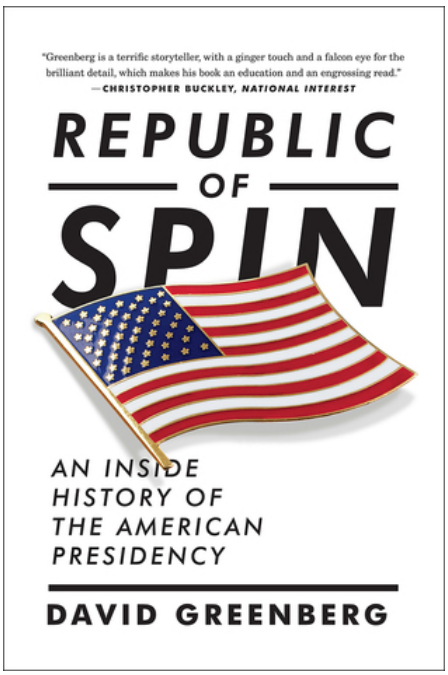

Republic of Spin: An Inside History of the American Presidency

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In *Republic of Spin*—a vibrant history covering more than one hundred years of politics—presidential historian David Greenberg recounts the rise of the White House spin machine, from Teddy Roosevelt to Barack Obama. His sweeping, startling narrative takes us behind the scenes to see how the tools and techniques of image making and message craft work. We meet Woodrow Wilson convening the first White House press conference, Franklin Roosevelt huddling with his private pollsters, Ronald Reagan's aides crafting his nightly news sound bites, and George W. Bush staging his "Mission Accomplished" photo-op. We meet, too, the backstage visionaries who pioneered new ways of gauging public opinion and mastering the media—figures like George Cortelyou, TR's brilliantly efficient press manager; 1920s ad whiz Bruce Barton; Robert Montgomery, Dwight Eisenhower's canny TV coach; and of course the key spinmeisters of our own times, from Roger Ailes to David Axelrod.

Greenberg also examines the profound debates Americans have waged over the effect of spin on our politics. Does spin help our leaders manipulate the citizenry? Or does it allow them to engage us more fully in the democratic project? Exploring the ideas of the century's most incisive political critics, from Walter Lippmann and H. L. Mencken to Hannah Arendt and Stephen Colbert, *Republic of Spin* illuminates both the power of spin and its limitations—its capacity not only to mislead but also to lead.

Republic of Spin: An Inside History of the American Presidency Details

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From Reader Review Republic of Spin: An Inside History of the American Presidency for online ebook

David says

3 1/2 stars. It would have been 4 but it claims to be an inside history of the American Presidency. What it is is an account of the development of public relations and the presidency. In general the theory is that what we are seeing today isn't much different than what was seen in Teddy Roosevelt's day. Yes we have come a long way in the way news is spread but it is just a question of degrees. What is missing today is the ability to communicate, to compromise. The politics of destruction may well lead to the end of the American experiment as we know it. That last is my view not the writer's. He thinks we'll emerge from this period of hyper partisanship relatively unscathed. In a world where the least miscue is known on the other side not only of the country but the world before the person making the miscue can even get off the stage I'm not so sure. The bar for what we'll accept in our leaders is getting way too low.

Jeff Francis says

Ad-man-turned-Calvin-Coolidge-adviser Bruce Barton once made an observation about our democracy:

> “Emotions affect votes much more than logic”(p.156)

That simple statement couldn’t encapsulate our political system more perfectly. Those seven words should be taught in schools, routinely cited, re-cited, hell—splashed across our currency.

That quote *also* encapsulates the basis for David Greenberg’s “Republic of Spin: An Inside History of the American Presidency,” an exhaustive, informative and at-times frustrating book.

From about Teddy Roosevelt through Obama, RoS explores the unseemly merging of politics and advertising that’s often dubbed “spin,” including how the concept evolved (devolved?) from a simple campaign strategy to a governing tool, and how spin—like any tool—is only as good/bad as its user.

The book also explores an eternal debate among spinners akin to the nature-vs-nurture debate among behavioral scientists, i.e., whether the public should be treated as intelligent individuals who merely need access to objective data to make sound voting decisions, or—as H.L. Mencken reportedly thought—as “an immense, stupid, uneducable majority” that exists to be manipulated. (p. 148).

All this sounds like great fun for those into politics, journalism or social science, but I still give “Republic of Spin” a high three-stars because it’s a tad scholarly for the non-professional. The author is a professor, and in the acknowledgements section he claims he was trying to write a book for both scholars and casual readers. For better or worse, that comes through in the narrative. Don’t expect the gossipy tone of a *Gamechange*, here. RoS is concerned with who-where-when, as evidenced the by book’s “Cast of Characters” at its beginning… but, if you’re looking to memorize the various precursors of figures such as Nate Silver and Karl Rove, you should be quite gratified.

Gregory Howe says

I gave up on this one. I found it less than compelling.

Peter Rice says

It seemed really promising, but in the end was not all that revelatory. The earlier chapters were enlightening enough, the more we approached the modern era, the less the book seemed to offer. Still a solid choice.

Greg Miller says

Probably more like 3.5 stars... this was a real slog at times. Alternated between interesting historical narrative, somewhat dull backstory of peripheral characters, and wandering analysis. I enjoyed sections of the book and definitely learned about the history of "spin," but could have done without some of the verbosity and fancy words.

Matthew says

Fascinating if somewhat overambitious in its scope. The author's passion is clearly mid-century US political history, and the book is light on every president after Kennedy (and, seriously, who wouldn't want to know more about the Nixon Administration's approach to manipulating the news?). The chapters on Wilson and Eisenhower are fascinating, as both men had to contend with the transition into a new media landscape, and Greenburg clarifies just how crucial their contributions were. The twentieth-century, after all, saw new media arise every 15 years or so, so it is little wonder that government's relation to media was forever in flux.

Zhelana says

This book promised me a history of the American presidency, and wound up giving me a history of propaganda, which I am not at all interested in.

Socraticgadfly says

Excellent overview of how the rise of the modern presidency with Theodore Roosevelt led to the rise of the modern public relations presidency. Or "publicity" presidency. Or "propaganda" presidency. Or "spin" presidency. Or "spin by no-spin" presidency.

That's one of the things that came out of this book — how the terminology changed from generation to

generation, or sometimes more often, in describing what was in general the same mindset.

Also noted and demonstrated by Greenberg? Nothing new under the sun, indeed. Obama's YouTube channel had predecessors in other presidents running official-like newspapers, whether for the White House or for various federal agencies.

Nor is there anything new under the sun, Greenberg shows, about presidents trying — and failing — to keep reins on the media conversations of Cabinet-level staff.

Nor is there anything new in Trump being his own leaker.

Greenberg demonstrates the rise of public relations men, and ad men along with them, until in the 1940s we get to the first full-blown political campaign shop. And, the husband-and-wife team of Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter came from where? Nowhere else but California. They influenced Murray Chotiner and, from him, directly or directly, have a "family tree" that reached to Reagan and Fox News.

Then there's the rise, within the Fourth Estate, of pundits. Greenberg shows this, and the leaky wall between them and presidents, undercutting their own narrative of criticality.

That's just a sampler. I'm not sure why some people said this book was a slog; I thought it was great.

Maybe a few of them didn't like Greenberg busting Obama's chops for calling him a spinner by allegedly not spinning, even while he was. Or maybe, wanting to blame everything on the GOP, they didn't like Greenberg's assertion that Obama wasn't a good political negotiator. (Sorry, but he had a bad habit of compromising away compromises in advance, in public. Greenberg's right, even if he would disagree with my take.)

That said, even a 5-star can have a goof or two.

With Greenberg, it's claiming that Woodrow Wilson was really neutral in 1914-1917. Erm, no.

John says

Here is a broad sweep account of presidential public relations and election ventures since the time of Teddy Roosevelt. Many early PR and polling operatives mentioned (Bernays, Gallup, Lasker, Roper, Lazersfield) were for me retro rehash since I was exposed to their propaganda, social psychology and polling techniques in grad school at UofMinn in the 1960s. New for me was to read about the increased sophistication of presidential spin since the 1960s. Particularly interesting were techniques used to bolster the image of movie actor Ronald Reagan, the so-called "great communicator." He was not that, author states. Indeed without a script Reagan was pretty much a dodo. In the book's last paragraph there's this: "[T]he greatest moments of American presidential leadership have often been forged not by men of impeccable virtue and purity of heart, but by careful and caring labors of speechwriters, pollsters, image crafters and other professional spinners." Yes, though that statement is a bit of a sop to the profession, let's hope that "careful and caring" can hold true.

Sanford Chee says

Underneath the spin failures, most of the time, are policy failures. When presidents say, “Oh, the problem was my messaging, my marketing,” usually — not all of the time, but usually — that is a cover story for policies that aren’t resonating.

http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/ar...

Steven Peterson says

Think that political spin by presidents just started recently? This book says "No"! The volume goes back to the beginning of the American Republic under our Constitution. George Washington, for example, would ask James Madison do provide a draft of an important message. Madison would do so--and then present a response from the House of Representatives to the draft that he gave Washington! Over time, we see early presidents "spinning" their perspective.

Over time, the spin aspect of a presidency became more sophisticated and the use of media more fine grained. By the early 20th century, presidents such as Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson and others became adept at getting their word out. And--over time--practitioners became more skilled. FDR, Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, Clinton, Bush (2), and Obama. Polls became more scientific and were used to assess public opinion and suggest ways of speaking to the public's concerns.

This is a well written work, accessible to readers, and addressing an issue of some importance.

Frank Stein says

A propulsively readable and accessible account of how the American presidency and the American public relations industry evolved together in the 20th century. As Greenberg points out, the presidency itself grew in statute because it was able to harness public and media attention away from Congress and other politicians, and the public relations industry touted its own connection to the presidency to bolster its own importance. From Teddy Roosevelt onwards, the President was always also a celebrity, and Presidents gradually came to embrace this role and try ever harder to manage it. They came to rely on "press agents," speechwriters, pollsters, and ad-men. Roosevelt was an innovator in all these respects. Besides holding the first on-background press conferences, or seances, as he called them, he also adopted a Grover Cleveland-era stenographer named George Cortelyou to handle all press relations. Finally he hired Joseph Bucklin Bishop purely as a public promoter, in this case of the Panama Canal. These efforts horrified Senators Ben Tillman, Frederick Gillette, and others in Congress, who tried, largely unsuccessfully, to block all government spending on publicity. Still, future President Warren Harding used famed ad-man Albert Lasker, inventor of the "reason why" commercials, while Calvin Coolidge worked with Bruce Barton, the advertising genius who once portrayed Christ as the world's best self-publicist. Later, Dwight Eisenhower used Rosser Reeves, the Ted Bates Agency advertiser who came up with the "unique selling proposition" (USP), as well as TV's infamous Anacin ad, which featured a pounding hammer to illustrate headaches. Reeves designed the first presidential campaign slots for TV. Richard Nixon, who simultaneously decried and embraced advertising, populated much of his staff from the famed J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, and created the first "Communications Office" in the White House. His office popularized such ideas as the daily "line," the pitch

the White House was going to make all day about what should be the next day's news story. H.R. Haldeman, a former Thompson employee, probably invented the term "news cycle," to describe what they were aiming at winning.

Greenberg goes into detail on Americans ever-conflicted feelings about this profusion of presidential spin. As early as 1896 Teddy Roosevelt could complain that President McKinley had been sold just like a bar of soap. In the 1920s, the New Republic brayed about an "innovation unique in all of history-government by publicity." Candidate Adlai Stevenson in 1952 attacked Rosser Reeves and the "The idea that you can merchandise a candidate for high office like breakfast cereal." Many former journalists who made their name attacking such propaganda, however, such as George Creel and Will Irwin, later tied themselves up with Presidents they liked and engaged in such spin with vigor. On the whole, Greenberg argues that most claims about a brainwashed public were and are overwrought. He shows public relations efforts tend to have "limited effects" on citizens, and presidential success and failure are largely determined by their policies and politics.

Although the last part of the book can be a little tendentious and spotty, on the whole this is a wonderful read for anyone interested in American politics and media. Its also a healthy antidote to those who bemoan a supposedly new culture of spin and dishonesty. Greenberg shows instead that debate and spin have been a continuous and important part of our modern politics, not to be overestimated but also not to be ignored.

Ari says

Useful summary of US Presidents and their spin doctors from the McKinley to Obama administrations. It's packed with history but chapters are short and memorable.

Colton Richards says

After reading Nixon's Shadow I couldn't wait to read this offering by David Greenberg, who I think writes wonderfully well.

I've read any number of books on American presidencies, but what I find remarkable about this one is that it shows much more than others how much Presidents - going farther back than you'd imagine - cared about the image their White House projected. Teddy Roosevelt, pivotal and consequential as always, Wilson a paragon of fluency, Coolidge surprisingly aware, FDR a master, Nixon supremely protean, this book really does reveal how occupants of the White House pulled the levers available to them to attempt to control what the world saw of them - some better than others.

A very good study in political power and image.

Christa Van says

An interesting history of the the American presidency and the efforts of presidents to communicate with the public. Starting with FDR and ending with Obama, the book details the professional efforts of PR and media consultants that have aided every president to make their case to the public. I liked learning how the various

presidents tried to deny that they hired and depended on people to help them look better, sound better, and be more persuasive. Not an easy read but a reminder about how the technology has changed but not the intent.
