

## The Decider as memoirist

*Who reads a president's book?*

When George W. Bush goes on NBC this week—first for a prime-time special, then for the *Today* show, all with an Oprah appearance sandwiched in between—watch how much he and Matt Lauer talk about Bush's new book. Or rather, watch how much they don't. Because Bush's *Decision Points* will matter less as a weighty tome than as a multimedia launching platform. Like all presidential memoirs, it will become both the anchor and the excuse for a full-on media blitz. What other reason would we have to start a national conversation about Bush almost two years after his presidency?

Another way to say this is that, when it comes to presidential memoirs, the means often *are* the ends. This is a slightly different point than the one that people buy political books not to read but to own. (As Michael Korda, who edited Ronald Reagan's *An American Life*, puts it: "The presidential memoir is a piece of furniture.") Instead, these are books people write not to sell but to promote. In the coming weeks, *Decision Points* will bleed over into just about every media frequency. And the most interesting one will also be the least bookish: television.

It makes perfect sense that the modern presidential memoir—the blockbuster book assembled with lots of help and lots of hype—came of age alongside TV. Take Harry Truman, the first president to write (and to promote) such a book. Truman hoped his memoir would provide a rich historical resource and correct the many misperceptions about his presidency. But Truman knew his second goal didn't require people to read his book. When he announced his book deal in 1953, Truman made sure to prepare a statement for the TV and newsreel cameras. When, after the book's publication in 1955, he became the first president to do a book signing, Truman sat in front of six American flags and under the glare of floodlights—again to create a patriotic panorama for the cameras.

Dwight Eisenhower took things a step further, selling the rights for an exclusive interview about his presidency to CBS. This came to be known as selling one's "electronic memoirs," and the most famous example remains Richard Nixon's interviews with David Frost. Still, Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, and Gerald Ford all signed up for electronic memoirs, in addition to writing books. Ford even ended up asking NBC to rework his interview after deciding he shouldn't talk about his Nixon pardon until after he'd published his book.

This didn't save Ford's presidential memoir from flopping, but it did hint at a shift in how these books would be marketed and discussed. There's no need to arrange for an electronic memoir when a book will accomplish the same thing: getting you and your message on TV. And that's happened with increasing regularity. When *An American Life* came out in 1990, Reagan appeared on *20/20*, a PBS special with William F. Buckley, and *Good Morning America*—for five days in a row. In 2004, the coverage of Bill Clinton's much-delayed memoir got so thick that John Kerry's team worried it would steal their convention thunder. To keep him on task, Clinton's editor moved into his Chappaqua home. *My Life* dropped one month before the convention, but,

in that month, Clinton did *60 Minutes*, *Good Morning America*, and *Larry King Live*, among others, generating enough industry buzz to get his book compared to *Harry Potter*.

Of course, people actually read *Harry Potter*—and will, it's safe to say, continue reading it. But while the authors and publishers of presidential memoirs like to repeat Truman's first goal of contributing to history, their books never make more than an immediate impact. With the right media roll out, though, that's still plenty of time to try for Truman's second goal: shaping and, if need be, rehabilitating one's reputation.

And Bush's timing couldn't be better. This is partly about sales; most presidential memoirs have arrived just in time for the holiday season. But it's also about promotion. We've got all this empty post-election airspace, and someone (and something) has to fill it. Bush's book will provide a platform for reassessing his actions and ideas—and that's even more true given what his publisher is calling its “groundbreaking” organization, an organization that allows Bush to analyze and contextualize his key decisions, many of which remain live legislative issues.

It's enough to make *Decision Points* start to sound like talking points. But that's only one example of what has been a careful, choreographed plan, a plan that smartly prioritizes the coverage over the book. Last month, Lauer said he'd lobbied Bush's people “for the better part of a year”—which means he spent nearly as much time getting the author interview as Bush spent authoring the book.