



The Power and the Story: How the Crafted Presidential Narrative Has Determined Political Success from George Washington to George W. Bush

By Evan Cornog

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A masterly new look at the American presidency, revealing the importance of the way presidents craft personal narratives—persuasive storytelling that has a crucial effect on the electorate and the nation.

Perfectly timed for the 2004 election, Evan Cornog's *The Power and the Story* raises a thesis so integral to the discussion that it's surprising it's never been posited before. The key to a successful election, administration, and ultimate legacy is, in great measure, the crafting of the presidential story. The impact of these stories on the electorate and the nation is almost beyond measure, because it is often these stories that we call American history.

The sheer narrative drive of "the war hero," "the Rhodes scholar," "the drunkard-or recovered alcoholic," "the small-town boy," "the log cabin," "the cherry tree," "the good old boy," "the Rough Rider," and on and on can come to define a leader, an administration, and an entire era. *The Power and the Story* is the investigation of the story behind that story: how, with deliberation and occasional manipulation, a president's crafting of his public image has surmounted scandal, capitalized on opportunity, obfuscated flaws, and created legend. And how presidential storymaking has been a professional undertaking on the part of the media and spin meisters as well—from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Karl Rove.

There is, of course, the larger story as well. Cornog's book is a meditation on the American psyche and our penchant for storytelling. Questions are raised about what makes for the quintessential story; in what sense are Americans misled by the neatness imposed by storyline; and perhaps, most important, why are we so eager to see our leaders in this easily comprehensible light? All questions very much of the moment, and Cornog's sound and fascinating answers to them make this book essential campaign-season reading—and a lasting investigation of the presidency.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Repackaging presidential history for our age of "spin," Cornog's lively if reductionist work argues that it's "the battle of stories, not the debate on issues, that determines how Americans respond to a presidential contender." In making this argument, Cornog, associate dean at Columbia's journalism school and author of *Hats in the Ring*, a campaign history, touches on the roles of candidates, the public, the press and historians in crafting (or debunking) images and reputations. No reader will put down the book without greater appreciation of the role of tales, both tall and true, in our public history. To his credit, Cornog only occasionally drops into cynicism, as when he says that the role of images shows "the relative unimportance of truth." But sometimes he succumbs to melodrama, as in his grandiose conclusion: "The future of the nation, and the world, depends upon the abilities of American citizens to choose the right stories." And devoting a full chapter only to George W. Bush seems a ploy for media attention in this election year. More seriously, Cornog shortchanges such other important historical factors as presidential actions and national power. In sum, this is a pleasant but not weighty work.

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About the Author

Evan Cornog is the associate dean for policy and planning at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism and publisher of the Columbia Journalism Review. He was educated at Harvard and Columbia and has taught American history at Columbia, CUNY, and Lafayette College. He also worked as press secretary for former Mayor Edward I. Koch of New York City. Cornog is the author of *The Birth of Empire: DeWitt Clinton and the American Experience, 1769-1828* and coauthor of *Hats in the Ring: An Illustrated History of American Presidential Campaigns*.

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