only a voice emerged from a vast screen of snow. "That's better," said the Speaker. But as Nixon continued talking King noticed an almost chemical change in Rayburn. He seemed to be changing color. Nixon was attacking the Democrats while promising not to attack them, and that seemed to affect the Speaker profoundly. Rayburn began now to denounce not just Nixon but the entire proceedings. It was, thought King, as if the old man were dismayed not just by the candidate himself but by the whole process he represented. "Look at what they're doing, putting someone like him on that machine. It's all going to be like that Checkers speech, trying to trick people into electing him. They're going to try and trick people into making him President." It was clear, King thought, that Rayburn was appalled by the entire new process of politics, the new and different tempo, television, modern advertising, polls, all that. The new modern manipulation was so different from the manipulation that Rayburn knew and trusted and practiced, where Rayburn and a few others dealt the cards, knew each other and looked into the faces of the men they were dealing with the next day. A new age was coming where things were moving faster, and where fewer and fewer people turned their face off the television set. As he went on he sounded more and more querulous. He liked everything

about the old age of politics and nothing about the new.

Eleven years later a crew of CBS television reporters was in Johnson City, Texas, interviewing Lyndon Johnson for his televised memoirs. There was a curious ambiguity to the project: Johnson, the first of two Presidents to feel himself driven from office by the press, was still angry at the media for his demise, CBS not excepted, and yet Johnson, the politician-memoirist-businessman, was not only telling his side of the story but making hundreds of thousands of dollars for the combined book and documentary project. His mood and his temper thus sharply fluctuated. On one particular day the former President was in an unusually relaxed mood, and a senior CBS producer named John Sharnik asked him what had changed in politics between his early days in Congress some thirty years before and the final days of his presidency. Sharnik asked his question quite casually and was stunned by the vehemence of Johnson's answer. "You guys," he had said, without even reflecting. "All you guys in the media. All of politics has changed because of you. You've broken all the machines and the ties between us in Congress and the city machines. You've given us a new kind of people." A certain disdain passed over his face. "Teddy Tunney. They're your creations, your puppets. No machine could ever create a Teddy Kennedy. Only you guys. They're all yours. Your product."

It was like a news explosion. The pace had been so slow before Roosevelt, so relaxed and genteel in Washington, after all, was not that big a dateline. There had been only a handful of reporters there who really mattered and who covered national events, five or six of them perhaps. They were all gentlemen, emulating the style of Richard Oulahan of *The New York Times* and J. Fred Essery of the *Baltimore Sun*, the beau ideals of the time, very properly dressed, men who wore fedoras and carried walking sticks. The walking sticks were symbolic, they were a sign of the more leisurely professions; after Franklin Roosevelt came there would be no more walking sticks. To their colleagues they were *Mister* Oulahan and *Mister* Essery. Mister Essery even wore a starched shirtfront. Crosswell Bowen of International News Service had arrived in the late twenties and he, new in town and much influenced by *The Front Page*, had deliberately affected a style that was in part ruffled and in part seedy, but he had quickly gotten the message and soon was appearing with both a fedora and a walking stick. They were all men in their forties and fifties, it was not yet a young man's beat. They were the cream of a new crop of journalists, they covered the activities of dignitaries, and their clothes, as much as anything else, put some distance between them and other reporters, those who covered murders and other police stories. They were very deliberately making the profession more serious; why, Hoover himself was said to be personally fond of Oulahan, and later, while still President, attended Oulahan's funeral, a mark of great distinction for Oulahan. They all carried calling cards, they never rushed from one office to another; they knew all the people they spoke to by name and they as rarely as possible used the telephone, the telephone was a sign of being rushed, it seemed a mark of discourtesy.

Besides, there was always time to visit news sources in person, the government was so small, there were so few sources of information. The State, Navy, and War Building housed the entire American military and national security complex, such as it was. They would drive to the Ellipse in the morning parking their cars there, a good hundred yards away from the White House itself, complaining bitterly to each other how inconvenient it was all becoming with his new heavy traffic; then they began their rounds. The first stop was often the Interior Building, because it was usually good for a story on Indians. In the twenties in Washington the Indian story was a big one, Indians were one of the few major concerns of the federal government. Then, often traveling as a small group, they would go on to the War Department Building. Secretary of State Kellogg saw them very regularly, though there were those who did not think Kellogg a particularly good source of information. Sometimes they saw General Pershing as well. Then they went to the White House and tried to see the President. There was no need for White House credentials as such, everyone knew everyone else, if there was a new report his colleagues vouched for him. One reporter covered the entire executive branch in those days—the White House, State, War, Interior, Commerce—so if a colleague covered the Congress two men might make up the entire bureau. (Thirty years later ten or twelve reporters might be necessary to cover a comparable number of departments, and most of their work would be done by phone; there simply wasn't time for very much human contact.)

When journalists visited President Hoover they submitted their questions for him in writing. On occasion he deigned to answer them. In writing, of course. Increasingly, as the weight of the Depression bore down on him, Hoover declined to respond at all. Indeed, his press secretary suggested on occasion that the reporters would do well not even to use the terms “financial crisis” and “unemployment” in their stories without checking with the White House press office. Some of the thought that bordered on censorship. Complaints were made and the White House backed down. Most of them were disappointed with Mr. Hoover. Before becoming President he had been a much-admired figure, a talented administrator with an international reputation for having brought food to a starving world after World War I. Washington journalists were in fact the very ones who had built his reputation, for, in truth, Herbert Hoover, outwardly stiff and formal, particularly as President, had been, before taking office, a very good source of news, very accessible, very manipulative, a very good all-around leak. But Hoover had changed even before the Depression, when he ran for the presidency in 1928. It was as if he were a different and now more important man and such close contact with working reporters was below not just his dignity but that of his intended office. He was very good, it turned out, at outlining the flaws and weaknesses of government as long as someone else was in charge of the government.

As the Depression grew worse, Hoover had turned inward; he had been unable to deal with the terrifying turn of events. Immobilized politically by his fate, he grew hostile and petulant. He blamed reporters for his problems and his diminished popularity, as if his hard times during the Depression

were their fault and the economic chaos was primarily a public relations problem. He became obsessed with what was written about him, and punitive toward reporters. "Knowing that the newspapers made him, he assumes with equal ease they can destroy him," wrote Paul Anderson, one of Washington's better reporters. There were more and more squabbles between the President and the press; on several minor occasions, such as when reporters wrote about a Marine guard being bitten by one of the dogs at Hoover's fishing camp, there were investigations launched to find out who the sources were. It was a bad time for the nation and a bad time for the President. The country was in an economic collapse, and the entire nation waited to hear what Hoover was going to do. The President was largely silent. In his first year, he had held twenty-three press conferences and handed out eight press statements; in his last year as President, when the country most desperately wanted contact with him, wanted leadership and wanted a voice, he held only twelve press conferences and handed out twenty-six statements.

Franklin Roosevelt changed all that. He was the greatest newsmaker that Washington had ever seen. He came at a time when the society was ready for vast political and economic change, all of it aimed at enhancing the power of the President and the federal government, and he accelerated that change. The old order had collapsed, old institutions and old myths had failed; he would create the new order. In the new order, government would enter the everyday existence of almost all its citizens, regulating and adjusting their lives. Under him Washington became the focal point, it determined how people worked, how much they made, what they ate, where they lived. Before his arrival, the federal government was small and timid; by the time he died it reached everywhere, and as the government was everywhere, so Washington became the great dateline; as it was the source of power, so it was the source of news.

Roosevelt promised reporters two press conferences a week and, with astonishing regularity, he held to that: 337 in his first term, 374 in the second, 279 in the third. United Press carried *four* times as much Washington news in 1934 under him as it did in 1930 under Hoover; *one fourth* of all the world news on the Associated Press wire in those days came from Washington. Suddenly everything was faster, the pace was quicker, there were so many more events, so many more government agencies, so many more sources, so many more stories. "You've got a mouthful now," Roosevelt had said as an early press conference was ending. "Better run." Run they did, there was no more time for walking sticks, no more time to put questions in writing, no more time for calling cards. The world had changed from one administration to another. Power in the wake of the Depression was waiting to be taken, and Franklin Roosevelt was going to take it, and those in the media were going to be his prime instrument.

God, did he make news! Every day there were two or three stories coming out of the White House. He intended to make the whole federal government his, make it respond to his whim and

vision, he did so, and in that struggle he became this century's prime manipulator of the new and increasingly powerful modern media. Thirty and forty years later, politicians like John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson would study how Franklin Roosevelt had handled the press, it was a textbook course in manipulation. The entire nation waited on him; if newsmen misread the rules and transgressed even slightly, he could come down hard and quickly, indeed quite brutally, on them. But the personality was secondary. Far more important was the fact that he was the best source in town. He understood exactly what journalists needed and when they needed it, and he understood from his Albany days that the very high public official who gives the greatest amount of information can dominate the story, often define the issue in question and thus dominate the government. Let no other government official dare try and take the play away from him and thwart his will. He was skilled at taking reporters behind the scenes, into the very heart of the mechanics of government, what was being done and why, explaining in terms highly suitable and favorable to him, the working of the processes. He was thus divulging a staggering amount of information, all of it difficult to get by any other means, all of it sympathetic to him. And everything was happening so quickly that the reporters never had time to go to other sources; if they tried, they might make today's story better, but they would surely be beaten on tomorrow's. Roosevelt was as much teacher as spokesman, and he was always aware of every nuance of the constituency and mandate he was trying to create. He tried to shape every story. "If I were writing that story," he would often say, "I would write it along the lines ..." Then he would dictate their leads. In terms of public policy it was a tour de force, nothing like it had ever been seen before. "The best newspaperman who has ever been President of the United States," Heywood Broun called him. "The White House school of journalism," Raymond Clapper, one of the most distinguished of Washington reporters, labeled the entire operation.

It was, by contrast with previous operations, strikingly informal. There simply wasn't enough time for formality, and besides, Roosevelt's touch, that splendid patrician touch, required informality, without it would have appeared a snob. In another time he might have seemed overbearing, but in the midst of the Depression, when the nation had lost its faith, it took comfort in the fact that he was so sure of his destiny and his role. His destiny would become theirs. His confidence seemed inspiring. He knew the reporters by their first names and he laughed with them and exchanged small talk and, totally at ease with himself, he was totally at ease with them. He constantly assaulted the nation's newspaper publishers for their conservatism, which, given the greater class consciousness of the era, did not hurt him with working reporters. He went before the Daughters of the American Revolution and began his speech, "Fellow immigrants ..." and the reporters covering him loved it. He even made up nicknames for them. Felix Belair of *The New York Times* became Butch because Roosevelt thought there ought to be someone named Butch at a paper as serious as the *Times*. His touch always seemed so sure. He was so confident of himself, so sure that he was the ablest man in the country to govern, so aware in his

own patrician way of his right to be doing what he was doing, that he seemed totally natural. President; it was a great art and he made it seem artless. It was astonishing in that era that someone so wellborn could have so intuitive a common touch; some friends thought it had come from the politics that this had sensitized him and made him aware of the pain that others, less fortunate, suffered. It made him no less confident, and it made him far more aware.

He was a cripple. Those who covered him never wrote about it because Steve Early asked them not to, and the White House photographers never took his photo in a wheelchair or on crutches because Early asked them not to; those were different days and the reporters respected certain rights of the President. (Felix Belair, working for *Time* a few years later, was with Roosevelt at Hyde Park when he had voted in the 1940 election. He had gone inside the voting booth and a lever had jammed. “This goddamned thing doesn’t work,” came that rich familiar voice from the voting booth, and Belair had filed it and *Time* had printed the quote; Roosevelt was enraged—no one believed in those days purer of soul than the President of the United States could lapse into profanity. Reporters had always shielded the public from presidential profanity and Roosevelt denied that he had been blasphemous.)

Nor did the journalists covering him think of Roosevelt as a cripple, he seemed to radiate such immense power and force, a kind of magnetic vitality. The first time that Felix Belair, then newly assigned by the *Times* to the White House, met Roosevelt was after a press conference in 1936. Steve Early, as was his wont with new reporters, had waited until the conference was over and then he had brought the new man up to meet the President. The first thing that Belair noticed was the head, how massive and forceful it was, a head waiting for a great artist to sculpt it. Then the hand. The hand was enormous, like a Virginia ham, Belair thought, as it swallowed up his own hand: “Mister President,” Early was saying, “do you know Felix Belair of *The New York Times*?” Then that voice, rich and powerful, so sure of itself, sweeping over Belair: “No. I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure, but I’ve read his stuff.” Could it be more perfect? He even had the phrasing right, why; that was the way other newspapermen spoke to each other about their work, *I’ve read his stuff*. Just one of the boys. Whenever it suited him.

He was very good with the boys, the five or six or seven regulars who traveled with him on his trips, able to be one of them when he chose, even on occasion playing poker with them. Once he had blown up at one of the regulars at a press conference, and he immediately realized that he had gone too far and come down too imperiously. Later the reporter apologized for being a little sleepy because they had all been up until 4 A.M. playing poker. Poker, the President said, that sounded like a good idea, he hadn’t played poker with them in a long time. He turned to Marvin McIntyre, his other press secretary, and told him to get together a buffet dinner, they would all play poker that night. So they played that night and Willard Edwards of the *Chicago Tribune* played and he was also a few drinks ahead of the others, and, as if carrying out the *Trib*’s editorial opposition to Roosevelt, he raised even

time the President raised. He did not do this very well, and Roosevelt kept winning the hands, but did not deter Edwards. “Colonel McCormick’s money is better than any goddamned New Deal money,” he kept saying. McIntyre, watching, was shocked and made a signal to the other reporters to get Edwards out of there, but Roosevelt waved him off. He was taking the Colonel’s money and he was in no hurry to get rid of the Colonel’s man.

Roosevelt’s hold on his press corps was very powerful. In part he was brilliant at the mechanics of their craft and they, like everyone else, were members of the society, he held their hopes in his hands just as he did those of their readers. The years of the Depression had been so bleak; reporters, like everyone else, had wanted a savior, wanted him to succeed, wanted the New Deal to work. It had rained heavily on inauguration day and there was mud everywhere but it had not dimmed the anticipation of the new era. At one point along the parade route Turner Catledge of the *Times* had looked down and seen a new dime. He had picked it up and said, “Now I know everything’s going to be all right.” Any symbol would do. So Roosevelt began with the benefit of the doubt and, indeed, more. He was also very skilled, once in office, at using peer pressure to keep reporters in line, isolating any journalist who asked too difficult a question, making him look ridiculous. There was a small group of regulars who sat in the front-row seats at all White House press conferences and who were totally Roosevelt’s men. They laughed at every joke and pun; the others called them The Giggling Club. There was no doubt that the President used them effectively; not only would a potential dissident feel the quick lash of the President’s tongue, but he might also hear what seemed to be the laughter of his colleagues. When Bob Post of the *Times* asked, in 1937, whether the President was considering a third term, Roosevelt had answered, “Go sit in the corner and put on a dunce cap,” and everyone had laughed. Another time, angered by the isolationist writings of John O’Donnell of the *New York Daily News*, the President had awarded O’Donnell an Iron Cross. Once, when he was feuding with Arthur Krock of the *Times* and Felix Belair asked a question he did not like, Roosevelt had answered, “I bet little Arthur sat up all night framing that one.” Much laughter. Another time when Belair seemed to doze off at a press conference while Roosevelt was going through a tirade against fat-cat publishers, a favorite theme, the President had exploded, “Belair! I don’t care what paper you represent! You’re here on my sufferance and when you’re here you will take notes!” It was a shattering moment for Belair, the President of the United States shouting at him. There were not many moments like that but there were enough to remind the regulars who was in charge, informal or not, family atmosphere or not. Once, after the 1942 election, Richard Harkness, then with United Press, had written in his overnight story that Roosevelt had voted the straight Democratic ticket. The next day Harkness was sitting with other reporters when an enraged Roosevelt sought him out. “You have destroyed the secrecy of the ballot! How dare you announce that I voted in any way? How dare you say I voted straight Democratic or anything else?”

But those moments were the exception. It was a reporter’s dream, there was so much energy, so

much action, so much access. Roosevelt had an intuitive grasp of the way the press worked, could be worked. His sense of timing was impeccable; he once told Orson Welles that there were two great actors in America at that moment. Welles, he said, was the other one. Besides, the rhythm of the times, the great inventions and the changing shape of society, were working to centralize power. The coming of radio and airplanes was breaking down regionalism and making the nation, in a clear sense, one. Radio was a network, one man's voice was heard across the entire country. Issues became national rather than parochial and regional. In the old era Washington was filled with journalists who covered regional issues for their regional papers; when the Roosevelt era was over Washington was filled with reporters who were often highly trained specialists who wrote of national implications for the entire country. The speed of decision was becoming faster and faster and, as it did, local governments simply could not keep up with the growing power and affluence of the federal government. The federal government's taxing power increased as its mandate increased, and as its taxing power increased, so did its real power. Technology was bringing the central state a longer and more powerful reach. The central state could reach areas previously isolated. More, it could perform functions, deliver services, and make judgments inconceivable in another era.

Nor was this an isolated phenomenon. It was happening throughout the world. In Germany and the Soviet Union, powerful highly centralized governments had taken power, and their very rise strengthened the coming of the centralized government in America. Highly centralized totalitarian states were deeply threatening; if power was more clearly centralized elsewhere, might not democracy prove vulnerable, might not, in an age of increasingly swift and destructive bombers and other weapons, democracy be too slow, too awkward? So the coming of totalitarian states strengthened the American presidency, giving the President leverage which he used not just against the adversarial states but against the American public, Congress, and press, arguing the needs of national security. Similarly, as the peacetime Roosevelt years ended and World War II began, the focus was to change from domestic issues, about which the Congress was informed and felt itself equal, to foreign policy and national security, where Congress felt itself ignorant and clumsy and thus inevitably subservient.

All this began in the thirties, the arrival of new forces that were to make the American presidency for some forty years almost unchallenged in its power, and it all began under Franklin Roosevelt. A lesser man, a more modest man, might have shrunk from all these possibilities and implications as he took office, but Roosevelt welcomed them; he welcomed the chance to change things, to expand the powers of the government and he knew immediately how to create his own new mandate. He was, of course, subtly but quite consciously elevating the importance of the press. If he wanted direct access to their readers, then they had to have direct access to him. He was more often than not going directly to the media rather than to the Congress with information; and he put more energy into his press relations than into his congressional ones. There was a changing institutional balance. If on occasion print reporters were angered by his increased use of and chumminess with radio reporters, then people

in the Congress and some Democratic Party politicians were irritated by the fact that he seemed to court media people in general more than he did them. He simply needed the Congress and the party structure less.

As he used the media more often and more directly, they became more influential; they became more and more architects of the national agenda, making more decisions on what the great issues were rather than just responding to the decisions of others. The press corps was becoming a different, more serious, and better informed body. Reporters became, with their greater role in the Roosevelt years, more influential and more prestigious around town, more sought after; similarly, as the stories became more serious and more complicated, the people writing them became better qualified, better educated and more serious.

In those early Roosevelt years reporters like Catledge and Belair, who had covered the Congress in the old era, could almost feel the tide changing, the Congress becoming weaker; no one on the Hill even seemed to know it was happening. One moment in 1937 seemed to crystallize it for Belair: the President was at Warm Springs and he had been driving around in his manually operated car and he had stopped where the reporters were gathered, for an impromptu outdoor curbside press conference. The setting seemed to emphasize the informality of it, the President driving up in front of waiting reporters, teasing them—*Are you all right? You probably want something from me to write about*. Then he had quickly gotten down to business. There was a major congressional struggle on at the time on the question of devaluing the dollar; the President wanted the devaluation and big business generally opposed it. The news had come in that day that the Senate had voted for devaluation, which did not surprise Belair. What did surprise him was Roosevelt's tone. He was boundlessly full of himself that day, more so than usual, and he seemed exalted by the triumph. "This proves," he said, "that the Senate of the United States cannot be bought." Belair was scribbling down the words, but even as he did, he was thinking, *Who ever said that it could be bought?* It was the colossal arrogance of it, it symbolized to Belair how completely Roosevelt had taken over the town, how personal an instrument of his will he had made the office, it was his possession and so was everything else in Washington. It was as if it were now *his* Senate. If the Senate responded as he wanted, it was a good Senate, otherwise it was a bad one. It often seemed in those years, Belair thought, as if a new kind of politics had come into existence, so forceful and all-encompassing was the power of the President. He could reach past anything that stood in his way, the opposition party, the Congress, his own party, the Supreme Court.

Part of it was the special quality of the moment; the Depression gave Roosevelt vast political freedom and also permitted him, as a media figure, to play exactly the kind of role in exactly the type of theater he wanted—Roosevelt the friend of the common man, his opponents the friends of the old, discredited, exploitative order. There was also one large new ingredient in the political composition of the country and that was radio. Roosevelt had made radio his own personal instrument and had

changed permanently the institutional balance of politics. Radio had been a powerful force in the country for almost a decade; by the time of his inauguration it was already the most important means of entertainment in the country and it represented a means of merchandising that was beginning to rival and even threaten magazine advertising. But it had been scarcely used as a political instrument. Herbert Hoover, in desperate political trouble, needing all the assets he could muster, had not deigned to use radio. Men of his generation looked at it with contempt. It was beneath their dignity. Hoover's rare broadcasts had been awkward, stilted, pedantic, words written and spoken in governmentese. Rather than humanizing the President, they had merely confirmed the impression of an uncaring man in a distant office. Yet the instrument was there and sooner or later some shrewd politician was going to make a powerful national connection.

The first broadcast had been made in 1920 and the public response had been quick and enthusiastic; by 1922 there were some 220 radio stations in the country. The sets themselves, simple models, sold for about ten dollars. Stores were not able to keep them in stock, manufacturers had to rush forward their orders. By 1923 there were already 2.5 million sets in the country. Millions of Americans had made radio the focal point of their households, scheduling their day around their favorite programs. When "Amos 'n' Andy" was on the air, the nation simply stopped all its other business and listened. When Pepsodent sponsored "Amos 'n' Andy" its sales tripled in just a few weeks. The way was clear. Those companies which were highly dependent on popular taste, like toothpaste and cigarettes, saw the light; by 1931 the American Tobacco Company spent \$19 million to advertise Lucky Strike on radio. Was it surprising then, with audiences and sales like that, that Franklin Roosevelt, free of charge, was soon selling himself and the New Deal on radio? He was the first great American radio voice. For most Americans of this generation, their first memory of politics would be of sitting by a radio and hearing *that* voice, strong, confident, totally at ease. If he was going to speak, the idea of doing something else was unthinkable. If they did not yet have a radio, they walked the requisite several hundred yards to the home of a more fortunate neighbor who did. It was in the most direct sense the government reaching out and touching the citizen, bringing Americans into the political process and focusing their attention on the presidency as the source of good government. Roosevelt was the first professional of the art. He had practiced for it as governor of New York. The first time he had used radio as President he had turned to Carleton Smith of NBC, the one radio man allowed in the room, and had said, "You'll never have any trouble with me, I'm an old hand at this." Which he was. Smith (whom NBC had chosen to replace Herluf Provenson because the Roosevelt people thought Provenson was too close to Hoover) had a stopwatch that Roosevelt always used to time himself. He called it "that famous watch." Smith was impressed by Roosevelt's ability to stay almost exactly within the prescribed time limits. When it was over he would always turn to Smith and ask: How did it go? Was I repetitious? Were there any lapses? There rarely were; it was consummately professional performance.

Most Americans in the previous 160 years had never even seen a President; now almost all of them were hearing him, *in their own homes*. It was literally and figuratively electrifying. Because he was President he had access to the airwaves any time he wanted, when he wanted. Indeed, because he was such a good performer, because his messages so bound the nation, the networks wanted him to come on more often regularly, perhaps once a week (an offer he shrewdly turned down, aware of the danger of overexposure, telling a network official that people cannot stand the repetition of the highest note of the scale for very long). "You guys want him to do everything," Steve Early, Roosevelt's press secretary, once told Carleton Smith. "I don't want the Boss to do very much. We want to conserve him."

He spoke in an informal manner, his speeches were scripted not to be read in newspapers but to be heard aloud. He worked carefully on them in advance, often spending several days on a speech, reading the words aloud, working on the rhythm and the cadence, getting the feel of them down right. When aides questioned the immense amount of time he devoted to just one speech, Roosevelt said that it was probably the most important thing he would do all week. He had an intuitive sense of rhythm and cadence. Unlike most people, who speeded up their normal speech pattern on radio, Roosevelt deliberately slowed his down. He was never in a rush. He had often memorized a speech before he began, and so he seemed infinitely confident, never seemed to stumble. The patterns of the speeches were conversational. His very first words reflected his ease: "My friends," he began. *My friends*. That was it, they were his friends. Nor were they a passive audience. At that desperate moment in American history the American people were not cool, not aloof, they needed him and they wanted him to succeed; what could be more stirring than to be told by that man with that rich assured voice that the only thing they had to fear was fear itself.

It was all so personal. This was not some distant government official talking in governmentese; this was a voice connected to a warm human being; he knew them, he had visited them. He spoke to his wife and his children, even his dog. Some thirty-five years later an astonishing number of Americans who did not remember the names of the dogs of Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and John Kennedy, remembered the name of Franklin Roosevelt's dog because he had spoken with them about Fala, *my little dog Fala*, about Fala's Irish being up over Republican criticism. It was an awesome display of mastery. It was as if sitting in the studio he could visualize his audience sitting around their radios in their homes, and he spoke not to the microphone but to those homes. If it was very hot in Washington he might turn to an aide and ask, over the open mike, for a glass of water, and apologize to his audience; and that too humanized him, the President needed a glass of water. His touch was perfect. Often, when the speech was over, because newsreels were becoming a bigger and bigger factor in American life, Roosevelt would then repeat vital parts of the speech for a newsreel camera. But the camera was not allowed in to film the broadcast itself; it was simply too noisy on those days.

Nearly 50 million Americans listened to most of his speeches. They were in a real sense his own captive audience. Not by chance was he the first three-term and then four-term President in the nation's history, rising above tradition, above opposition party, above his own party's will. (No longer did politicians need the party to raise a crowd. Now the radio did it. Yet few professional politicians of the day understood radio or how to use it. Carleton Smith of NBC tried to do a program with members of Roosevelt's cabinet and had a terrible problem. Jim Farley, the Postmaster General and able professional politician of his generation, simply could not pronounce the word "with." It always came out "wit," making Farley seem like a hack.) Thus did Franklin Roosevelt outdistance even his own party. He had changed the institutional balance and he changed the nature of the presidency; from now on it was a personalized office, less distant from the average American. Until March 1933, through world war and a Great Depression, the White House had employed only one person to handle the incoming mail. Herbert Hoover had received, for example, some 40 letters a day. After Franklin Roosevelt arrived and began to make his radio speeches, the average was closer to 4,000 letters a day.

The White House reporters, of course, resented the coming of radio, and even more, the coming of the first radio correspondents. Never mind that radio inevitably whetted interest in government and the increased readership, never mind that radio would act as a kind of monitor and force journalism to improve, ending the Hearst style of reporting, what was at stake was turf. Suddenly there was a new kind of reporter around, reporters who, to the eye of the print traditionalists, weren't reporters at all. They were pretty boys with slick voices and worse, they seemed to have stunning quick access to vast audiences. Carleton Smith of NBC was the first radio correspondent at the White House. His job was to place a microphone in front of the President and tap Roosevelt on the shoulder when the network hookup was ready. NBC in those early days was the dominant company. Poor Bob Trout, the first CBS man, had to stand outside the door. The first time that Roosevelt saw a CBS microphone he asked, "CBS? What's that?" But CBS gradually got into the act. John Charles Daly succeeded Trout. Daly was not so much a correspondent in the early days as he was a special-events man; he was supposed to cover the launching of ships and to help broadcast concerts by the Army Band on Mondays and the Marine Band on Wednesdays. Daly—smooth, strikingly handsome, with a rich voice—inspired even more resentment among the print reporters, particularly from Belair of the *Times* and Walter Trohan, the feisty correspondent of the *Chicago Tribune*. Trohan in particular did not like radio and he especially did not like John Charles Daly. "That man's no reporter," he used to complain to his colleagues. "He's never worked in a city room. He's never covered a story. *I think he's an actor*." What makes you think he's not a reporter? Belair asked. "Because reporters play poker when they're not working and that man is off in the woods practicing lines from Shakespeare, listening to his own voice," Trohan answered.

Daly, of course, was not shy. He had his job and part of it was to push for access. That part was

made easier by the growing size of the audiences; no one had to tell Franklin Roosevelt where people gathered. Gradually the status of Carleton Smith and Daly changed; correspondents they wanted to be correspondents they were. Soon they rode in the third car in presidential caravans. In those days position was based on circulation; the wire services were in the first car; the specials, men like Bela and Trohan, in the second; and the networks in the third. That was not good enough for Daly and he kept arguing that the networks in status were in fact equal to the wire services. That was a staggering presumption for the times and at first not only did the print reporters resist it, but more importantly Steve Early refused to accept it. But Daly persisted; on occasion, he argued, the networks had a greater circulation than the wires, although in sum the wires had a basic circulation that was higher. But certainly more people heard CBS than read the *Times*. Finally Early, after consultation with his boss, agreed, and at the start of a presidential trip, Early changed the rating system, putting the networks in the second car. As they all rushed to their cars Daly and Smith found Walter Trohan in the second car. "You son of a bitch," Trohan told Daly, "this is our car." Not any more, it wasn't. Daly summoned Steve Early, who forced the *Chicago Tribune* and *The New York Times* to car three. When Felix Bela complained mildly to Early later, the press secretary apologized. "It's not that we like them better," he said. Radio had arrived.

1

CBS

HE WAS YOUNG AND the industry was younger. He had started in the family cigar business, which was very successful, but he was nonetheless restless for something a little different, he did not simply want to repeat his own father's successes. He did not know very much about radio, which was then very new. A friend had one of the early crystal sets, and Bill Paley tried to buy a radio for himself, but in those days radios were not for sale in stores, and so he had to have one made. He became a devoted radio listener, the little machine seemed to open up a much larger world, and he often found himself staying up very late at night listening. He also found that many of his friends were doing much the same thing. One summer in 1925 when his father, Sam, and his uncle Jake were away and he was in charge of the company, he, experimented a little with the advertising budget and for the grand sum of fifty dollars a week sponsored the "Miss La Palina Hour" on WCAU, the local Philadelphia radio station. Miss La Palina was, of course, named after the cigar, which was in turn named after the family, Paley, and for the fifty dollars he got not only the singer but a ten-piece orchestra as well. When Jake Paley returned from the trip and very quickly spotted the fifty-dollar expenditure, he was furious; Jake Paley was not a frivolous man and he did not do frivolous things like listen to the radio. He demanded to know what the money had gone for and his nephew tried to explain. "That's nonsense," said Jake Paley, "that machine is never going to work," and so Miss La Palina quickly departed Philadelphia's airwaves. But in the next few weeks Sam Paley, who was a very smart man and a very good listener, was struck by how many people stopped him on the street to ask what happened to the "Miss La Palina Hour." He wondered aloud to his son Bill how he could spend half a million on print advertising and get so little response, and then spend only fifty dollars for radio and everyone missed his singer. Soon Jake Paley checked the books and found that sales had gone up because of the radio advertisements. Shortly after that Miss La Palina went back on the air and very soon after that Bill Paley went into radio.

Sam Paley had made his money in cigars, the Congress Cigar Company, and indeed the woman on the wrapper of the La Palina was said to resemble Goldie, wife of Sam, mother of Bill. Sam Paley's father, Isaac Paley, had been a prosperous businessman in Russia; he had been in the lumber business in a small town outside Kiev, and he had been a good deal wealthier than most Jews in Russia in the latter part of the nineteenth century. But he was discontented with the restrictions which the Russian society placed on Jews and the anti-Semitism that hung so heavily in the atmosphere at all times, and so he had often thought of emigrating to America. Unlike most Eastern European Jews who dreamed of America as a distant miracle and who, if they came to this country, came blind and by steerage

Isaac Paley, deciding that America was worthy of his interest, had bought a first-class ticket and taken an investigatory trip to the United States. He had liked it here, and had returned to Russia to bring over his entire family, including the youthful Sam, around 1890. Isaac Paley had settled in Chicago, investing his money in a number of stocks. He envisioned a life of genteel semi-retirement, sitting around the samovar with his friends, discussing serious intellectual subjects, sipping tea the Russian way through the sugar, enjoying the intellectual ferment of the old world while buffered by the great freedom of the new one. He did not intend for his son Sam to work; he wanted him instead to be a full-time intellectual. Unfortunately Isaac Paley's investments were not worthy of his dreams, the stock market went bad and he lost all his money. So as a boy Sam Paley went to work to support his father, doing something that Isaac Paley never entirely realized. Sam Paley was very bright and ambitious and entrepreneurial and soon he was rolling cigars and selling them, and soon after that there were other people working for him, and soon after that there was a factory, and after that, other factories. He was a man of great driving energy and a genuine skill in the blending of tobacco. He had a feel for the texture of tobacco, how to take two or three different strains and anticipate the blend that they would create. He proved to be a masterful cigar maker, the most successful one in the country at the time, and his success was genuine. He eventually sold the business for \$30 million just before the Depression.

Since he had had a dilettante for a father, Sam Paley was more determined than most men that his own son would be a serious young man and would know the meaning of hard work. Not only would Bill go to the best American schools, to the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce at the University of Pennsylvania, but he would be required to work at every level of the cigar company from the bottom up. So Bill Paley did just that and he found that the cigar business was a hard taskmaster, there was very little room for either generosity of spirit or of bookkeeper error in the making of cheap mass-produced cigars. The edge of profit was simply very thin. Sam Paley was pleased by how well his son did in the business, Bill was a good tobacco buyer and he was a very good salesman, particularly gifted at making other people believe that what he wanted was what they wanted as well. But Sam Paley was not a dogmatic man; it was not necessary for his son to take over the family business for Sam Paley to validate his own life. So in 1928, when through family friends and in-laws the chance came along to buy into a fledgling radio network called CBS, Sam Paley, already impressed by radio's possibilities, quickly encouraged his son to get in on it, and put up some \$400,000 of the family money. The Congress Cigar Company had just been sold to Dillon Read and while he and Jake had five-year employment contracts as part of the deal, Bill did not. He was free to go to CBS. Sam was enthusiastic about his son's idea: he had decided that one of two things would happen with CBS. Either it would very quickly turn out to be a bust, and thus smaller than the cigar business, in which case he would get his son back with very little heartbreak, or it was going to be very big, in which case it would turn out to be liberating for a talented young man like his son William Samuel Paley. Radio turned out to be bigger than cigars.

At the time the Paleys bought into CBS, Bill Paley was all of twenty-seven years old. Because the network was being very poorly run, he had intended to spend some time in New York reorganizing the business structure before returning to Philadelphia and the family business. He never went back to cigars. In those days, NBC, all of two years old itself, was the dominant network, so dominant that it had in fact been split into two networks, the Red and the Blue. (The Blue network, at government orders, was sold and became ABC in 1941.) Whether CBS would even survive when Bill Paley took over was highly questionable. Radio had no past, the present was very shaky, and most socially responsible people did not seem to think there was very much future. To the degree that network radio existed, NBC was it: NBC controlled the wires, it had signed up the best concert stars for its programming. CBS in 1928 owned no stations of its own, had only sixteen affiliates, lost money, and was housed in one small floor in the Paramount Tower.

Bill Paley changed all that. He was for fifty years the supreme figure of modern broadcasting, first in radio, then in television. Very simply, he merchandised more products for more different companies, and sent out more different entertainers on more different programs, than anyone in the history of mankind. His was one of the staggering success stories of the American twentieth century, a century whose early genius seemed to flower in production and whose later genius emerged, fitting enough, in sales and promotion. Bill Paley was right at the center of the era's most powerful forces, he had combined the prime energies of American huckstering with the explosive new potential of American technology. He and his imitators achieved vast power and influence over American taste and culture. He made the American home the focal point of the American marketplace. Whereas at the turn of the century only an occasional door-to-door salesman visited the American home, by the middle of the century a ceaseless stream of the most subtle electronic impulses created by the nation's most richly rewarded hucksters was beamed into this new marketplace, relentlessly selling not just the American dream but an endless series of material products through whose purchase that dream might be more quickly achieved.

He was in any real sense the father of modern broadcasting, a towering figure in this newest profession, his maturity spanning almost the entire history of the institution. He was, in the savage predatory world of broadcasting, not just the first, but the best. For almost fifty years he had swum in the waters with some of capitalism's greatest sharks and there were no tooth marks on him. He was tough and shrewd, and he survived and endured, creating with his desires and ambitions the modern structure of broadcasting, with its brutal ratings system and its unparalleled profits. He more than the other early figures of broadcasting was fascinated by entertainment and programming; it was his devotion to every detail in programming which made him so important in American life, for he helped determine what the nation first heard and then saw in its home every night. His chosen instruments, particularly with the coming of television, were by the end of the sixties more dominant in most American lives than newspapers, churches, and often the family itself. It was his decisions which created broadcasting

as it exists today, with the power and taste-making centralized in the network. He brought to his new career an extraordinary assortment and blend of skills; he was a shrewd and imaginative businessman, able to see the future and carve it up, even as it was just arriving; he was a wonderful salesman, subtle and low-key, well briefed on each client, with the marvelous ability to make his ideas seem as if they had originated with the client; and in addition he had a natural feel for entertainment. He both loved it and could judge it.

That last was a crucial advantage. There were other men who were good businessmen and others who were deft salesmen, but the feel for talent, that was something else, and it was essential in a public and volatile a profession as broadcasting. He had an absolutely brilliant ear and later, when television arrived, a brilliant eye as well. He had almost perfect pitch in terms of entertainment. For almost half a century, he had a better idea than anyone else in the country of what would play and what would not play to the largest possible audience. He was totally without sentiment: he knew what was good and would sell, what was bad and would sell, and what was good and would not sell, and he never confused one with another. If his own personal taste happened, as it did, to be exquisite, he never confused his taste or that of his very silky friends with that of the larger audience. He was very simply a genius at mass entertainment.

The critical years were the early ones. What he had from the start was a sense of vision, a sense of what might be. It was as if he could sit in New York in his tiny office with his almost bankrupt company and see not just his own desk, or the row of potential advertisers outside along Madison Avenue, but millions of the American people out in the hinterlands, so many of them out there, almost alone, many of them in homes as yet unconnected to electricity, people alone with almost no form of entertainment other than radio. It was his sense, his confidence that he could reach them, that he had something for them, that made him different. He could envision the audience at a time when there was in fact no audience. He not only had the vision, he knew how to harness it, he could see that the larger the audience, the greater the benefit to the network, because it would mean that many more advertisers would want to participate. If the larger audience meant better advertisers, then it also meant more money, which meant better programs, which meant larger audiences, and which meant that more stations would want to affiliate with CBS.

Whereas in those days NBC was trying to make a large part of its money from its affiliate stations by *charging* them for carrying many of its shows, Paley envisioned a different route, designed to reach the maximum audience as directly as possible. It would make things easier and cheaper for the affiliate and thus inevitably minimize the affiliate's role. All he wanted was a guarantee of the maximum audience. The larger the audience, the more time he could sell. To achieve that goal, he had something to offer—indeed to give away—by making his programs available to affiliate stations. As Erik Barnouw writes in his excellent history of American broadcasting, *The Golden Web*:

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