“The Fireside Chats”—President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1944)

Added to the National Registry: 2002
Essay by Christopher H. Sterling (guest post)*

Perhaps the epitome of man and medium melding together, the radio broadcasts of President Franklin Roosevelt from 1933 through 1944 are among the best known presidential uses of radio. These “Fireside Chats” (so named by Washington broadcast executive Harry Butcher on the occasion of the second one) were planned as conversations rather than stiff public speeches. And as such, they were widely listened to (all the national radio networks carried them—meaning hundreds of stations nationwide) and became an important element in White House communications for more than a decade. How many “Chats” were depends on the source, but most agree that between 27 and 31 were broadcast by the time of the last one in June, 1944.

The first one—on the banking crisis—took place on March 12, 1933, barely a week into what would soon be dubbed the famous “100 Days” that began the New Deal. Broadcast from the White House’s Diplomatic Reception Room—with the President actually sitting next to a fireplace—the informal but serious talk helped to calm people worried about a nationwide bank closure. The talk was credited with averting widespread panic. The second—a broad description of the developing New Deal program—came less than two months later, in early May. Both were broadcast on Sunday evenings. They began a broadcast series that built on Roosevelt’s similar use of radio while serving two terms as governor of New York (1928-32).

While these talks *sounded* informal, they were as carefully prepared as any of Roosevelt’s more formal public appearances—their informality of wording and phrase was built into the text. The President appeared to talk *with* his listeners rather than lecturing *at* them. The “chats” nearly always focused on a single issue. In describing the problem and what the administration was doing about it, the President used direct and simple language, and clear examples or analogies, just as would two people in a face-to-face conversation. But while he sounded conversational, he actually had a script with that conversational tone built in.

Analysis of the "Fireside Chats" suggests several other elements also aided in their success. Most of the words were among the most commonly used in everyday English. And Roosevelt spoke more slowly than many other users of radio—120 to 130 words per minute while the political norm of the time approached 175 to 200 words. For clarity and emphasis of key points, he sometimes spoke as few as 100 words a minute. His vocal pacing was masterful for radio delivery.

Roosevelt took to radio in order to reach Americans directly, and not merely through the journalistic sieve of the newspaper press, most of which editorially opposed him. Listeners could hear their leader speak—seemingly directly to them—and could thus judge for themselves the issues discussed. One result of the radio talks was the growing trust of the President among the populace that began to show up in several public opinion polls at the time. Suddenly, press and radio commentators had to contend with a new, masterful user of the radio medium.

The "Fireside Chats" didn't always work, however. On the broadcast of Tuesday, March 9, 1937, for example, Roosevelt explained his plan to expand the U.S. Supreme Court to overcome the often-negative votes of what others had dubbed "the nine old men." Despite his eloquence, his conversation didn't successfully sway public opinion and the controversial idea died some weeks later.

For many of the chats, the President usually rated higher than the usual commercial comedy or dramatic show. The largest audience for any single "Fireside Chat" came on May 27, 1941 (which was also the longest broadcast—45 minutes), when Roosevelt described why he had declared an unlimited national emergency amidst growing global wartime tensions. According to the Hooper radio ratings service, nearly 54 million people (of roughly 82 million adult Americans) tuned in to the broadcast.

(Not surprisingly, war news came to dominate many of the "Fireside Chats." Roosevelt eventually invited his listeners to have a map handy so they could follow his discussion of the strategic direction of the war.)

Virtually all presidents since Roosevelt have used radio—and, since the early 1950s, television—to speak to the nation. But most of these occasions were formal speeches, often with the President seated at his desk in the Oval Office. Of those who followed Roosevelt into the White House, only one replayed the "Fireplace" approach. Jimmy Carter was telecast speaking about the energy crisis on February 2, 1977--wearing a sweater and sitting informally in an easy chair—next to the proverbial White House fireplace. In 1982, Ronald Reagan began a weekly radio talk, reviving use of that medium by the White House. He eventually presented more than 330 brief talks. His successors (of both political parties) have continued the practice well into the 21st century.

Christopher H. Sterling served on the faculty of George Washington University for over three decades. Prior to that, he spent 10 years at Temple University and two years at the

FCC. He has authored or edited over 25 books on telecommunications and the electronic media.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.