

# Donald Trump and four rules of twitter engagement

By Dan Eaton

Donald Trump will continue to use Twitter to communicate with the American public once he takes office as President of the United States on January 20, 2017. There are four lessons to be drawn from the history of presidential communication with the public that should enable Mr. Trump to make the most of the possibilities that communicating via Twitter presents while sidestepping the medium's limitations.

Many of those lessons are chronicled in Professor Jeffrey Tulis's classic book *The Rhetorical Presidency*, on which I did some cite-checking work as a young law student. The central thesis of the book is that "Since the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, popular or mass rhetoric has become a principal tool of presidential governance."

That book was published nearly 30 years ago and yet has resonance in the current historical moment that its author could not have anticipated. Professor Tulis observed, decades before the advent of social media, "The modern mass media has facilitated the development of the rhetorical presidency by giving the president the means to a large national audience." Mr. Trump's demonstrated ability to arrest the public's attention in 140 characters could advance his agenda and do real, durable good, unless he is undisciplined.

**Lesson One: If you wouldn't write it in an op-ed piece, don't say it in a tweet.** Everything the President says reflects on him, his party, his country, and his countrymen. As Professor Tulis quotes President Jimmy Carter's last Chief of Staff Jack Watson as once saying, "An offhand remark by the president of the United States frequently can have implications or reverberations of a major decision." That should serve as a check on the short, impulsive outbursts Twitter makes it easy to share without the context or elaboration that may be provided in more conventional modes of presidential communication. "Silent" Calvin Coolidge once said: "You know, I have found out in the course of a long public life, that the things I did not say never hurt me." Wise advice.



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**Lesson Two: A tweet should never be the last word given on any serious topic:** A 140-character tweet can: start a conversation with the broader public; raise a question; express a concise immediate reaction to a sudden event. What a tweet cannot do is satisfy the duty of a president to explain his thinking on an important issue. There is a danger in thinking that it could. In a recent email to me, Professor Tulis lamented "the movement over time from [presidential] speeches that manifest coherent arguments to those that become a mere list of points. Twitter is a further devolution of that tendency."

**Lesson Three: A Twitter storm that produces a short-term political win may result in long-term policy failure:** The great temptation, indeed imperative, of Twitter is to reduce communication to pithy slogan. But a slogan that arouses the public does not replace the need for carefully deliberated policy. As Professor Tulis pointed out in *The Rhetorical Presidency*, it is one thing for a President to state his case to the public "in terms of principle, not detailed policy; to repeat principles; and to moderate public expectations as to the success of the policy" and then leave the details to vigorous bargaining with Congress. That is what President Theodore Roosevelt did in his successful campaign for legislation regulating the railroads. It is another thing to substitute sloganeering for deliberative policy-making altogether. That is a lesson conservatives especially should appreciate from the slapdash collection of programs that ultimately comprised President Lyndon Johnson's disastrous "war on poverty," which resulted in an impressive political victory in both houses of Congress. As Professor Tulis wrote in his book: "The same popular rhetoric that provided clout for victory substituted passionate appeal and argument by metaphor for deliberation. Johnson's tactic not only produced a hastily packaged program, his clear victory ensured that he and not Congress would be blamed if the program failed. And fail it did."

**Lesson Four: Recognize the special risk you face in using Twitter to go over the heads of Congress:** Modern presidents routinely use direct communication with the public to force action from an intransigent Congress. Ronald Reagan, faced with a House of Representatives run by the liberal Democratic Speaker Tip O'Neill, was a master at this. But Mr. Trump comes to Washington with both houses of Congress controlled by his own party. Yes, there will be disagreements; the separation of powers bakes that into the system. But using tweets to bypass a talented Congressional leadership will be seen, with some justification, as a failure of presidential leadership, not a demonstration of it. Mr. Trump's deft use of Twitter attracted public attention and kept the spotlight focused on him. Attracting attention, however, is not Mr. Trump's greatest or most useful strength. It was his reputation as



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a skilled dealmaker that ultimately earned him the confidence of the voters. Paraphrasing the work of another eminent presidential historian Richard Neustadt, Professor Tulis wrote: "Bargaining is central to a successful presidency because formal authority promises presidents power that it cannot provide."

Twitter was a powerful tool in helping Donald Trump get elected. If used wisely, it is a tool that will help him govern successfully. If the lessons of history are disregarded, however, Mr. Trump's tweets will result in victories

without success. What a wasted opportunity that would be.

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