

## **Performing the Presidency: George H.W. Bush as *Time*'s "Men of the Year"**

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On December 20, 1990, the Bush Administration welcomed representatives of *Time* magazine, along with renowned portrait photographer Gregory Heisler, to the White House for a portrait sitting and interview of George H.W. Bush.<sup>1</sup> Although Bush's portrait had been taken for the cover of *Time* before, White House Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater recounts that something about this photo shoot seemed different. And indeed, it was. The cover image resulting from the shoot displayed a bizarre two-faced image of President Bush with the accompanying byline: "Men of the Year: The Two George Bushes" (see Image 1, below). Livid, the Bush Administration temporarily revoked the White House press privileges of both *Time* and Heisler. As Fitzwater recalls of the photo shoot and interview, "They [Time] knew damn well we wouldn't grant one with the President if we knew that this was going to be a mocking cover that showed him to be a two-faced politician...we were duped."<sup>2</sup> Why did the editor of *Time* risk the administration's displeasure for the sake of a cover photo? Certainly, *Time* had frequently featured presidential portraits on their cover, taken by their own photographers, but never before had they gone so far as to "dupe" a president into sitting for an intentionally mocking portrait.

As the account of the *Time* man of the year cover demonstrates, George H.W. Bush's presidency presents an interesting puzzle. At the time the portrait was taken (following the Gulf War), Bush had high public opinion ratings: Kuwait had been liberated and the Berlin Wall had fallen. George H.W. Bush was arguably the most powerful man in the world. How then is it that the editors of *Time* magazine felt it appropriate to dupe the leader of the free world into posing for a portrait that made him a mockery? Having been elected in 1988 at the height of Reagan's

popularity, Bush should have been ideally situated for a two-term presidency. But Bush lost. And he did so in spectacular fashion, alienating core groups that helped to bring the Reagan Regime into power and reneging on his “No New Taxes” pledge. In other words, Bush’s problem represents a failure in presidential leadership and therefore presents an opportunity to understand how a president who *should* have been a strong leader was popularly understood—and visually represented—to be anything but.

My work examines visual representations of presidential authority through the lens of Stephen Skowronek’s notion of political time: the idea that “authority structures for presidential action recur in rough sequences over broad stretches of time, each tending to drive a characteristic kind of political change.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the warrants for presidential authority reside within an existing political regime that is emerging, maintaining, or waning. A given president’s (or presidential candidate’s) available rhetorical resources are thus expanded or constrained based on the regime’s place in political time. Considering visual representations of presidential authority within this framework builds upon Erickson’s notion of the performance fragment by exploring how visual rhetoric *about* presidents contributes to citizens’ popular understanding of, and interaction with, the presidency.<sup>4</sup>

I contend that there are rhetorical indicators of political regime change and, more specifically, that there are visual rhetorical indicators of political time that bear out in public rhetoric about presidents. In other words, contained within the composition of presidential images in mainstream news outlets, such as *Time* magazine, are visual rhetorical markers that indicate the regime’s—and by extension, the president’s—place in political time. These visual markers become evident when we examine the corpus of visual rhetoric that is representative of a given regime’s visual performance of presidentiality. In this case, by closely reading the

images of Reagan and Bush on the cover of *Time*, Bush's failure to enact the expectations of the Reagan legacy becomes apparent.

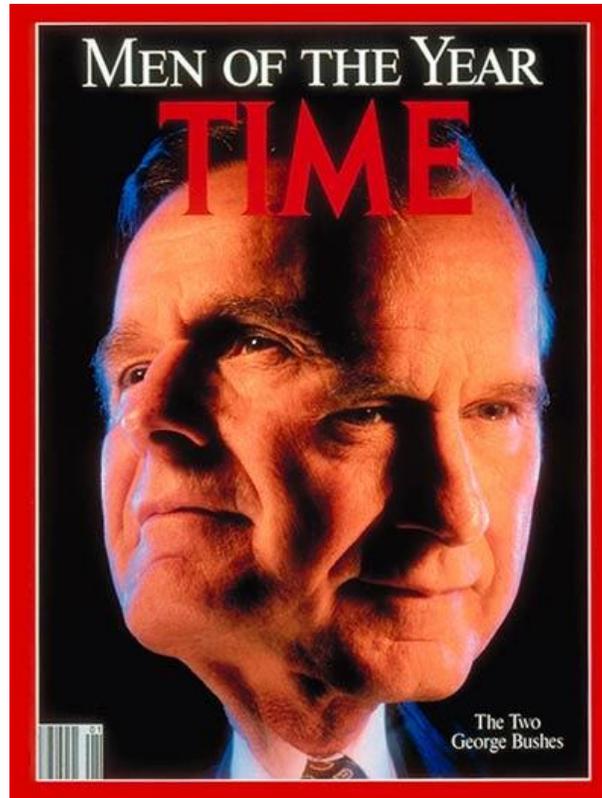


Figure 1. Source: *Time* January 7, 1991.

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<sup>1</sup> Marlin Fitzwater, "Interview With *Time* Magazine." Administrative File, Bush Presidential Records. George Bush Library, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Marlin Fitzwater, "Call the Briefing", Interview with Brian Lamb, November 5, 1995. CNN Booknotes. <http://www.booknotes.org/Watch/67754-1/Marlin+Fitzwater.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Skowronek, *Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal*, (University of Kansas Press, 2008), 14.

<sup>4</sup> See Keith V. Erickson, "Presidential Rhetoric's Visual Turn: Performance Fragments and the Politics of Illusionism." *Communication Monographs*, 67:2 (2000), 138-157.