


Spring 2018

## Donald Trump and the Spectacle of the Modern American Presidency

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### Recommended Citation

Jones, Medora McDougall, "Donald Trump and the Spectacle of the Modern American Presidency" (2018). *Senior Projects Spring 2018*. 195.  
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Donald Trump and the  
Spectacle of the Modern American Presidency

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies

and

The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2018



## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my advisor Bill Dixon for his endless support and guidance. This project would not have been possible without his marvelous course on the American Presidency and his mentorship throughout my time at Bard.

Thanks also to my “consultant” Marina Van Zuylen for her meticulous translating eye, creative mind, and constant motivation.

I also greatly appreciate Alexa Murphy for putting me in a good mood at work in the early morning and her patience with my citations.

I am indebted to my beautiful family and friends who have provided love and encouragement when I needed it most. A special thank you to my Dad for taking care of me when my vestigial organ tried to kill me.

A final thanks to my appendix for its role as a useless remnant from an evolutionary past—you are now gone but not forgotten.



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## Introduction

On January 20, 2017, Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 45th president of the United States. A former reality TV star with no prior political experience, his ascendance to most powerful position in American government shocked the country. News outlets and political analysts portrayed him as an unprecedented outlier, describing his demagogic appeals and grand gestures as anomalies detached from the typical features of presidential leadership. Yet, Donald Trump is not a glitch in the American political system, but rather a unique manifestation of the qualities inherent to the spectacular status of the modern presidency. His rise to the Oval Office requires an examination of the relationship between the presidency and the public, from the Founders' original conception of executive power to Woodrow Wilson's 20th century vision of the rhetorical presidency. Wilson's desire for a form of executive leadership closely tied with public opinion created the serious problem of presidential spectacle— a symbolic event performed by the president which leaves no space for another narrative to exist. In Guy Debord's *La Société du Spectacle*, he advances a broader theory of spectacle, bringing to light celebrity culture and the consequences of a society based in consumption as opposed to reflection. Donald Trump's spectacle provides a crucial lens into the problems of the modern American presidency, raising unsettling questions regarding the influence of single, symbolic figure over the entire democratic process.



## Chapter 1

Donald Trump's ascendance to the presidency is not an unexplainable anomaly disconnected from American political history. In order to comprehend his rise to power, the historical evolution of the American presidency as an institution must be investigated, from the Founders' conception of an executive detached from public opinion to the modern, 20th century vision of an executive inextricably tied to the American people. Instead of an aberration of the political system, President Trump's demagogic rhetoric is rooted in the cultivation of public opinion personified by figures such as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. The transformation of the relationship between the presidency and the public created space for presidential spectacle to emerge, helping to explain how a candidate with no prior political experience harnessed the passions of the American electorate to secure his place in the Oval Office.

### The Founding

The Founders feared a form of executive power derived directly from the will of the people. In the first and last of the *The Federalist Papers*, Alexander Hamilton warns of leadership built on the cultivation of popular opinion. In *Federalist 1*, he cautions against politicians "who have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people, commencing demagogues and ending tyrants,"<sup>1</sup> and he concludes in *Federalist 85* by defending the Constitution as a "prodigy" meant to prevent a "victorious

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander Hamilton, "Federalist No.1," in *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Signet Classics, 2003), 29.

demagogue” from ascending to power.<sup>2</sup> The term “demagogue” translates to “popular leader,” with roots in the Greek words *dēmos*, meaning “the people,” and *agogos* meaning “leading.” In *The Rhetorical Presidency*, Jeffrey K. Tulis describes two types of demagogues: soft and hard.<sup>3</sup> In order to amass political power, the soft demagogue uses flattery and pays “obsequious” attention to the people to give the pretense that their leadership embodies the desires of the entire populace. The hard demagogue is even more nefarious, and sows divisions between different groups of people to increase their own power, therefore swaying popular passions through “extremist rhetoric that ministers to fear.”<sup>4</sup> The Founders worried that an administration built on constant rhetorical appeals to the general public would result in both types of demagoguery, creating a divisive and unstable government unable to carry out the daily operations needed for the country to survive.

The Founders’ distrust of popular leadership stemmed primarily from a Hobbesian view of human nature. In *Federalist* 10, James Madison describes a polity divided by faction—a majority or minority group sharing an interest which forms a chaotic political community “inflamed with mutual animosity” and “much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good.”<sup>5</sup> Madison depicts the public sphere as an “inflamed” environment, like an open wound infected with the evils of mankind. As political scientist Greg Weiner stresses, Madison’s

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No.85,” in *The Federalist Papers* (Signet Classics, 2003), 526.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 29.

<sup>5</sup> James Madison, “Federalist No.10,” in *The Federalist Papers* (Signet Classics, 2003),73.

descriptions of the general public are rife “with metaphors like fire and contagious epidemics that connot[e] sudden eruptions of sentiment sweeping across populations or political institutions.”<sup>6</sup> Madison argued that faction is “sown into the nature of man,” and can arise from “an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power; or to persons of other descriptions whose fortunes have been interesting to the human passions...”<sup>7</sup> This passage illustrates Madison’s intense fear of demagoguery. The final line, however, does not simply emphasize the dangers of a power-hungry politician, but a celebrity-like figure “whose fortunes have been interesting to the human passions.” This individual may not be politically ambitious, but their “interesting” wealth and status has the power to hold the general public’s attention. To ensure factious individuals and interests remained unable to capture the attention of the entire populace, Madison proposed a “republican remedy.” He asserted that a republic limits faction through a system of representatives who “refine and enlarge the public views” by virtue of the sheer size of the electorate.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, demagogues, or “men of factious tempers, of local prejudices, or of sinister designs,” are rendered unable to exert influence over the entire electorate, creating a fractious state in which no single faction can claim dominance.<sup>9</sup> Madison thus conceived a form of government meant to proscribe popular control, leaving civic deliberation in the hands of a small number of representatives, not the impulsive general public.

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<sup>6</sup> Greg Weiner, *Madison’s Metronome: The Constitution, Majority Rule, and the Tempo of American Politics*, American Political Thought (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 3.

<sup>7</sup> James Madison, “Federalist No.10,” 73.

<sup>8</sup> James Madison, “Federalist No.10,” 76.

<sup>9</sup> James Madison, “Federalist No.10,” 74.

The Founders envisioned republican government as a space where representatives would refine instead of blindly follow popular opinion. In *Federalist 71*, Hamilton explains that while representatives serve their constituents, they are not required to act with an “unqualified complaisance” towards “every sudden breeze of passion, or to every transient impulse which the people may receive from the arts of men.”<sup>10</sup> *Federalist 71* shows Hamilton’s deep distrust of civic deliberation in the public sphere, where men are “continually beset” by the “wiles of parasites and sycophants” and “the snares of the ambitious.” Instead of entrusting civic deliberation to an unqualified general populace susceptible to demagoguery, Hamilton presents a vision of governance in which the American people allow representatives to deliberate on behalf of their best interests, thus regulating the “breeze of passion” sweeping through the public sphere. He argues further that it is the duty of the representatives to be the “guardians” of the popular interest, withstanding “the temporary delusion” of public opinion “in order to give them time and opportunity for more cool and sedate reflection.”<sup>11</sup> The Founders feared demagoguery because of its power to erase a space of deliberation from the government, transforming “cool and sedate reflection” into passionate and unthinking action. A president tied to the “temporary delusion” of popular interests reeked of demagogic disaster.

The struggle to ensure that executive power did not devolve into demagoguery shows in the Constitutional Convention’s debate surrounding the best method to elect the president. During the Convention, the only delegate who conceived of the presidency

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No. 71,” in *The Federalist Papers* (Signet Classics, 2003), 430.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No. 71,” 431.

as based “firmly in the will of the people” was James Wilson of Pennsylvania. The remaining 54 delegates were wary of a president tied too closely to popular opinion and strongly rejected Wilson’s proposal for the democratic election of the president.<sup>12</sup> As Sidney M. Milkis and Michael Nelson highlight in *The American Presidency*, many delegates felt that Wilson’s support for a populist method of executive selection was “too democratic” and “democracy was suited only for small politics.”<sup>13</sup> Delegate George Mason’s argument reflects the elitist and anti-populist sentiments of the time: “It would be as unnatural to refer to the choice of a proper character for chief Magistrate to the people, as it would, to refer a trial of colours to a blind man.”<sup>14</sup> Mason viewed the very idea of popular election as “unnatural.” Far from merely implying that the general populace lacked the qualifications to choose an executive, Mason bluntly argued that allowing the American people to select the president was as impossible and foolhardy as a blind man attempting to see color. Instead of entrusting the vote to the “blind” general populace, the delegates decided that the president should be elected by joint ballot in both the House and Senate. Yet, this electoral process left them unsatisfied. While the delegates felt wary of an executive appealing directly to the American people, they also feared an executive unable to act as a check on congressional power.

As a compromise bridging the two concerns of direct popular control and legislative overreach, the delegates collectively decided to create the Electoral College, whereby the president would be selected by the majority vote of electors chosen by the

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<sup>12</sup> Sidney M. Milkis and Michael Nelson, *The American Presidency: Origins and Development, 1776-2014*, 7th edition (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2015), 33.

<sup>13</sup> Milkis and Nelson, *The American Presidency*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> George Mason, quoted in *The American Presidency*, 33.

states in proportion to each state's representation in Congress.<sup>15</sup> The entire conception of the Electoral College points to the Founders' suspicion of democracy's role in the American government, particularly in relation to executive power. In *Federalist 68*, Alexander Hamilton describes the Electoral College as an election process built upon the ideal of republican representation, as opposed to direct democracy:

It was equally desirable that the immediate election should be made by men most capable of analyzing the qualities adapted to the station and acting under circumstances favorable to deliberation, and to a judicious combination of all the reasons and inducements which were proper to govern their choice. A small number of persons, selected by their fellow citizens from the general mass, will be most likely to possess the information and discernment requisite to so complicated an investigation.<sup>16</sup>

Hamilton asserts that the general public may lack the “discernment,” or political intelligence to handle the weighty task of selecting an executive, and thus a “small number of persons,” or men most “capable” of understanding the workings of government, are the best qualified to act on behalf of the people. He argues further that the chosen electors are better able to make an informed judgement because they will decide “under the circumstances favorable to deliberation,” implying that the public sphere is not an environment where true civic deliberation can flourish. The Electoral College was created to prevent the emergence of a demagogue, showing the Founders' ambivalence towards popular control and their overall distrust for the general public's capacity to deliberate.

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<sup>15</sup> Milkis and Nelson, *The American Presidency*, 35.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No.68,” in *The Federalist Papers* (Signet Classics, 2003), 410.

The delegates of the Constitutional Convention struggled to develop a conception of executive power divorced from the tyrannical practices of a monarch or despot, yet strong enough to facilitate the capable administration of the law. The difficulty in achieving this balance led to several debates regarding the benefits of a unitary vs. plural executive. In order to prevent the president from becoming the “foetus of monarchy,” Edmund Randolph of Virginia insisted on a three-person committee to disperse executive power among multiple men.<sup>17</sup> While appealing because of its distance from a traditional monarchical structure, the delegates eventually decided that this conception diffused executive authority too greatly, creating, in the words of George Washington, “power without the means of execution when these ought to be coequal at least.”<sup>18</sup> Washington’s fear of a lack of administrative authority is echoed in Alexander Hamilton’s defense of the Convention’s decision to form a unitary executive. In *Federalist 70*, Hamilton argues that the key ingredient to a strong executive is “energy,” a quality which ensures “decision, activity, secrecy, and dispatch” when carrying out the law.<sup>19</sup> A plural executive or an executive committee slows the execution of law through inner debate and conflict, while masking true responsibility for executive decisions from the public by spreading the blame among multiple members. Hamilton describes “energy” as an essential trait used to protect the nation from “foreign attacks,” to facilitate the “steady administration of the laws,” to guard property, and to secure

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<sup>17</sup> Milkis and Nelson, *The American Presidency*, 32.

<sup>18</sup> George Washington, quoted in *The American Presidency*, 32.

<sup>19</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No.70,” in *The Federalist Papers* (Signet Classics, 2003), 423.

“liberty against the enterprises and assaults of ambition, of faction, and of anarchy.”<sup>20</sup>

Importantly, Hamilton lists executive tasks related to administration, not public communication, therefore removing the president from constant contact with the general public.

In order to create the “vigor and expedition” needed for the president to carry out the law, Hamilton argued that executive authority should not be overwhelmed by legislative power.<sup>21</sup> In *Federalist* 71, he critiques the Anti-Federalist stance of a weak executive in total subservience to Congress:

There are some who would be inclined to regard the servile pliancy of the executive to a prevailing current, either in the community or in the legislature, as its best recommendation. But such men entertain very crude notions, as well as purposes for which government was instituted, as of true means by which the public happiness may be promoted.<sup>22</sup>

Hamilton feared that the president could be swept away in the “prevailing current” of legislative and popular opinion. Instead of an executive who exists in a state of “servile pliancy,” Hamilton conceived of an independent executive able to administer the law and facilitate good governance in an environment free from the passions raging in both “the community or in legislature.” This independent space would remove the president from heated congressional debates and the roar of popular opinion, thus enabling them to form judgements on the execution of legislation which may differ from those of

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<sup>20</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No.70,”422.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No.70,”425.

<sup>22</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No. 71,”430.



Congress. Thus, the Founders envisioned the president's power as neither derived from Congress nor the American people, but the Constitution itself.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Rhetorical Presidency**

At the beginning of the 20th century, Woodrow Wilson advocated for a new conception of the presidency, far removed from the Founders' original vision. In the "Two Constitutional Presidencies," theorist Jeffrey K. Tulis describes these two dueling visions regarding the source of executive power. The first is the "capital C" version intended by the Founders, which emphasizes that presidential authority derives from the Constitution, not the will of the American people.<sup>24</sup> The "lowercase c" version is the modern perspective formed by Woodrow Wilson, where presidential authority draws from the ability to lead public opinion. Both the Founders and Wilson envisioned an energetic and deliberative president, but the "Constitutional" presidency makes the executive independent of popular opinion, while the "constitutional" presidency creates an executive who thrives off of power given by the people.<sup>25</sup> Wilson saw this reformulation of executive power as essential to address modern day needs, arguing in a 1912 campaign speech that "The old political formulas do not fit the present problems; they read now like documents taken out of a forgotten age."<sup>26</sup> Wilson believed that the Constitution required an update, and insisted that the nation revise the original

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<sup>23</sup> Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 40.

<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey K. Tulis, "The Two Constitutional Presidencies," in *The Presidency and the Political System*, 10th ed. (SAGE, 2013), 1.

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey K. Tulis, "The Two Constitutional Presidencies," 2.

<sup>26</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "The Old Order Changeth," in *The New Freedom* (Page & Company, 1913), *The New Freedom*, 5.

conception of the presidency to allow for a more active form of executive leadership deeply connected to popular opinion.

Wilson's new vision of the presidency was built on the foundations established by Theodore Roosevelt, who had already begun to challenge the Founder's view of executive power. By the turn of the 20th century, sweeping economic changes led to demands for a more responsive government better able to protect the common good during an age of fast-moving industrialization. To address new challenges such as growing economic inequality and the lack of consumer protection, Theodore Roosevelt transformed the executive office into a "bully pulpit," bypassing both party and Congress to speak directly to the general public. Roosevelt ushered in the Progressive era by espousing the idea of stewardship, where the president actively cares for and guides the populace.<sup>27</sup> While well-known for expanding power in the realm of foreign affairs, Roosevelt also expanded the executive's role in formulating public policy. His platform the "Square Deal" was the first instance of attaching a "catchy phrase to a programmatic philosophy" in order to advertise policies to the general public. As Milkis and Nelson argue, Roosevelt's "Square Deal" program shows a clear development of the modern executive because "it invoked principles of fairness as he [Roosevelt], rather than his party or Congress understood them."<sup>28</sup> Roosevelt's tenure made "government action much more likely to bear the president's personal stamp," removing policy debates from the floors of Congress and into the public sphere. Roosevelt was also one of the first presidents to grasp the power of the mass media, thus allowing a larger audience to

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<sup>27</sup> Milkis and Nelson, *The American Presidency*, 233.

<sup>28</sup> Milkis and Nelson, *The American Presidency*, 236.

receive his messages in the vast circulation of magazines and newspapers. However, he only appealed directly to the general public when the occasion demanded action, and stopped campaigning for pieces of legislation when Congress was in session. Although Roosevelt's popular appeals reached beyond the Founders' conception of executive power, his stewardship model remained respectful of congressional deliberation and governmental institutions.<sup>29</sup>

Wilson expanded Roosevelt's event-based popular appeals into an entire rhetorical ideology. Instead of a steward, he viewed the president as a "leader-interpreter" of the American people, guiding and cultivating popular opinion with a clear rhetorical message.<sup>30</sup> In contrast to senators and representatives, Wilson argued that the president was the sole figure who commanded a view of the nation as a whole, and thus could be "a spokesman for the real sentiment and purpose of the country, by giving direction to opinion, by giving the country at once the information and statements of policy which will enable it to form its judgements alike of parties and men."<sup>31</sup> This ambitious rhetorical standard is far removed from the intentions of the Founders. In the Constitution, presidential rhetoric is only mentioned twice, and both references involve oral communications with Congress, never the general public. As Milkis and Nelson highlight, Wilson altered the traditional conception of presidential oratory by establishing it as "a principal tool of presidential leadership."<sup>32</sup> Instead of an

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<sup>29</sup> Milkis and Nelson, *The American Presidency*, 255.

<sup>30</sup> Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 125.

<sup>31</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "The President's Role in the American Government," quoted in *The American Presidency*.

<sup>32</sup> Milkis and Nelson, *The American Presidency*, 257.

executive office independent from public opinion, Wilson's "second constitutional presidency" explicitly draws power from the ability to interpret and appeal to the sentiments of the American people.

Wilson espoused a vision of executive primacy in American government. In his 1908 book *Constitutional Government*, Wilson describes the president as a leader meant to embody the desires of an entire nation:

The nation as a whole has chosen him, and is conscious that it has no other political spokesman. His is the only national voice in affairs. Let him once win the admiration and confidence of the country, and no other single force can withstand him, no combination of forces will easily overpower him. His position takes the imagination of the country. He is the representative of no constituency, but of the whole people. When he speaks in his true character, he speaks for no special interest. If he rightly interprets the national thought and boldly insists upon it, he is irresistible; and the country never feels the zest of action so much as when its President is of such insight and calibre. Its instinct is for unified action, and it craves a single leader.<sup>33</sup>

This passage shows a striking departure from the Founders' original conception of executive power. Wilson argues that the public "craves" a strong leader, and cannot feel "the zest of action" without the insight and direction of presidential authority. Both Hamilton and Wilson would agree on the importance of "a single leader" to execute laws with "unified action." However, Wilson's version of executive energy stems from the ability to guide popular opinion, and not, as the Founders desired, from the ability to

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<sup>33</sup>Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States, Library of Liberal Thought* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 55.

remain independent from the “breeze of passion” sweeping through the public sphere.<sup>34</sup> The Founders feared a popular leader able to harness the passions of the entire populace, and Wilson’s description of an “irresistible” president able to capture the “imagination of the country” appears eerily similar to the practices of a demagogue.

Wilson worked to distinguish the blurred line between a “leader-interpreter” and a demagogue. He envisioned a president who could discern the common good from the roar of public opinion, writing that a leader-interpreter is “obedient to the purposes of the public mind,” as opposed to a demagogue who follows “the inclination of the moment” instead of the collective wellbeing of the American people.<sup>35</sup> While a demagogue desires to augment personal power, Wilson’s “leader-interpreter” strives to sift through public sentiment to find the common good. Wilson thus perceived the executive as neither a selfish leader nor a servant to public opinion, but an active player in formulating and interpreting the desires of the American people.<sup>36</sup> He believed that the executive’s rhetorical appeals should elevate the public discourse in order to educate the masses. As Tulis notes in *The Rhetorical Presidency*, unlike the Founders, who viewed leadership and deliberation in constant conflict, “Wilson regarded them as dependent on each other.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, Wilson’s conception of leadership rested on facilitating deliberation on a mass scale throughout the electorate. Ultimately, as he argues in *Constitutional Government*, Wilson viewed the president as a “vital link of

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<sup>34</sup>Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No. 71,” 431.

<sup>35</sup> Wilson, “Cabinet Government,” quoted in *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 130.

<sup>36</sup> Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 125.

<sup>37</sup> Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 123.

connection with the thinking nation.”<sup>38</sup> By crafting rhetorical appeals meant to enlighten the public, Wilson believed his conception of executive power moved beyond the selfish motivations of demagoguery and towards crafting an idealistic vision for the benefit of the entire country.

While Wilson believed in a “thinking public” eager to learn and participate within the democratic process, he struggled with the second constitutional presidency’s combination of the desire for an idealistic political discourse and the need to convey messages clearly to the general populace. In his essay “Leaders of Men,” Wilson describes this tension:

Their [the public’s] confidence is gained by qualities which they can recognize, by qualities which they can assimilate: by the things which find easy entrance into their minds and are easily transmitted to the palms of their hands or the ends of their walking sticks in the shape of applause. [...] Mark the simplicity and directness of [true leaders.] The motives which they urge are elemental; the morality which they seek to enforce is large and obvious; the policy they emphasize, purged of all subtlety.<sup>39</sup>

For true deliberation to function on a massive scale, Wilson believed that appeals made to the masses needed to be “purged of all subtlety” to be “easily transmitted.” He felt that the public would be uninterested in nuanced, policy-oriented debates because, as Tulis writes, “the discussions were not elevated to the level of major contests of principle.”<sup>40</sup> In Wilson’s opinion, rhetoric capturing the attention of the general public

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<sup>38</sup> Wilson, “The President’s Role in the American Government,” quoted in *The American Presidency*, 255.

<sup>39</sup> Wilson, “Leaders of Men,” quoted in *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 127.

<sup>40</sup> Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 126.

had to be made “elemental,” “large,” and “obvious” to truly connect with the American people. In fact, both the Founders and Wilson would agree that the general public lacks the capacity for civic deliberation, with the Founders arguing that the electorate is too impulsive and passionate to even begin to deliberate, and Wilson asserting that without tying debates to a grand, idealistic vision, the general public is bound to remain apathetic and uninvolved. Therefore, Wilson’s conception of deliberation is tied to the president’s ability to simplify the political discourse for the American people: “The arguments which induce popular action must always be broad and obvious arguments; only a very gross substance of concrete conception can make any impression on the minds of the masses.”<sup>41</sup> To make “any impression on the minds of the masses,” a Wilsonian vision of the rhetorical presidency rests on the ability to create consumable, simple messages which appeal to the entire nation.

### **Presidential Spectacle**

The president’s constant creation of simplified rhetorical appeals to attract the attention of the American public leads to the problem of presidential spectacle. In *Presidents on Political Ground*, Bruce Miroff describes a spectacle as “a kind of symbolic event,” which implies “a clear division between actors and spectators.”<sup>42</sup> Miroff argues that spectacles are designed for the American public to watch, not debate:

A spectacle does not permit the audience to interrupt the action and redirect its meaning. Spectators can become absorbed in a spectacle or can find it

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<sup>41</sup> Wilson, “Leaders of Men,” quoted in *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 127.

<sup>42</sup> Bruce Miroff, *Presidents on Political Ground: Leaders in Action and What They Face* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 13.

unconvincing, but they cannot become performers. A spectacle is not designed for mass participation; it is not a democratic event.<sup>43</sup>

Spectacles relegate the audience to a state of passivity. They are engineered to convey a greater symbolic message—one that is then “absorbed,” consumed, and digested by the spectators. As Miroff emphasizes, spectacles are “not designed for mass participation” nor should be considered “democratic event[s].” Thus, the use of spectacle by a democratically elected leader such as the president is disturbing. Far from Wilson’s vision of an executive who strives to create mass deliberation and elevate the political discourse, the use of presidential spectacle undermines a citizen’s ability to debate and reflect upon democratic issues. Miroff warns that spectacle leads to “the promotion of gesture over accomplishment, the obfuscation of executive responsibility, and the encouragement to citizens’ passivity,” creating a perverse version of Wilson’s rhetorical presidency in which the public remains non-participative and unenlightened.<sup>44</sup> The greatest problem with presidential spectacle is its power to diminish the democratic process, leaving no space for another narrative to exist.

The personalization of the presidency in modern American life allows for the existence of presidential spectacles. Wilson’s version of an executive who “takes the imagination of the country” and represents the “sole voice in national affairs” was solidified in the modern era, with radio and TV bringing the voice of the president directly into the homes of the American public. While Hamilton desired a single, energetic executive, the unitary nature of the presidency also had the unintended effect

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<sup>43</sup> Miroff, *Presidents on Political Ground*, 13.

<sup>44</sup> Miroff, *Presidents on Political Ground*, 43.



of creating an intensely personalized conception of the executive office. As Miroff notes, “Almost anyone who pays at least minimal attention to the news will have an impression of the president, the best-known figure in all of American life.”<sup>45</sup> It would seem that a closer relationship between citizens and their leaders is a worthy goal, creating a truly democratic government. However, in “Myth of the Presidential Mandate,” Robert Dahl argues that due to the executive’s ceaseless cultivation of public opinion, a type of *pseudodemocratization* dominates the electorate, reducing a citizen’s capacity for civic deliberation.<sup>46</sup> Instead of meaningfully engaging the views of the public as Wilson had hoped, the president removes the diverse perspectives of the citizenry to convey a strong, appealing message to the entire electorate. Dahl argues that democracy should be a space which provides “ordinary people with opportunities to discover what public policies are best for themselves and for others.”<sup>47</sup> Yet in a system dominated by the president’s constant, consumable messages for public outreach, the “opportunity to discover” is lost.

Miroff’s theory of spectacle revolves around the “symbolic value” of the president’s public persona. The unitary nature of the executive office creates a mythical aura surrounding presidential politics, allowing a single individual to shine in the spotlight of public attention. Miroff argues, “What differentiates a spectacle from other kinds of symbolic events is the centrality of character and action,” creating a show where the president stars as the “spectacular character” on the national stage, the presidential

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<sup>45</sup> Miroff, *Presidents on Political Ground*, 18.

<sup>46</sup> Robert A. Dahl, “Myth of the Presidential Mandate,” *Political Science Quarterly* 105, no. 3 (1990): 370.

<sup>47</sup> Dahl, “Myth of the Presidential Mandate,” 371.

advisors fulfill supporting roles, and the American public watches as the enraptured audience.<sup>48</sup> Spectacles created by the White House hold such power over the electorate due to the intense personalization of the presidency:

The American public may not learn the details of policy formulation, but they know that Gerald Ford bumps his head on helicopter door frames, that Ronald Reagan likes jellybeans, and that Bill Clinton enjoys hanging out with Hollywood celebrities. In a spectacle, the president's character possesses intrinsic as well as symbolic value; it is to be appreciated for its own sake.<sup>49</sup>

Instead of an emphasis on the complexity of policy issues, spectacles provide the public with symbolic snapshots of the president's personal life: their guilty pleasures, personal foibles, and physical attributes are projected to the American public for mass consumption. A president's public persona is "appreciated for its own sake," thus creating a powerful tool to gain popular support and shape public perception. By using performative gestures to burnish a meticulously crafted personal image, the president turns "the enactment of leadership" into spectacle.

The power of spectacle is also tied to the overarching problem of mythic rhetoric replacing reality in American society. Wilson intended for the rhetorical presidency to simplify the political discourse in order to engage the public in discussions surrounding grand questions of principle. Yet, to elicit an emotional reaction from the public, the modern executive often oversimplifies the political debate, creating an environment where mythic rhetorical appeals dramatize, rather than explain, important policy issues.

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<sup>48</sup>Bruce Miroff, "The Presidential Spectacle," in *The Presidency and the Political System*, 10th ed. (SAGE, 2013), 232-234.

<sup>49</sup> Miroff, "Presidential Spectacle," 234.

In his book *Democracy Incorporated*, Sheldon S. Wolin defines myth as presenting “a narrative of exploits, not an argument or demonstration. It does not make the world intelligible, only dramatic.”<sup>50</sup> Ronald Reagan’s 1983 “Evil Empire” speech, in which he urges the American people to ignore proposals to halt the proliferation of nuclear weapons, is a strong example of a president using rhetoric to reach mythic heights:

I urge you to beware the temptation of pride—the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil.<sup>51</sup>

Myths tell stories with stark dichotomies. In his speech, Reagan sets up an epic struggle between “right and wrong,” and “good and evil,” creating a totalizing narrative in which every American has the duty to obliterate communism. Reagan’s rhetoric is not motivated by an interest in debating policy positions, and instead relies upon a dramatic and one-sided ideology. These rhetorical oversimplifications have consequences. Wolin warns that “when myth begins to govern decision-makers in a world where ambiguity and stubborn facts abound, the result is a disconnect from the actors and reality.”<sup>52</sup> This disconnect allows empty rhetoric to substitute for concrete policy, creating a single narrative with no room for facts and differing opinions within the electorate. Spectacle and myth-making thrive on grand symbolic gestures, and thus are often diametrically

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<sup>50</sup> Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>51</sup> “Evil Empire” Speech (March 8, 1983), Ronald Reagan.” Miller Center. Accessed May 2, 2018.

<sup>52</sup> Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated*, 14.

opposed to the substantive debate of policy. As Miroff emphasizes, “Spectacle production and policy production are fundamentally different: spectacle deploys gestures to burnish the identity of the president; policy production employs means to solve problems affecting others.”<sup>53</sup> Ronald Reagan mastered the art of spectacle by utilizing grandiose displays of power to exhibit a staunchly anti-communist stance, thus creating an administration built on empty ideological spectacle as opposed to concrete policy accomplishment.

Mythic rhetorical appeals promote a simple narrative to support a specific presidential image. Miroff writes that a president’s team strives to craft spectacles which “project attractive qualities that either resemble the featured attributes of the president or make up for the president’s perceived deficiencies.”<sup>54</sup> George W. Bush’s infamous “Mission Accomplished” banner on the *USS Abraham Lincoln* and Bill Clinton walking hand-in-hand with his family after giving his August 1998 speech regarding the Lewinsky affair, are two examples of spectacles used to control the public’s perception of presidential character. These events, both mediated by images, stand for each president’s desired personal attributes—the first, a display of military force showing a confident commander-in-chief, and the second, a reticent family man walking away from scandalous sexual impropriety. Both Bush and Clinton employed spectacles in an attempt to create meaning *for* the American public. The goal of these spectacles was not to debate the substance of a costly war overseas or workplace sexual harassment, but to use symbolic gestures in order to simplify important questions of governance. Miroff

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<sup>53</sup> Miroff, *Presidents on Political Ground*, 17.

<sup>54</sup> Miroff, “Presidential Spectacle,” 235.

laments that “gesture overshadows results in a presidential spectacle,” promoting dramatic images which thrive off of narrative simplicity as opposed to political nuance.<sup>55</sup> Under Miroff’s theory, spectacles are one-sided constructions which rely on passive spectators watching a carefully constructed performance—the audience is never permitted to redirect or participate within the action.

The Reagan administration’s invasion of Grenada is an “archetypal example” of empty performance overtaking accomplishment. As Miroff argues, the invasion’s importance “did not derive from the military, political, and economic implications of America’s actions, but from its value as a spectacle.”<sup>56</sup> In 1983, when a small group of militant Marxists came to power in Grenada, the Reagan administration emphasized the need to eliminate a “Soviet-Cuban” outpost near the US and to protect a handful of American medical students on the island. At the time, Grenada had a population of less than 100,000, a tiny economy built on exporting nutmeg, and a minuscule military; when US combat forces arrived, “they outnumbered the island’s defenders ten to one.”<sup>57</sup> Despite its limited threat to national security, Reagan raised the significance of Grenada to epic proportions. In his October 1983 “Address to Nation,” Reagan creates an image of a battle between good and evil: “Grenada, we were told, was a friendly island paradise for tourism. Well, it wasn’t. It was a Soviet-Cuban colony, being readied as a major military bastion to export terror and undermine democracy. We got there just in time.”<sup>58</sup> Throughout his speech, Reagan uses rhetoric to highlight the urgency involved behind

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<sup>55</sup> Miroff, “Presidential Spectacle,” 235.

<sup>56</sup> Miroff, *Presidents on Political Ground*, 26.

<sup>57</sup> Miroff, *Presidents on Political Ground*, 26.

<sup>58</sup> Ronald Reagan quoted in “Presidential Spectacle,” 240.

the invasion, solidifying himself as a decisive commander-in-chief. By battling against a “suitably evil enemy” for “purely moral” reasons, Reagan could be perceived as a confident, forceful leader willing to do anything to protect Americans from threats abroad.<sup>59</sup> Despite accomplishing little from a security standpoint, the Grenada invasion had a striking effect on public opinion, with Reagan’s approval ratings skyrocketing to 63 percent, his highest in two years.<sup>60</sup> Importantly, the Reagan administration banned the press from covering the invasion, thus preventing the circulation of less-than triumphant photos of fatalities and casualties by placing the spectacle firmly under the White House’s control. The one-sided curation of the Grenada invasion exhibits how spectacle can obscure reality, eliciting an emotional reaction from the American public and burnishing Reagan’s personal credentials, while remaining a political show devoid of all substance.

However, spectacles are not inescapable constructions. George W. Bush’s 2003 “Mission Accomplished” publicity stunt is a classic example of a failed spectacle. After landing a fighter jet on an aircraft carrier, Bush confidently strode across the deck in a green flight suit, helmet tucked under his arm. In front of crew members dressed in an array of cheery primary colors, he famously proclaimed that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended.”<sup>61</sup> The patriotic “Mission Accomplished” banner, with bold text printed on a billowing image of the American flag, hung behind him as a marker of victory. Miroff argues that within spectacles, the facts must remain to “nurture the gestures [...] and [rise] above contradictory or disconfirming details.” While Bush’s

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<sup>59</sup> Miroff, *Presidents on Political Ground*, 27.

<sup>60</sup> Miroff, *Presidents on Political Ground*, 28.

<sup>61</sup> Jarrett Murphy AP May 1, 2003, “Text Of Bush Speech,” accessed May 1, 2018.

“spectacle specialists” attempted to create an “image [of] a warrior president,” the continuation of the war eventually discredited his performance, turning the banner into a symbol of false promises.<sup>62</sup> Far from burnishing his public persona, Bush’s display of military might led to a series of counterspectacles which questioned the truthfulness of his public image. The media, particularly satirical television programs such as *The Daily Show*, worked to reverse the spectacle by capturing the disconnect between Bush’s assurances of victory and the brutal realities of the Iraq war. In a May 2004 episode, host Jon Stewart mocked Bush’s statement that the speech aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln* was not a celebration of the end of combat operations in Iraq, but rather an observance of “a mission, the killing of Saddam Hussein.” Stewart then displayed a graphic which changed the iconic banner to “A Mission Accomplished,” thus using the president’s own spectacular imagery to ridicule his administration’s policies.<sup>63</sup> The “Mission Accomplished” fiasco highlights forms of resistance against spectacle which allow the mass media and the American public to step out of their role as spectators and challenge the president’s narrative.

Yet presidential spectacle is more than a strategy of deception. Similar to Woodrow Wilson’s contention that the political discourse must be simplified for the “minds of the masses,” Miroff asserts that “the symbols and gestures of spectacles are what the media and the public generally expect and more easily understand.”<sup>64</sup> He points to television as the perfect vehicle for spectacular displays of leadership because

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<sup>62</sup> Miroff, “Presidential Spectacle,” 234 and 247.

<sup>63</sup> “365 Days Later - The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (Video Clip) | Comedy Central,” accessed May 1, 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Miroff, “Presidential Spectacle,” 233.

it “favor[s] the visual and the dramatic” and “promotes stories with simple plot-lines over complex analyses of causes and consequences.” Importantly, the very medium the American public watches is itself spectacular, creating a climate where news items are reductive, eye-catching, and uncomplicated (qualities which are further magnified by social media). During Barack Obama’s first term, he focused on complex issues such as healthcare. This serious, policy-minded approach changed his public persona from the charismatic leader seen on the campaign trail to an aloof and “professorial” bureaucrat who “cut against the requirements of spectacle.”<sup>65</sup> Miroff contends that Obama’s disinterest in crafting simple, consumable messages for the public allowed space for groups such as the Tea Party to fill “the vacuum of narrative simplicity” with their own spectacular claims. Spectacle is thus a structural feature of the contemporary presidency,” acting as an important tool of governance to communicate a specific stance or ideology for mass consumption.<sup>66</sup>

Ultimately, spectacles draw power from the centrality of the presidency in modern American life. The president is the “embodiment of government”— a single figure who carries the hopes and desires of the entire American electorate. In order to craft a persona which fulfills the public’s high expectations, the president magnifies his/her desired personal attributes through spectacle:

What matters is that he or she is presented as having these qualities in magnitudes far beyond what ordinary citizens can imagine themselves to possess.

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<sup>65</sup> Miroff, “Presidential Spectacle,” 252.

<sup>66</sup> Miroff, “Presidential Spectacle,” 255.



The president must appear confident and masterful before spectators whose very position as onlookers denies them the possibility of mastery.<sup>67</sup>

This passage points to Miroff's main issue with spectacle: it disrupts the participatory nature of the democratic process by encouraging the passivity of ordinary citizens. The conception of the president as a kind of celebrity figurehead renders the American people spectators to an empty symbolic performance—they are “denie[d] the possibility of mastery because of their “very position as onlookers.” While unintended by the Founders, placing executive power in the hands of a single individual created the opportunity for an intensely personalized conception of the presidency to emerge. Miroff quotes French situationist philosopher Guy Debord to describe the president as a “spectacular representation of a human being.”<sup>68</sup> Instead of an ordinary citizen fulfilling a political service, the president utilizes dramatization to appear superhuman in comparison to the general public. The grand, symbolic gestures of the presidency overtake the nuanced and reflective debates of policy, leaving civic deliberation in the shadow of political showmanship.

Miroff's theory revolves around presidents creating spectacles on occasion to symbolize a specific stance or ideology. President Donald Trump, however, presents a challenge to Miroff's conception of presidential spectacle by turning every mundane action of the executive office, from the selection of the Federal Reserve chairman to a routine phone call with a grieving widow, into a form of sensationalized performance. Unlike the controlled curation of Reagan's event-based spectacles, Trump's spectacular

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<sup>67</sup> Miroff, “Presidential Spectacle,” 234.

<sup>68</sup> Miroff, “Presidential Spectacle,” 234.

appeals lack a sense of purposeful construction. Miroff argues that while the president remains the “star performer” of a spectacle, they have help from “a team” of advisors and aides to create and carry out the performance.<sup>69</sup> In contrast, the success of Trump’s spectacles stem from both the unpredictability and personal quality of their creation—they give the impression that no other actor controls the president’s voice. Trump is a one-man show who succeeds in capturing the attention of both his supporters and critics through late-night twitter battles and shocking speeches. His background as a celebrity and former reality TV star creates a type of executive showmanship unlike anything the American government has ever experienced, leaving the public in a perpetual state of suspense. Trump’s unique use of social media to cultivate a flurry of spectacles renders the American people unable to focus on a single political issue or scandal, erasing space for civic deliberation from the public sphere. The Trump administration is built upon spectacle, and requires a deeper exploration to examine the way these spectacular techniques transform rational political discourse in the American electorate.

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<sup>69</sup> Miroff, *Presidents on Political Ground*, 15.

## Chapter 2

President Donald Trump is the product of the intense public opinion upon which the second constitutional presidency thrives. He panders to fear, uses sweeping rhetorical statements, and espouses a vision of greatness of which only he is capable of creating. Trump is the Founders' worst fear because of his blatant demagoguery, and Wilson's worst fear because of the way he has effectively lowered the political discourse in America. Alexander Hamilton argued that representatives in a republic must "withstand the temporary delusion" of popular opinion to have the space for "more cool and sedate reflection." This space for deliberation is in danger of disappearing within American politics, where passionate rhetoric, outrageous tweets, and farcical displays of power overwhelm the political discourse. The spectacle of Donald Trump requires a deeper theoretical exploration to investigate the sensationalized, popular appeals which now envelop the American government, altering the democratic process itself.

### Miroff versus Debord

Bruce Miroff's theory of spectacle provides a crucial window into the modern presidency's spectacular roots. Yet, in order to better understand why the American public possesses such an intense desire to consume spectacle, Miroff's thinking requires a lens which moves beyond the political sphere. In his 1967 work *La Société du Spectacle*, Guy Debord provides a more comprehensive theory by examining the wider social practices of spectacle in the context of modern capitalism. Debord was a founding member of a French movement of the 1960s known as Situationist International, a

group of revolutionary, anti-authoritarian Marxist thinkers concerned with modern capitalism's influence upon an individual's capacity to search for a sense of selfhood. While Marx focused on the alienation within an individual's working life, he assumed that the leisure time workers received after a hard day on the job was their own. The situationists, however, argued that modern capitalism's reach stretched beyond the workplace, where images facilitated by the media and relentless advertisements from the corporate world alienated workers from having the power to define themselves even within their personal lives. As Greil Marcus notes in "The Long Walk of the Situationist International," "The situationists argued that the alienation which in the nineteenth century was rooted in production had, in the twentieth century, become rooted in consumption."<sup>70</sup> In *La Société du Spectacle*, Debord argues that the consumption of spectacle dominates all aspects of social life—culture, entertainment, and leisure—leaving little space to escape from the incessant pounding of spectacular images. Beyond Karl Marx's conception of commodities which alienate the worker within labor and production, spectacle functions through images to alienate the individual from independent self-discovery. For the situationists, the greatest evil of modern capitalism was the way it pushed the general public to find identity through consumption as opposed to reflection.

Instead of a constructed event used on occasion to symbolize a stance or ideology, Debord envisions spectacle as a fluid and all-consuming facet of capitalist society. The opening lines of *La Société du Spectacle* consciously mimic the first sentence of *Das Kapital*, where Karl Marx argues, "The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist

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<sup>70</sup> Greil Marcus, "The Long Walk of the Situationist International," in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), 3.

mode of production prevails, presents itself as ‘an immense accumulation of commodities.’”<sup>71</sup> Rather than an “accumulation of commodities,” Debord envisions the world as a vast accumulation of spectacles:

*Toute la vie des sociétés dans lesquelles règnent les conditions modernes de production s’annonce comme une immense accumulation de spectacles. Tout ce qui était directement vécu s’est éloigné dans une représentation.*<sup>72</sup>

The entire life of societies in which the modern conditions of production reign is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. All that was directly lived has drifted away into a representation.<sup>73</sup>

Debord describes spectacles as distortions of real life. His use of the verb “*éloigner*,” meaning to “drift/move away from” or “draw apart,” evokes the way spectacles distance all that is “directly lived” from reality. Unlike Miroff’s depiction of spectacles as constructed events which require at least a slight basis in fact to function, Debord views spectacles as an accumulation of images based solely on representation; a factual foundation is unneeded, and even harmful, to a spectacle’s success.<sup>74</sup> Under Debord’s theory, a spectacle is not an occasional political tool, but rather an insidious feature of capitalist society which warps the fabric of daily life into a twisted unreality where truth ceases to exist.

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<sup>71</sup> Karl Marx and Serge L. Levitsky, *Das Kapital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Gateway ed, The Skeptical Reader Series (Washington, D.C.: New York: Regnery Pub.; Distributed to the trade by Perseus Distribution, 2009), 1.

<sup>72</sup> Guy Debord, *La Société Du Spectacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008),15. Emphasis original to the text.

<sup>73</sup> Translations are my own

<sup>74</sup> This sentence exemplifies the perfect use of the semi-colon

Debord never provides a specific definition of spectacle in *La Société du Spectacle*— a purposeful decision which highlights the spectacle’s omnipresence in modern life and allows his work to remain prescient 50 years since its publication. While Debord argues that the mass media is spectacle’s “most glaring and superficial manifestation,”<sup>75</sup> he asserts that spectacle also has a broader reach, where it is “not a collection of images, but an entire social relation among people, mediated by images.”<sup>76</sup> Debord views spectacle not only as an accumulation of advertisements and images, but also an extensive power within capitalist societies to control both the individual’s ability to create identity and also their capacity to envision themselves in relation to others. In *La Société du Spectacle*, Debord provides a more specific definition of spectacle when he splits it into two types: *le spectaculaire concentré* (concentrated) et *le spectaculaire diffus* (diffuse). The concentrated spectacle is found in secretive totalitarian governments, where the citizenry is offered a restricted vision of selfhood. Debord gives Maoist China and Stalinist Russia as examples of the concentrated spectacle, where threats of brutality and violence hang over the citizenry, narrowing their everyday lives to fit within the requirements of a specific regime. In contrast, the diffuse spectacle is exemplified by wealthy democracies where citizens are free to make decisions, yet only within the framework of capitalist consumption. Debord argues that the United States is a shining example of the diffuse spectacle. Despite the apparent freedom of choice, he asserts that individuals remain just as trapped as those in the concentrated spectacle because they are boxed into a capitalistic ideology which offers a circumscribed and

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<sup>75</sup> “*sa manifestation superficielle et la plus écrasante*” Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 26.

<sup>76</sup> “*n’est pas un ensemble d’images, mais un rapport social entre des personnes, médiatisé par des images*” Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 16.

limited identity. The diffuse spectacle also breeds dissatisfaction because consumers become addicted to the images on the screen, believing that if they buy certain products or assume a certain look, they will eventually reach full contentment and gain a more confident sense of self. Debord most feared the diffuse spectacle's ability to embed itself into the fabric of daily life, creating a repressive cycle of consumption in the disguise of liberation.

In his later 1988 work *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle*, Debord introduces a new form of spectacle, *le spectaculaire intégré* (integrated), a combination of both concentrated and diffuse spectacles. The integrated spectacle fuses the secret governmental power of the concentrated spectacle with the unbridled capitalist ideology of the diffuse spectacle. Debord views integrated spectacle as the most powerful and most common type of spectacle, where it moves to an even grander scale to “permeate all of reality.”<sup>77</sup> He argues that societies defined by the integrated spectacle share five main features: “Incessant technological renewal; the fusion of state and economy; generalized secrecy; unanswerable lies; an eternal present.”<sup>78</sup> These tactics strive to alter reality, where the growth of government surveillance and the consumption of mass media support a perpetual spectacular state. Debord argues that this form of government erases public opinion, creating a state which wishes to be “judged by its enemies rather than its results.”<sup>79</sup> He uses terrorism as an example of this phenomenon,

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<sup>77</sup> “s’est mélangé à toute réalité” Guy Debord, *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle*: 1988, Collection Folio 2905 (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), section 4.

<sup>78</sup> “le renouvellement technologique incessant; la fusion économique-étatique ; le secret généralisé ; le faux sans réplique; un présent perpétuel.” Debord, *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle*, section 4.

<sup>79</sup> “Elle veut, en effet, être jugée sur ses ennemis plutôt que sur ses résultats” Debord, *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle*, section 9.

arguing, “Spectator populations certainly cannot know everything about terrorism, but they always know enough to be convinced that, compared with terrorism, everything else will appear rather acceptable to them, in any case more rational and more democratic.”<sup>80</sup> The integrated spectacle never leaves room for the thoughts of the populace, creating an illogic government hidden under the guise of national security.

In contrast to Miroff’s insistence that spectacles must have a foundation in actual facts and events, Debord argues that integrated spectacles gain their strength precisely from the negation of truth through “unanswerable lies”:

*Le mouvement de la démonstration spectaculaire se prouve simplement en marchant en rond : en revenant, en se répétant, en continuant d’affirmer sur l’unique terrain où réside désormais ce qui peut s’affirmer publiquement, et se faire croire, puisque c’est de cela seulement que tout le monde sera témoin. L’autorité spectaculaire peut également nier n’importe quoi, une fois, trois fois, et dire qu’elle n’en parlera plus, et parler d’autre chose; sachant bien qu’elle ne risque plus aucune autre riposte sur son propre terrain, ni sur un autre.*<sup>81</sup>

The movement of the spectacular demonstration proves itself simply by walking in circles; returning, repeating itself, and continuing to affirm on the unique terrain where anything can be publicly affirmed, believed, because it is the only thing to which everyone bears witness. Spectacular authority can also deny anything, once, three times, and say that it will no longer talk about it, and change the subject; knowing full well that it is no longer in danger of any riposte on its own land or on another.

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<sup>80</sup> “Les populations spectatrices ne peuvent certes pas tout savoir du terrorisme, mais elles peuvent toujours en savoir assez pour être persuadées que, par rapport à ce terrorisme, tout le reste devra leur sembler plutôt acceptable, en tout cas plus rationnel et plus démocratique.” Debord, *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle*, section 9.

<sup>81</sup> Debord, *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle*, section 7.



Debord asserts that the “unanswerable lies” found within integrated spectacles render any meaningful discussion of important issues pointless by creating circular arguments which uphold spectacle’s disassociation from reality. Spectacular power thrives upon irrationality, and by “deny[ing] anything” and “chang[ing] the subject,” it strengthens its hold over the public sphere. The “unanswerable lies” within integrated spectacles prevent individuals from asking questions or forming a different narrative to challenge both their government and capitalist society because spectacle never provides a consistent and coherent argument to either refute or interrogate.

The power of integrated spectacle also relies on the eternal present—an interruption of the function of time within modern society. Debord states:

*La construction d’un présent où la mode elle-même, de l’habillement aux chanteurs, s’est immobilisée, qui veut oublier le passé et qui ne donne plus l’impression de croire à un avenir, est obtenue par l’incessant passage circulaire de l’information, revenant à tout instant sur une liste très succincte des mêmes vécues, annoncées passionnément comme d’importantes nouvelles ; alors que ne passent que rarement, et par brèves saccades, les nouvelles véritablement importantes, sur ce qui change effectivement. Elles concernent toujours la condamnation que ce monde semble avoir prononcée contre son existence, les étapes de son auto-destruction programmée.*

The construction of a present where fashion itself, from clothes to singers, has come to a standstill, which wants to forget the past and no longer gives the impression of believing in a future, is achieved by the incessant circularity of information, always returning to the same brief list of trivialities, passionately announced as important news; while only rarely, by fits and starts, does the news of what is genuinely important, about what actually

changes, surface. It always concerns this world's apparent condemnation of its own existence, the stages of its programmed self-destruction"<sup>82</sup>

The eternal present is the "world's apparent condemnation of its own existence"—there is neither a future nor a past, only the crushing presence of the spectacular now. In this suspended state of non-temporality, Debord argues that "news of what is genuinely important, about what actually changes" comes rarely, rendering the information provided to the general masses disjointed, cyclical, and most of all, trivial. The spectacular media discourse surrounding the news contributes to the eternal present, where attention flits in "fits and starts" from one event to another. Debord argues, "When the spectacle stops talking about something for three days, it is as if it did not exist. For it has gone on to talk about something else, and it is that which consequently, in short, exists."<sup>83</sup> Instead of constructing meaning out of lived events, spectacle returns to "the same short list of trivialities," creating a dynamic where "breaking" news is simultaneously hyper-important, yet also inconsequential. For Debord, the eternal present both negates the past and diminishes an individual's capacity to envision a different future. In a capitalist world where the integrated spectacle alters information into incoherent and non-temporal fragments, the path towards independent self-discovery warps into a circuitous route defined by the power of consumption.

The integrated spectacle also relies on the mass passivity of the general public. Debord critiques the estrangement between the spectator and lived experience, where

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<sup>82</sup> Debord, *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle*, section 5.

<sup>83</sup> "Ce dont le spectacle peut cesser de parler pendant trois jours est comme ce qui n'existe pas. Car il parle alors de quelque chose d'autre, et c'est donc cela qui, dès lors, en somme, existe." Debord, *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle*, section 7.

an individual's "gestures are no longer his own, but of another who represents them to him."<sup>84</sup> Instead of making conscious choices and contemplating questions of selfhood, spectacle creates an environment where individuals passively consume identities circumscribed by modern capitalist culture:

*Le spectacle se présente comme une énorme positivité indiscutable et inaccessible. Il ne dit rien de plus que <<ce qui apparaît est bon, ce qui est bon apparaît.>> L'attitude qu'il exige par principe est cette acceptation passive qu'il a déjà en fait obtenue par sa manière d'apparaître sans république, par son monopole de l'apparence.<sup>85</sup>*

The spectacle presents itself as an enormous, indisputable, and inaccessible asset. It says nothing more than "what appears is good; what is good appears." The attitude it inherently demands is passive acceptance as a matter of principle, which it has already effectively obtained by this manner of appearing without debate, by its monopoly of appearance.

Debord views spectacle as a force which demands "passive acceptance as a matter of principle." The language "indisputable" and "inaccessible" highlights his depiction of spectacle as an inescapable quality which appears to be an essential part of lived experience. The question of "what appears is good, what is good appears" creates a dialogue with no room for an opposing narrative, further preventing an individual from consciously making choices about their identity. While Miroff also highlights the troubling way spectacle relegates the general public to passive acceptance, he asserts that if an individual is aware that he/she is watching a spectacle, they then step outside

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<sup>84</sup> "par rapport à l'homme agissant apparaît en ce que ses propres gestes ne sont plus à lui, mais un autre qui les lui représente" Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 30.

<sup>85</sup> Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 20.

the spectacle's boundaries to challenge the existing narrative. In contrast to Miroff's limited conception, Debord views the lines between spectacle and reality as virtually impossible to differentiate, whereby the individual becomes entranced in a show he/she may not even be conscious of watching. He argues spectacle is a larger force which possesses a "monopoly of appearance," making it difficult to move beyond the unceasing performance of capitalist culture. In Debord's view, the omnipresence of spectacle normalizes and hides its influence, making it difficult for individuals resist within an environment in which they see primarily through spectacle's twisted lens.

Debord also condemned the role of celebrity culture as a clear disruption of autonomous identity creation. In *La Société Du Spectacle*, he describes *les vedettes*, or stars, as spectacular representations of human beings who are commodities in themselves:

*En concentrant en elle l'image d'un rôle possible, la vedette, la représentation spectaculaire de l'homme vivant, concentre donc cette banalité. La condition de vedette est la spécialisation du vécu apparent, l'objet de l'identification à la vie apparente sans profondeur, qui doit compenser l'émiettement des spécialisations productives effectivement vécues. Les vedettes existent pour figurer des types variés de styles de vie et de styles de compréhension de la société, libres de s'exercer globalement. [...] Là c'est le pouvoir gouvernemental qui se personnalise en pseudo-vedette; ici c'est la vedette de la consommation qui se fait plébisciter en tant que pseudo-pouvoir sur le vécu. Mais, de même que ces activités de la vedette ne sont pas réellement globales, elles ne sont pas variées.*<sup>86</sup>

By crystalizing in the image of a possible role, the star, the spectacular representation of a living human being, embodies this banality. The

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<sup>86</sup> Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 55.

condition of the star is the specialization of *apparent lived experience*, the object of identification to the apparent life without depth, who must compensate for the crumbling of productive specializations of actual lived experience. Stars exist to represent the varying lifestyles and political/ sociological viewpoints, free to be practiced globally. [...] There, it is the governmental power which finds its individuality in pseudo-stardom; here it is the star of consumption who may advertise as a pseudo-power over lived experience. But, just as the activities of the star are not really global, they are not really varied.

Debord criticizes the way celebrity culture pretends to offer real choices regarding identity, when in reality, it limits and circumscribes selfhood to fit within a capitalist framework. Although their spectacular personas seem to represent an array lifestyles and viewpoints, stars merely give the appearance of individuality while following a strict blueprint of identity tied to a culture of consumption— the options they present are “not really global” and “not really varied.” Debord argues that the wealth and glamour of celebrity culture holds “pseudo-power” over the experience of ordinary people by promoting superficial lives “without depth,” which thrive on appearance over substance. Through saturating the world with advertisements and glamorous images devoid of reality, stars alter how an individual examines their own identity. Instead of an individual creating their own goals, celebrities provide aspirations and dreams for the masses, thus reducing the capacity for members of capitalist societies to control their own “lived experience.” Debord also critiques the way celebrity culture promotes fame over expertise, “where ‘media status’ has acquired infinitely more importance than the

value of anything one might actually be capable of doing.”<sup>87</sup> Media status and the aura of fame thus become more important than qualifications rooted in reality. Under Debord’s theory, stars represent the empty essence of a spectacular society, blinding the populace with the harsh glow of celebrity instead of illuminating the problems of daily life.

In his earlier work *La Société du Spectacle*, Debord offers methods of resistance against spectacle to remove the individual from a state of passivity. He describes *détournement*, translated to diversion, hijacking, or misappropriation, a technique used by Situationist International to turn capitalist culture against itself. When Debord produced a film based on his seminal work, he repurposed advertisements and clips of the news to ridicule a system of consumption. However, in his later work Debord became disillusioned with the possibility of resisting spectacle. His *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle* offers a bleak diagnosis of capitalist society with few prescriptive methods for improvement. Spectacle, he argued, had taken over all aspects of daily life:

*Car il n'existe plus d'agora, de communauté générale ; ni même de communautés restreintes à des corps intermédiaires ou à des institutions autonomes, à des salons ou des cafés, aux travailleurs d'une seule entreprise ; nulle place où le débat sur les vérités qui concernent ceux qui sont là puisse s'affranchir durablement de l'écrasante présence du discours médiatique [...]*<sup>88</sup>

For there is no longer an agora, a general community; or even communities restricted to intermediary bodies or to autonomous institutions, to salons or cafes, to workers of a single company; no place left where the debate on the truths

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<sup>87</sup> “Là où la possession d’un « statut médiatique » a pris une importance infiniment plus grande que la valeur de ce que l’on a été capable de faire réellement” Debord, *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle*, section 5.

<sup>88</sup> Debord, *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle*, section 7.

which concern them can be lastingly liberated from the crushing presence of the media discourse [...]

In *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle*, Debord describes spectacle's monopolization of the public sphere as the negation of all forms of meaningful deliberation—individuals in modern capitalist societies inhabit spaces where “debates on the truths which concern them” can no longer take place. Without escape from “the crushing presence of media discourse” Debord feared a society devoid of personal freedom and the ability to live and discuss the “realities” of day to day life. Unlike Miroff's belief that individuals can easily step outside of the spectacle, Debord understood spectacle as a constant and inescapable force embedded within modern capitalist society. When he took his own life in 1994, Debord died convinced that spectacle had triumphed.

### **Guy Debord and Donald Trump**

The Trump presidency fuses the concentrated spectacle of governmental power and the diffuse spectacle of capitalist consumption. In contrast to Miroff's limited conception, Trump follows Debord's fluid and perpetual vision of spectacle, in which his every action devolves into superficial performance. Trump's unending flurry of spectacles follow three crucial aspects of Debord's conception of the integrated spectacle, where an eternal present, unanswerable lies, and incessant technological renewal have altered the democratic process within the American electorate. Debord's insights regarding the consequences of stardom falsifying lived experience and circumscribing identity creation are also essential features of Donald Trump's spectacle.

In both *La Société du Spectacle* and *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle*, Debord's critiques of visual media and celebrity culture illuminate how a reality star with no prior experience ascended to the highest office of American government, moving from the domain of consumer culture and into the political realm.

The relentless self-promotion at the heart of reality television forms the basis of Trump's political success. Donald Trump's career as a reality TV star reflects Debord's concern for the way "media status" promotes a false sense of expertise over lived experience. In the pilot episode of NBC's *The Apprentice*, Trump lounges in the backseat of a gleaming limousine and proclaims to the viewer, "I've turned the name Trump into the highest quality brand." An image of Trump striding through crowds of adoring fans fills the screen as he professes his desire to counsel an ordinary individual to succeed in the business world: "As the master, I'm looking to pass my knowledge off to somebody else."<sup>89</sup> *The Apprentice* turns working for Donald Trump into a dream job, where contestants strive to please a brash billionaire to ascend to the top of the corporate ladder. As the contestants are introduced in the opening credits, the O'Jay's jubilant song "For the Love of Money" plays in the background (Money, Money, Monayyyyy!), while images of fancy cars, private jets, and hundred dollar bills flit across the screen. Trump creates aspirations for both the contestants and the viewers, equating success with profit in the business world: "But if you work hard, you can hit it big, and I mean really big."<sup>90</sup> *The Apprentice* promotes Trump as the key to this monetary success, creating the impression that he alone is able to move an ordinary individual to

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<sup>89</sup> "The Apprentice," Intro Season 1, Donald Trump, accessed May 1, 2018.

<sup>90</sup> "The Apprentice," Intro Season 1, Donald Trump.



spectacular heights.<sup>91</sup> In the superficial world of reality television, Trump embodies the ultimate symbol of wealth and brazen business acumen, transforming him into a “spectacular representation of a living human being.”<sup>92</sup> Ultimately, the prize of *The Apprentice* is the chance to work for and develop the qualities of an “expert” celebrity, encouraging the contestants and the viewers to find themselves through Trump’s glow of stardom. This relationship between celebrity and identity echoes Debord’s fear that individuals in capitalist societies consume a circumscribed sense of self, thus allowing spectacular figures to dominate the process of independent self-discovery.

While Debord describes celebrity’s influence on identity creation in the context of capitalist culture, he does not fully examine the way this same process functions in the political realm. During the 2016 presidential election, Trump built his campaign on a cult of personality, relying on his persona alone to form his base of devoted followers. Trump’s policy positions on abortion, immigration, and healthcare changed almost daily, yet the genuine personal quality of his campaign remained the same—crude, outspoken, and uncontrollable. The Federal Election Commission filings from June 2015 to September 2016 reported that the Trump campaign spent over 3.2 million dollars on hats alone, and altogether 15.1 million dollars on “collateral,” or items including signs and clothing—far more money than was spent on polling, field

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<sup>91</sup>As Emily Nussbaum notes, “[*The Apprentice*] departs radically from reality: no one criticizes the boss. Instead, [Trump] receives endless praise, even behind his back. All scandal and debt are erased; Trump’s combative streak is alchemized into Daddy’s tough love.” Emily Nussbaum, “The TV That Created Donald Trump,” *The New Yorker*, accessed May 2, 2018.

<sup>92</sup> “*la spectaculaire representation de l’homme vivant*” Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 55.

consulting, and voter data collection.<sup>93</sup> The Trump campaign's unusual spending strategy reflects a focus on Trump's personal brand over attention to voters' views on policy issues. Trump did not gain a loyal following from a specific political party (he has vacillated between Republican, Democrat, and Independent), but rather from his own spectacular persona. The bright red "Make America Great Again" hats worn by Trump's most ardent supporters are overt symbols of identification tied to Trump himself, not a specific political platform. Trump defeated the entire Republican party through an emphasis on independent star power. Similar to the way he symbolized the key to monetary success on *The Apprentice*, on the campaign trail Trump convinced a portion of the electorate that he alone represented a solution to complicated policy issues through the force of his persona. The campaign's focus on Trump-themed merchandise combined capitalist consumption with demagoguery, creating a form of political identity attached to a single, spectacular figure.

Yet, the Trump spectacle does not solely captivate his core base of supporters. While Trump's opponents and detractors do not find identity in the same way through his celebrity, their outrage surrounding his every action still pulls them into his perpetual show. On the 2016 campaign trail, Trump used the same techniques from his experience in tabloids and reality television to create a media circus where his campaign always took center stage—he kept all citizens, regardless of political affiliation, in a state of suspense, waiting for his next shocking comment. In March of 2016, *The New York Times* reported that Trump received the most "earned media," or unpaid coverage, out of all other candidates of both parties. During the primary, Trump elicited "close to \$2

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<sup>93</sup> Philip Bump, "Donald Trump's Campaign Has Spent More on Hats than on Polling," *The Washington Post*, October 25, 2016.

billion worth of media attention, about twice the all-in price of the most expensive presidential campaigns in history.”<sup>94</sup> Trump’s antics are both entertaining and scandalous, and during the campaign season the mass media profited from the general public’s interest in his shocking antics. The majority of this coverage was negative, but the constant media attention invoked passion over contemplation, contributing to Trump’s all-consuming spectacle. While escaping the power of spectacle is not as impossible as Debord posits, Trump’s constant performance captures its critics, making it difficult to facilitate acts of resistance which step outside the impulsive world of capitalist consumption.

Trump’s ability to hold public attention has entrapped the American electorate in a shallow political discourse, cementing a Debordian vision of an “eternal present” where “unanswerable lies” flourish. The 24 hour news cycle describes each of Trump’s scandals as “breaking,” raising his every action to simultaneous levels of hyper importance and extreme triviality. To keep pace with the deluge of information, the mass media discusses another topic, moving on, as Debord warned, as if the first event “did not exist.”<sup>95</sup> During the first year of his presidency, the sheer accumulation of spectacles has prevented meaningful deliberation on a single issue because all forms of discussion are cancelled by the next shocking event. This non-temporal environment also allows Debord’s conception of “unanswerable lies” to function. Trump presents no coherent platform of future policy goals nor a consistent past record of political beliefs, leaving his administration in an unintelligible present where his positions on a wide

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<sup>94</sup> Nicholas Confessore and Karen Yourish, “\$2 Billion Worth of Free Media for Donald Trump,” *The New York Times*, January 19, 2018.

<sup>95</sup>Debord, *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle*, section 7.

variety of issues change almost daily. He facilitates an eternal present which interrupts the democratic process by eliminating coherent arguments that can be questioned, supported, or refuted. His stances on both domestic and foreign policy issues, from the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) to national security measures towards North Korea, are in constant flux, leaving lawmakers (even those from his own party) and constituents in a state of confusion.<sup>96</sup> Trump attracts supporters with his "tell it like it is" personality, when in reality his irrational spectacle overshadows policy debates. Instead of the rich political discussion required for strong governance, Trump alters the truth, causing American politics to revolve around his personal whims as opposed to concrete policy.

The Trump spectacle interrupts the process of democratic deliberation by distracting from the crucial issues beneath the scandalous exterior. Debord emphasizes how the eternal present makes it difficult to distinguish what holds importance in the "list of trivialities" repeated by the government and the mass media. In October of 2017, a routine condolence call to Myeshia Johnson, a widow of a soldier killed in Niger, attracted controversy. Ms. Johnson claimed that Trump seemed unable to remember her husband's name, causing Trump to tweet, "I had a very respectful conversation with the widow of Sgt. La David Johnson, and spoke his name from the beginning, without hesitation!"<sup>97</sup> The scandal morphed into a he said/she said debate which captivated media attention and sparked condemnation towards Trump from both parties. While

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<sup>96</sup> "White House Says Trump Supports Budget Deal, CHIP Funding," *PBS NewsHour*, January 18, 2018.

<sup>97</sup> Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump). "I had a very respectful conversation with the widow of Sgt. La David Johnson, and spoke his name from the beginning, without hesitation!" 23 October 2017, 5:03 EST. Tweet.

news outlets debated Trump's insensitive response, the reasons behind Sgt. Johnson's death remained largely undiscussed. The deaths of American soldiers should have raised more questions as to why 800 US troops were stationed in Niger, along with hundreds of other military personnel in other bases across Africa.<sup>98</sup> Sgt. Johnson was killed in an ambush along with three other US troops. The group was riding in unarmed vehicles, rendering them unprepared to mount a defense during the 30 minute assault. At the time of the attack, no National Security Council Senior Director for Africa had been approved and the Africa team at the State Department was staffed by inexperienced junior members. Further, in November of 2017, less than a month after Trump's disastrous phone call, the US spent a hundred million dollars on a massive drone base near Niger's capital.<sup>99</sup> These controversial national security decisions received little press coverage—*The New York Times* published eleven articles and opinion pieces regarding Trump's phone call as opposed to a mere three articles on the situation in Niger. The widow controversy exhibits the way Trump drives the media cycle, creating a political discourse which focuses on his actions at the expense of larger issues. When Trump shines in the spotlight of public attention, the rest of the federal government, from Congress to the inner-workings of the executive branch, remains backstage. Debord argues that an eternal present functions primarily through capitalist culture with an unceasing emphasis on image and consumption, yet the eternal present Trump facilitates rests more the specific institution of the presidency, where his position as the figurehead of the United States allows him to overshadow all of American government.

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<sup>98</sup> Siobhan O'Grady, "What the Hell Happened in Niger?" *The Atlantic*, October 20, 2017.

<sup>99</sup> Emma Farge, "U.S. Building \$100 Million Drone Base in Central Niger," *Reuters*, September 30, 2016.

Trump's ability to dominate the public discourse is further aided by the "incessant technological renewal," which can grow spectacle to a larger scale. Debord theorizes that image-heavy media technologies, such as television are the main purveyors of the integrated spectacle. However, while Trump has utilized traditional and curated forms of spectacle, from a televised meeting of his cabinet secretaries individually praising his genius<sup>100</sup> to photo-ops with large stacks of file folders,<sup>101</sup> his tool for spectacle creation most of takes the form of tweets, fusing rhetoric and image. His social media use also functions as a direct line of communication between the executive and the populace. Instead of Woodrow Wilson's vision of the president as a "leader-interpreter" who simplifies the political narrative to elevate the public discourse to questions of principle, Trump's social media tactics form a twisted version of the rhetorical presidency which reduces all political discussion to spectacular 140-280 character fragments. In a July 2017 tweet he proclaimed, "My use of social media is not Presidential - it's MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL. Make America Great Again!"<sup>102</sup> Far from clarifying issues for the general public, Trump's "modern day" form of communication transforms complex issues of policy into a series of incoherent all-caps statements and exclamation points. Trump's spectacular tweets are far removed from the carefully curated presidential spectacles of Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush, but still fulfill the same role of interrupting a citizen's capacity to reflect as opposed to

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<sup>100</sup>Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Trump's Cabinet, With a Prod, Extols the 'Blessing' of Serving Him," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2018, sec. U.S.

<sup>101</sup> "Trump Barred Reporters from Examining Stacks of Folders at Press Conference," *The Hill*, January 11, 2017.

<sup>102</sup> Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump). "My use of social media is not Presidential - it's MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL. Make America Great Again!" 01 July 2017, 15:41 EST. Tweet.

merely react to political issues. Twitter is a new technological platform built upon impulsivity, which stands in contrast to the contemplative environment needed for democratic deliberation to function.

Trump's social media use also contributes to the intense personalization of the presidency. After midnight on May 31st, 2017, Trump tweeted, "Despite the constant negative press covfefe."<sup>103</sup> His tweet remained on Twitter long enough to send social media and talk shows abuzz, speculating about whether the president was half-asleep, his general mood, and, most of all, the "mysterious" word's meaning. Hours later, Trump, clearly reveling in the spectacle he had created, tweeted, "Who can figure out the true meaning of "covfefe" ??? Enjoy!"<sup>104</sup> When asked about the word's meaning in an official press conference later that day, Press Secretary Sean Spicer stated, "The president and a small group of people know exactly what he meant,"<sup>105</sup> provoking even further speculation and ridicule. On the surface, the attention surrounding the word "covfefe" appears as a moment of levity, but the response Trump's typo elicited also points to the disturbing relationship between the modern presidency and the American people. His spectacular platform is amplified by presidential celebrity, creating a climate where something as small as a typo reaches a state of hyper-importance. While seemingly harmless, "covfefe's" brief domination of the public discourse exposes how the American electorate's attention cycles around the actions of one man. Trump's

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<sup>103</sup> Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump). "Despite the constant negative press covfefe!" 31 May 2017, 0:06 EST. Tweet.

<sup>104</sup> Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump). "Who can figure out the true meaning of "covfefe" ??? Enjoy!" 31 May 2017, 6:09 EST. Tweet.

<sup>105</sup> "Sean Spicer on Covfefe: Donald Trump Knew 'Exactly What He Meant,'" *USA Today*, May 31, 2017.

tweets move to the center of the political dialogue because of his position as a figurehead who embodies the entire American political system raises him to spectacular heights. Ultimately, the most powerful feature of Donald Trump's spectacle is the unitary nature of the modern American presidency.

While Debord presents a far more comprehensive theoretical lens than Miroff's limited scope, his conception of spectacle both fails to differentiate types of governmental power and offers few paths for resistance. Donald Trump is a reality TV star from the capitalist realm, but his spectacle relies on both the influence of capitalist culture and the mythic status of the president in American society. In *La Société du Spectacle* and *Commentaires sur la Société du Spectacle*, Debord reduces all of governmental power to "*l'état*" or "the state," creating an image of the government as a singular, totalitarian influence. Instead, Trump thrives on a specific type of state power—the inherently spectacular institution of the modern American presidency. Far from the Founder's original vision of a president independent from the general public, Trump is intrinsically tied to the roar of public opinion, attracting the attention of both his supporters and detractors. His election exposes fundamental problems with the intense symbolic value of a single figure within American government. Unlike Woodrow Wilson's vision of leader/interpreter who attempts to embody the desires of the entire electorate, Trump rejects the idea of unification, and instead directs appeals to a base of ardent supporters. He represents a warped conception of Wilson's rhetorical presidency, where his clickbait form of demagoguery fragments mass deliberation.

Yet, despite the immense power of the presidency in American life, meaningful forms of resistance to the Trump spectacle are not impossible. In contrast to Debord's



subliminal vision of integrated spectacle, in which individuals unconsciously consume the influences of capitalist culture, Trump represents a more overt form of spectacle, where his every action places him at the forefront of the public's consciousness. Debord died convinced that the crushing presence of spectacle had saturated the entire public sphere, disrupting meaningful forms of identity creation and self-reflection. In a society of passive consumers unable to see the boundaries of spectacle, he feared that all forms of resistance would collapse. However, the hyper-visibility of the Trump spectacle has the potential to spark more meaningful forms of resistance by making the American people aware of the deep problems with both a culture of consumption and the executive's primacy in American government. Instead of mass passivity, his undisguised spectacular appeals elicit intense responses from the general public. Impulsive reactions add to Trump's spectacle, but more reflective, nuanced approaches have the power to disrupt his perpetual show. As shown by both the Women's March and protests against Trump's travel ban, the public sphere still contains spaces where citizens facilitate creative and critical practices of civic deliberation to decenter the spectacular institution of the American presidency.

### Chapter 3

Spectacle encourages consumption as opposed to reflection. Instead of active participants discussing issues which affect their communities, citizens become unreflective spectators unable to participate in the democratic process. Beyond the Trump spectacle, challenging the immense power of the inherently spectacular office of the modern American presidency requires a reformulation of mass media and an investigation of the mythic and intensely personalized status of the president in American life. Yet, the true power to improve the democratic process rests with the citizens themselves. Before Debord became disillusioned with the possibility of resisting spectacle's influence, he supported *détournement*, a grass roots technique of reverting and appropriating forms of capitalist culture by turning advertisements and images against their original message. While Debord most often used *détournement* to challenge the profit-driven mass media, this technique can also hold power in the political realm. This deliberative practice requires both reflecting upon the original message it intends to disrupt, and creating a new meaning from the flaws it uncovers. To resist the Trump spectacle, along with the larger spectacle of the modern American presidency, the general public must facilitate creative and critical practices of civic deliberation through *détournement*, thus reclaiming the reflective capacities which spectacle undermines.

## Dismantling Myth

In order to decenter executive primacy, the mythic status of the modern presidency must be challenged. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes describes myth as a form of expression which acts as a “double system,” where its “point of departure is constituted by the arrival of a meaning.”<sup>106</sup> Similar to spectacle, myth creates meaning for the consumer—it signifies an idea while simultaneously imposing a constructed message. Barthes argues that myth is a form of “frozen speech,” wherein the moment it reaches the viewer, “it suspends itself, turns away and assumes the look of a generality: it stiffens, it makes itself look neutral and innocent.”<sup>107</sup> Similar to spectacle’s ability to embed itself into the fabric of daily life, the greatest issue with myth is the way it appears “neutral and innocent,” facilitating a natural rhetorical facade which makes it difficult for individuals to be aware of its constant presence. The status of the modern American presidency acts as a myth deeply embedded into the general public’s subconscious. As Bruce Miroff argues, the president is the “best-known figure in American life” whose power is heightened through the “symbolic value” of their public persona. Under a myth worshipful of the president’s public image, one person becomes a spectacular human being who transcends the lived experience of ordinary citizens. The importance of a “presidential” appearance or inspiring mythic rhetoric masks itself as a substantive aspect of the political narrative, while creating a superficial dialogue distanced from the reality of policy issues. While the mythic status of the modern

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<sup>106</sup> Roland Barthes and Annette Lavers, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 1993), 121.

<sup>107</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 124.

American presidency appears to occur naturally, it functions as a construction which sidelines meaningful forms of deliberation.

Yet, the overt quality of the Trump spectacle challenges the naturalization of the mythic conception of the presidency. In an exposé for *The New York Times*, reporter Charles Homans describes covering Trump's "victory tour" to commemorate his election, where during a rally in Pennsylvania, Trump mocked the revered conception of presidential character:

I'm very presidential!" Trump told us, with mock indignation. Then he stiffened in his suit and adopted a stentorian tone, like a fourth grader doing an impression of his school principal. "Laaaadies and gentlemen," he intoned, "thank you for being here tonight [...] "And then you go, 'God bless you, and God bless the United States of America, thank you very much.'" He turned and faced the V.I.P. guests in the riser behind him, and did a sort of rigid penguin walk.<sup>108</sup>

Homans describes Trump's behavior as an imitation of the typical qualities of presidential leadership, "It took a few more seconds for the spectacular strangeness of the moment to settle in: We were watching a sitting American president imitating an American president." Trump's parody of the mythic conception of a president's public persona emphasizes his unique rejection of traditional forms of presidential spectacle. In a society which craves a "presidential" leader who embodies a take-charge persona, an authentic personal character, and an authoritative physical appearance, Trump's imitation of these traits functions as a misappropriation of executive power. In *La Société du Spectacle*, Debord describes *détournement* as a "fluid language of anti-

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<sup>108</sup> Charles Homans, "The Post-Campaign Campaign of Donald Trump," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2018.

ideology” which “can confirm the previous kernel of truth it brings back into play.”<sup>109</sup> The “kernel of truth” Trump exposes is the hollowness of presidential spectacle. By hijacking of the imagery of presidential greatness, Trump forces the general public to be more aware of the way the presidency is framed in modern American life. The Trump spectacle thus acts as a unique form of *détournement* which twists the mythic status of the modern presidency against itself.

Donald Trump warps the president’s public persona to create a caricature of qualities of executive leadership. In contrast to the attractive public image cultivated by glamorous presidents of the past, from John F. Kennedy’s glowing smile to Reagan’s blue-eyed Hollywood charm, Trump’s outward appearance revolves around his distinctive combed-over hairstyle and orange-hewed spray tan from the world of reality television. His unique attributes function as an essential aspect of his personal brand, parodying the intense scrutiny a president receives regarding their physical appearance. Further, Trump’s “authenticity” is a hollow representation of reality. His positions on serious political issues are in a constant state of flux, unrooted from a basis in fact or policy. Instead of Reagan’s perceived mask of authenticity, Trump strips away mythic rhetoric’s disguise, exposing the emptiness underneath grand gestures and proclamations. During Trump’s first speech to a joint session of Congress, he publicly comforted a widow of a fallen soldier. News commentators and political analysts lauded his role as an “empathizer and chief,” arguing that this was the night Donald Trump

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<sup>109</sup> “*Le détournement est le langage fluide de l’anti-idéologie [...] qui peut confirmer l’ancien noyau de vérité qu’il ramène*” Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 199.

“became president.”<sup>110</sup> Only a few months later, Trump would be criticized for insulting another widow, revealing the emptiness behind his presidential showmanship. The obsession with a “presidential” image provides a superficial sense of security for the American public, where the symbolic value of an authentic and authoritative leader prevents citizens from investigating the massive amount of power vested in a single figure. The undisguised Trump spectacle must reveal to the American people the fundamental problems with a mythic conception of the presidency, potentially leading to larger debates which question the structure of the American government and the substantive qualities the executive office should exhibit.

Trump’s spectacle also reveals the politically gendered institution of the modern American presidency. Presidents often perform their masculinity, staging shows of strength which emphasize their status as an assured and stoic leader. Obama’s spectacle surrounding the killing of Osama bin-Laden, used in many ads during his re-election campaign, underlined a tough persona and his prowess as a risk taker, while Reagan’s invasion of Grenada upheld his status as a forceful leader stamping out dangerous threats abroad. Trump, however, strips away the gentlemanly sheen of these gendered performances to reveal the virulent masculinity beneath the surface. His long handshakes to foreign prime-ministers, tweets bragging about the US nuclear arsenal, and references to his ability to seduce and grope women point to a hyper-masculine conception of presidential power. Trump’s spectacle of masculinity hijacks the existing masculine conception of executive power to expose the deep gendered biases formerly unrecognized by the general public. Thus, Trump’s presidency is not a complete

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<sup>110</sup> “Trump Critic Van Jones: ‘One of the Most Extraordinary Moments You Have Ever Seen in American Politics, Period,’” *The Washington Post*, February 28, 2017.

anomaly detached from the American political system, but rather a twisted distillation of the mythos surrounding the executive office. The silver-lining of his election is an opportunity for American citizens to become conscious of the flaws embedded in the gendered spectacle of the modern American presidency, where deliberative forms of protest have the potential to challenge an exclusionary conception of presidential power.

The advancement of female political power also involves forms of *détournement* which hijack conceptions of presidential greatness. In 1992, poet and activist Eileen Myles ran for president on an “openly female” platform, sparking a write-in protest movement which emphasized her right “as a citizen, as a poet, as a woman, as a human being” to run for office and her right to express views which differed from those of the three white men running at the time.<sup>111</sup> To announce her campaign, she wrote her famous work, “An American Poem,” where she twists mythic presidential imagery to critique the disconnect between the spectacular representation of the president and the problems plaguing ordinary citizens. In her poem, Myles, who grew up in a blue-collar area of Boston, describes herself with the aura of John F. Kennedy, a president from a wealthy Massachusetts family. Myles contrasts the “bleeding gums” of the AIDS epidemic with Kennedy’s “beautiful teeth” and homelessness with the mansions of the wealthy political elite. She also juxtaposes her “ignominious” life as lesbian woman with the privileged upbringing of a “wealthy and powerful American family” to expose the massive difference of political status between a wealthy straight man and a working class lesbian poet. Her rebellious act of *détournement* underlines how the mythos of the presidency both overshadows the issues of daily life and precludes certain individuals

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<sup>111</sup>Joanna Rothkopf, “A Look Back at Eileen Myles’ Revolutionary, ‘Openly-Female’ Write-In Presidential Campaign,” *The Slot*, January 20, 2016.

from contributing to the political dialogue. Yet, despite the overwhelming flaws in American society, the final lines of her poem end on a hopeful note:

It is not normal for  
me to be a Kennedy.  
But I am no longer  
ashamed, no longer  
alone. I am not  
alone tonight because  
we are all Kennedys.  
And I am your President.<sup>112</sup>

The line “we are all Kennedys” denotes a democratic resistance to the image of the president as a spectacular human being who rises above the American electorate. She is not “alone tonight” because millions of ordinary Americans are also “Kennedys,” or political beings rising together for a common good. Through her deliberative act of protest, Myles cracks the undemocratic foundation of presidential spectacle, thus returning power back to the citizens spectacle intends to sideline.

### **Redefining Civic Engagement**

Resistance to presidential spectacle also involves physical acts of civic engagement. In *Democracy Incorporated*, Sheldon Wolin discusses the impact of demotic movements driven by the *demos*, or common people. He argues that in an unequal society intended to curb civic participation, authentic forms of democratic deliberation must happen “on the run” in a “fugitive democracy,” where demotic action is “informal, improvised, spontaneous” and often “born out of necessity.”<sup>113</sup> In the small

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<sup>112</sup> Eileen Myles. “An American Poem.” In *Not Me*. (New York: Semiotexte), 1991.

<sup>113</sup> Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated*, 254.



cracks within a repressive political structure and artificial capitalist society, these “fugitive” citizens shed their typically passive roles to become “agents” instead of “objects of power.” Wolin argues that democracy “is about the conditions that make it possible for ordinary people to better their lives by becoming political beings,”<sup>114</sup> but he is vague in his prescription of how demotic movements specifically initiate spur of the moment debates on larger political questions. Wolin’s conception of increased civic involvement does not elaborate on critical deliberative practices which ensure that demotic movements create reflective civic mindsets as opposed to impulsive mob mentalities. Large scale practices of *détournement*, such as participating in a form of collective art as with the Women’s March, endows civic movements with a stronger political message that requires a sense of unification to address a specific political problem. The practice of *détournement* merged with Wolin’s vision of demotic movements has the potential to provide a more effective form of resistance, thus unifying large physical protests with the deliberative practices needed for the democratic process to thrive.

The protests against Trump’s decision to ban immigrants from certain Muslim countries underline the effectiveness of reflective demotic movements which challenge presidential authority. When President Trump issued an unprecedented executive order in January of 2017 which further capped the US limit on refugees, prioritized Christian refugees over Muslim refugees, and prevented immigrants from seven Muslim countries from setting foot in the United States, protesters flocked to airports across the

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<sup>114</sup> Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated*, 260.

country.<sup>115</sup> Nearly 2,000 citizens protested at the John F. Kennedy international airport in New York City, and thousands of others from Detroit to Los Angeles stood in a show of unity with immigrants. Many held signs which re-appropriated Trump's xenophobic campaign slogan "Make America Great Again" to "Make Immigrants Great Again."<sup>116</sup> To further combat the divisiveness of the Trump spectacle, several faith-based organizations came together in a show of solidarity. A group of 20 rabbis were arrested in New York because, as they told the *New York Times*, "We know that some of the language that's being used now to stop Muslims from coming in is the same language that was used to stop Jewish refugees from coming."<sup>117</sup> Instead of allowing Trump's action to overshadow and cancel meaningful forms of deliberation, the protests against Trump's executive order prompted the general public to question who possesses the authority to define America's collective identity. Far from an unthinking form of rebellion, this demotic protest used practices of *détournement* to begin an essential conversation about religious freedom and American values, creating a countermovement of unification which resisted the divisive and demagogic appeals of the Trump spectacle.

The Women's March is another important example of the unifying power of physical forms of civic engagement. On January 21, 2017, citizens across the United States participated in the largest single day protest in American history. The Women's

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<sup>115</sup> "Executive Order Protecting The Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into The United States," The White House, issued March 6, 2017.

<sup>116</sup> Lauren Gambino, Sabrina Siddiqui Paul Owen in New York, and Edward Helmore at JFK international airport, "Thousands Protest against Trump Travel Ban in Cities and Airports Nationwide," *The Guardian*, January 30, 2017.

<sup>117</sup> Colin Moynihan, "About 20 Rabbis Arrested During Protest Over Trump Travel Ban," *The New York Times*, February 6, 2017.

March involved between 3,267,134 and 5,246,670 people in the United States, along thousands of others in 261 marches abroad.<sup>118</sup> The demotic movement of the Women's March channeled outrage towards Trump into a form of collective action which critiqued his virulent gendered spectacle. Social media was an important tool to organize the event, but this virtual online community was paired with the massive physical presence of millions of citizens exercising their right to peaceful assembly. The chants "Show me what democracy looks like!"/"This is what democracy looks like!" paired with the tangible movement of bodies in public spaces held more power than liking a Facebook post or sending a tweet. The march rejected the masculine image of presidential authority through the gendered physicality of women. By creating a visible, grass roots counter spectacle asserting their rights over public spaces, women emphasized their role as active agents in the democratic process capable of overpowering the singular voice of the president.

In order to further challenge Trump's gendered spectacle, the Women's March facilitated a large scale practice of *détournement*. During his campaign, Trump's comments on a 2005 Access Hollywood tape attracted intense controversy. In a conversation with host Billy Bush, Trump described how his celebrity status allowed him to sexually assault women:

Trump: ...It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star they let you do it. You can do anything.

Bush: Whatever you want.

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<sup>118</sup> Erica Chenoweth and Jeremy Pressman, "Analysis | This Is What We Learned by Counting the Women's Marches," *The Washington Post*, February 7, 2017.

Trump: Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything.<sup>119</sup>

The Women's March hijacked Trump's sexist message to form a movement emphasizing female political empowerment. The word "pussy" has two pejorative meanings, one as a slang term for female anatomy and sexual intercourse, and another as an insult to men, who are perceived as feminine and thus weak. Through *détournement*, the Women's March reclaimed this disparaging word as symbol of pride which captured public attention in a productive way. The bright pink "pussy" hats<sup>120</sup> worn by a large number of female marchers created a vast sea of pink which acted as a form of solidarity ridiculing Trump's vulgar language, while emphasizing the collective strength of women. The grass roots Pussy Hat Art Project involved the physical process of making hats and sharing them with others, giving women a way to show support for the march even if they could not attend themselves.<sup>121</sup> Slogans such as "This pussy grabs back" and "Grab him by the midterms" also formed a political call to action which resisted Trump's assertion of the power of male celebrity over a woman's body. *Détournement* is most powerful when it not only uses images and words in a new way, but changes the character of the rhetoric itself to criticize a broader social issue. To resist the Trump spectacle, sentiments like

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<sup>119</sup> "US Election: Full Transcript of Donald Trump's Obscene Videotape," *BBC News*, October 9, 2016.

<sup>120</sup> Controversy swirls around these hats acting as a form of trans-exclusion, with womanhood equated to having a vagina. This analysis focuses on *détournement*, with emphasis on how the president's specific offensive words were consciously appropriated and ridiculed for a political movement—the exclusion of trans voices is not intended and the Women's March must continue to ensure that it acts as diverse movement open the LGBTQ community and women of color. Debates against these hats are also an important aspect of civic engagement which addresses broader social issues.

<sup>121</sup> "The Pussyhat Story," PUSSYHAT PROJECT™, accessed May 2, 2018.

“this pussy grabs back” empowers citizens to raise their voices in an oppositional narrative which emphasizes their status as politically engaged citizens.

The Women’s March facilitated civic action which stretched far beyond a daylong protest. In January of 2017, New Jersey state senator John Carman shared a post on Facebook of a woman in a kitchen with the caption, “Will the woman’s protest be over in time for them to cook dinner?”<sup>122</sup> When Ashley Bennett, a 32 year old woman of color, viewed his post, her outrage inspired her to run for office for the first time. In November of 2017, she ran against Carman and won, channeling her anger into a productive form of political participation. Ashley Bennett’s case is not an isolated incident. The Women’s March returned in January of 2018 with a new emphasis on engaging citizens, particularly women, to run for office. Due to Women’s March and the influence of the Me Too movement, 2018 has seen a surge of female candidates, where nearly 60 percent more women have declared to run for the House and Senate compared to the 2016 election cycle.<sup>123</sup> The act of running for office moves beyond demotic political movements and towards a long-term focus on building a country which values a diverse chorus of voices within the electorate. Instead of silencing female voices, Donald Trump’s sexist and denigrating comments sparked an electoral form of counter protest which emphasized women as political participants capable of ascending to positions of authority.

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<sup>122</sup> Paul Owen, “US Politician Who Mocked Women’s March Defeated by Woman He Inspired to Run,” *The Guardian*, November 8, 2017.

<sup>123</sup> Heather Caygle, “Record-Breaking Number of Women Run for Office,” *Politico*, March 8, 2018.

The Founders, Wilson, and Debord all held negative attitudes towards the deliberative capacities of the demos. In *The Federalist Papers*, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton depict the masses as inflamed factions incapable of meaningful forms of reflection, while under his theory of the rhetorical presidency, Woodrow Wilson argues that ordinary citizens must consume simplified rhetorical appeals in order to participate in high-minded political debates. In *Commentaires sur La Société du Spectacle*, Debord laments the general populace's inability to withstand the immense power of spectacle within capitalist society, leaving them passive consumers to a prescribed form of identity. Yet, when civic movements are tied to broader deliberative practices, the demos has the potential to be a reflective body capable of resisting spectacle's grasp. Through the power of techniques such as *détournement*, the American people can transform from spectators to political participants in the democratic process. Donald Trump's election created cracks in the spectacle of the modern American presidency by exposing the twisted mythos beneath its innocuous surface. His undisguised spectacle may lead to increased civic engagement throughout the electorate, creating a body of conscious citizens able to question the primacy of executive power.

## Conclusion

The Founders struggled to develop a conception of executive power divorced from the passionate impulses of demagoguery, while strong enough to facilitate the capable administration of the law. To strike a balance between these concerns, Alexander Hamilton advocated for a unitary executive who possessed the energy needed for strong governance, yet remained independent from the roar of public opinion. In the 20th century, Woodrow Wilson argued that the Founders' original conception of executive power required a reformulation of the relationship between the presidency and the public. Wilson envisioned a rhetorical presidency where the president would act as a leader/interpreter able to facilitate deliberation on a mass scale to raise political discussions to debates of principle. In order to make an impression on the minds of the masses, he argued that deliberation rested upon the president's ability to simplify the political discourse for the American people.

Both the Founders' unitary conception of executive power and the Wilsonian ideal of the rhetorical presidency contributed to the emergence of presidential spectacle. Bruce Miroff describes spectacles as curated, one-sided events which rely on the value of the president's public persona and the centrality of the presidency in modern American life. Instead of creating an independent space for the president to execute the law, the Hamiltonian conception of placing power in hands of a single, energetic executive had the unintended consequence of creating an intensely personalized conception of the presidency. The close relationship between the executive and the general public advocated by Wilson also reduced the space for deliberation in the electorate, creating a

political dialogue based in consumption as opposed to reflection. Under Miroff's conception of spectacle, the grand symbolic gestures of the presidency overtake reflective debates of policy, leaving civic deliberation in the shadow of executive showmanship. The greatest problem with presidential spectacle is its power to diminish the democratic process, leaving no space for another narrative to exist.

Miroff's event-based, highly curated theory of spectacle is an inadequate lens to capture the perpetual and spontaneous quality of Donald Trump's spectacular appeals. Instead of a constructed event used on occasion to symbolize a stance or ideology, Guy Debord defines spectacle as an all-consuming facet of capitalist culture. Debord feared spectacle's ability to embed itself into the fabric of daily life, creating a subliminal cycle of consumption in the guise of liberation. In *La Société du Spectacle*, he also laments the power of celebrity, where media status and the aura of fame overtake expertise rooted in lived experience. His conception of the integrated spectacle, a fusion of the concentrated spectacle of governmental power and the diffuse spectacle of capitalist consumption, provides crucial insights into the eternal present and unanswerable lies perpetuated by Donald Trump.

While Debord advances a more comprehensive theory of spectacle, he provides a reductive view of governmental power, while the Trump spectacle thrives on a specific type of state power—the inherently spectacular institution of the modern American presidency. The Trump spectacle also differs from the subliminal features of Debord's theory. His hyper visible actions place him at the forefront of public attention, replacing unconscious mass passivity with intense reactions from both his supporters and detractors. Further, Trump's undisguised spectacle is not a complete anomaly detached



from the American political system, but rather a twisted manifestation of the myths surrounding the modern American presidency. He creates a caricature of executive leadership, revealing the inauthenticity and virulent masculinity beneath the presidency's naturalized mythic conception. Therefore, the Trump spectacle simultaneously thrives upon and weakens the spectacle of the modern American presidency, exposing the fundamental problems with the intense symbolic value placed on a singular figure in American government. His election may lead to increased civic engagement, creating a more conscious American electorate capable of questioning and resisting presidential spectacle.

Resisting the Trump spectacle and the larger spectacle of the modern American presidency raises many questions regarding the influence of the mass media on civic deliberation. Trump's election exposes the flaws of a breathless 24 hour news cycle which leaves the general public unable to focus on specific policy issues. Future research must interrogate how to decelerate the media discourse to create an environment with a past, present, and future, as opposed to a constant stream of breaking news. Trump's election also must lead to discussions surrounding social media and its effect on the political discourse. While Debord would most likely view social media as another tool of capitalist culture used to perpetuate an eternal present, platforms such as Twitter and Facebook also hold value for facilitating civic movements. Twitter, as shown by Trump's tweets, can be an impulsive and fragmentary platform, but its influence is also essential for practicing large scale forms of *détournement* such as the Women's March. Investigating how virtual communities are tied to physical demonstrations could prove

essential in creating future civic movements which can use media culture against itself to forge deliberative forms of resistance.

In the political realm, Trump's spectacle also calls into question the structure of the American government. During the modern era of the presidency, Congress has moved into the background of political debates, allowing executive power to take center stage. Possible forms of resistance to executive primacy may involve Congress facilitating legislative debates which move beyond whether the president supports or opposes specific policies. Future forms of resistance could also stem from investigating the relationship between political parties and presidential spectacle, specifically the role party ideologies play in influencing civic deliberation throughout the American electorate. Donald Trump is often depicted as an outlier of the Republican party, but a serious analytical lens must be held to the way his spectacle thrives upon traditional conservative rhetoric. Instead of simplified appeals intended to evoke an emotional response from core supporters, party leaders may want to focus on more nuanced and substantive political dialogues to facilitate campaigns based upon expertise rather than media status.

To preserve the democratic process, the American people must question the modern American presidency's power over the electorate. A complete reversion back to the Founders' original conception of the presidency is unattainable due to technological changes, direct primaries, and the increased expectations Americans hold towards their government, while the Wilsonian vision of executive power is undesirable due to the way simplified appeals overshadow reflective policy debates. Through critical and creative forms of civic deliberation, the American electorate can strive for a middle ground

between a Wilsonian leader/interpreter and a Hamiltonian independent executive, creating a more inclusive and reflective form of executive power which respects the deliberative capacities of the demos.

Donald Trump exposes an institution in crisis. The mythic status of the modern presidency and the close relationship between the president and the public institutionalizes all of the features of executive power which the Founders strove to restrain, creating a spectacular president who is a living incarnation of the hopes, desires, and values of the entire country. Instead of traits specific to the Trump spectacle, buffoonish gestures, toxic rhetoric, and hollow promises are all intrinsic elements of the spectacle of the modern American presidency. The process of reforming a mythic conception of presidential greatness requires an active and deliberative civic body which challenges the role of the president as a symbolic figurehead emblematic of the American electorate. The twisted blessing of the Trump presidency is an opportunity for the American people to become conscious of the structure of executive power, ultimately cracking spectacle's undemocratic foundation.

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