

Pressing Paws on a White House Tradition

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Editors Note: *This submission contains two separate essays. First is a long-form opinion piece (pages 2-9). This essay is followed by a shorter, 600-word op-ed submission based on the research included in the preceding piece (pages 10-12).*

Harry Truman once reckoned that “if you want a friend in Washington, get a dog.” With the intention of sharing his cynicism about genuine friendship in party politics, Truman also highlighted an important cultural tradition. Dog is man’s best friend and can be America’s beloved when coupled with a president.

Since the days of George Washington, various animals, exotic and domesticated alike, have trailed alongside our elected leaders. Starting in 1921 President Harding ushered in the trend of having a canine sidekick and from there, no one has wavered—until President Trump. Our chief executive is currently missing the quintessential furry companion that, some would argue, completes the First Family. This must change and fast.

Not only breaking with tradition, President Trump’s “petlessness” blocks him from the social, health, and political benefits that come with pet ownership. For a man that wants to make his mark on Washington, he will need a leash in tow. Otherwise, Americans may continue to question or even doubt his ability to do a few key things. One, connect and form meaningful relationships. Two, serve for potentially two terms. And three, to strategically build a positive image of himself during crisis.

In some respect, it takes a village to support the president and his agenda in a contentious political environment like our own. Yet, Trump stands alone. Journalist Frank Bruni notices that the absence of sincere friendships has molded the man we see before us. His lack of compassion, generosity, and temperance reflects a man lacking true human connection. And this has been a

detriment to his leadership.¹ Thus, in line with our core human need to belong, Bruni presses Trump to open himself to companionship.

This noticeable weakness poses a key opportunity for the addition of a dog to the White House. As noted by scientist Alan Beck, the twentieth century opened with “a pet phenomenon.” Meaning we have gradually integrated the role of a pet into American family culture.² Many would attest to them being a member of the family, sometimes the favorite. And why? They hold the capacity to provide social support and be anthropomorphized.

Turning to studies conducted by social scientist Allen McConnell and his colleagues, a strong correlation has been found between dogs and the fulfillment of social needs. Overall, owners claimed that they felt less depressed, lonely, and stressed when their dog was in their presence. Even with the Cold War tensions on the rise, President Eisenhower shared this sentiment as he felt ever so grateful for his “extremely affectionate and seemingly happy” Weimaraner, Heidi.³ Naturally Trump divides the American public on critical domestic and foreign affairs with his abrasive Twitter commentary, therefore the presence of a non-partisan pup could give him some comfort.

Furthermore, in comparison with significant human sources of support, dogs were still more effective.⁴ Thus, Trump could keep his pooch closer than his own family and be happier.

His critics are wary to believe that he does not live in a realm of mounting isolation. The Republican Party slowly inches away from him. World leaders are reluctant to meet with him. And

¹ Frank Bruni, “Donald Trump Could Really Use a Friend,” *New York Times*, 5 December 2017.

² Alan M. Beck and N. Marshall Meyers, “Health Enhancement and Companion Animal Ownership,” in *Annual Review Public Health* 17 (1996): 248.

³ Letter from President Eisenhower to Arthur Summerfield, January 27, 1958.

⁴ Allen R. McConnell et al., “Friends with Benefits: On the Positive Consequences of Pet Ownership,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101, no. 6 (2011): 1248.

the makeup of his cabinet fluctuates by the day. Thus, owning a pet could serve Trump as a social resource that encourages its owners to engage in more human to human interaction. He could start a meaningful relationship with a pet since an animal can assume an identity like a person and be subservient.⁵

While we, as pet owners, selfishly impose upon our animals human characteristics, we tap into our ability to feel empathy.⁶ So incorporating an animal into his family could embolden the President to be a tad bit more open-minded, a crucial trait for good leadership.

Weaving in the fact that Trump is a father to a young boy could further vivify his image. A father, son, and pooch dynamic has been a crowd pleaser in the past.

It is true that there is only correlating evidence that demonstrates the advantages of having a four-legged friend. Yet, there is none showing a causal relationship between owning dogs and the success of the presidency. And many would argue that pet ownership is a personal choice, not a requirement for a fulfilling life. If his history serves him well, it will demonstrate that he has had no interest in ownership of nonhuman subjects. Trump has proclaimed himself to be a “germaphobe,” thus the presence of any animal would disgust him with their capability to carry disease.

Already setting his sights on a future second term, Trump aims to sit in the Oval Office for a while. However, with his advancing age, there are obvious concerns for his health. Although presidents in the past such as Wilson and Roosevelt were plagued by ailing health, they went on

⁵ According to Bruni, Trump loves anyone that will bow down to him.

⁶ Beck, “Health Enhancement,” 249.

to lead great administrations, Trump is not willing to be burdened by any speck of weakness. Thus, the addition of a dog to his life could prove to be fruitful to his vitality.

Research has shown that a human's unconditional love of an animal eases them into a secure mode of attachment, which reduces heart disease and lowers blood pressure.⁷ These are natural results of the pet experience as dogs inspire their owners to remain active.

For example, photographers captured iconic photos of former President Obama engaging with his dog Bo on the White House lawn. Whether it was walking the dog or playing fetch, these are some key moments remembered.⁸ Any American could relate to them.

And those moments are what Trump needs now.

The recent intensification of party politics has caused political divisions to run deep. But the one thing that could transcend these divisions stands behind the president: his family. As political scientist Barbara Kellerman argues, the First Family possesses a function within the shaping of the presidential image.⁹ Thus, I would argue that the apolitical subject of a pet has shown its utility in building connections between past chief executives and the people.

Like any other pet that preceded him, Fala, a black Scottish terrier brought life to the White House. He made it a home. FDR, an incredibly stoic man, was guiding the country into war;

⁷ McConnell et al., "Friends with Benefits," 1243.

⁸ Pete Souza, "Bo chases President Barack Obama on the South Lawn of the White House," May 12, 2009, photograph, Obama Administration White House Archives.

⁹ Barbara Kellerman, "The Political Functions of the Presidential Family," in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (Summer 1978): 303; in this paper, I will be referencing three of the six roles (Decorations, Extensions, and Humanizers) that she highlights on 305-6 and applying them to the context of how presidents have employed the presence of their pet dog.

however, he was softened by his intimate relationship with Fala. Before his third inauguration in 1941, the small pup attempted to ride alongside in the automobile with FDR.¹⁰

The media caught this. Public opinion shifted. And masses of letters flooded the presidential mailbox. Some dog owners sent photos of their own dogs because of this new closeness. One man wrote to FDR about how he felt as if “[Fala] brings you Mr. President, into our homes. As a neighbor, a “Good Neighbor.”¹¹ This group identification created a new line of communication and a strong memory for Americans.

Later, Fala would be the inspiration for a 1944 election speech that FDR is still known for. The President forcefully defended his favorite dog against the libelous lies of the Republicans and evoked a round of laughter from the audience.¹² This speech was effective because the media coverage established the legacy of Fala; years after the presidential pooch would have his legacy memorialized through a statue at a national monument.¹³

Paving the way for Fala to gain such celebrity was Harding’s Airedale terrier, Laddie Boy. This furry friend became a marketed extension of the President in the media’s opinion. Historian Helena Pycior describes the early twentieth century as an era of “cult of personalities,” where even

¹⁰ Contemporary moment recreated when David Axelrod, an official on Obama reelection campaign, captured a photo of Bo riding with Obama in limo as a juxtaposition to Mitt Romney and his strapped dog on roof of car.

¹¹ Bryan Blankfield, “A Symbol of His Warmth and Humanity”: Fala, Roosevelt, and the Personable Presidency,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 212-3.

¹² Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Fala Speech” (speech at the campaign dinner with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters in Washington D.C., District of Columbia, September 23, 1944). The comments made from Dewey and Republicans were about the supposed large amount of taxpayer’s money (approx. \$20 million) FDR used to order a Navy destroyer to pick up his forgotten dog in the Aleutian Islands, AL.

¹³ Blankfield, “A Symbol,” 218-22; Fala is the only dog to have such an honor because his image was used to mobilize dog owners/lover behind the war effort. He was involved in some MGM films that provided subtle political commentary.

animals became social heroes.¹⁴ This “First Dog” managed the favorable status of his owner as Americans saw Harding as a breath of fresh air after Wilson.

Laddie Boy was involved in cabinet meetings as he had his own handcrafted chair. He helped gloss over the president’s lack of children and infidelity. The public supposed the good-natured characteristics of Laddie Boy as a reflection of Harding’s personality.¹⁵ Moreover, during the annual Easter Egg Roll of 1923, this happy terrier happily hosted the event, and no one batted an eye.¹⁶

Another critical factor that the Trump administration could recognize, as his predecessors, have is a dog’s political value.

Politicians utilize the effect of a psychological tendency known as “fundamental attribution error,” to create a positive perception of themselves through being or photographed with animals.¹⁷ Looking at past precedents, pets have been known to diffuse or distract the American public (with their cuteness).

The White House communications team have designed strategies where the president can capitalize off the allure of their pet. Also, they’ve outlined the conditions for when their displays of affection towards the animal are significant. Political scientist Forrest Maltzman proclaims, from his study of decades of newspapers, that the First Pet is released during “times of war or

¹⁴ Helena Pycior, “The Making of the “First Dog”: President Warren G. Harding and Laddie Boy.” *Society & Animals* 13, no. 2 (2005): 110.

¹⁵ Diana C. Mutz, “The Dog that Didn’t Bark: The Role of Canines in the 2008 Campaign,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* (October 2010): 708.

¹⁶*In the absence of President and Mrs. Harding, Laddie Boy acted as host for the many children who rolled eggs on the White House lawn today.* Washington D.C, 1923. April 2. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress

¹⁷ Beck, “Health Enhancement,”251.

scandal, but less likely when the economy sours.”¹⁸ Higher pet coverage means we should worry, but not too much as our president is “capable and confident.”

For example, Richard Nixon’s political career almost suffered a premature death in 1952. The cause would’ve been allegations of a “secret donation fund” for his personal use. However, in a television retort, he followed in the footsteps of FDR. Nixon noted the family’s attachment to their Cocker Spaniel, Checkers, and his refusal to return their noble pet quickly carries the sympathy of the masses.¹⁹

Another notable example is the famous photo of the *united* Clinton family walking to the *Marine One*. This was the first appearance of Buddy the Labrador. But also, this was subsequent to the president’s admission of his illustrious affair with intern Monica Lewinsky. Coincidence?²⁰ No.

With good pet press, there comes the bad too. This is something LBJ learned the hard way when he raised his beagle, Him, by his ears; this set off a spree of spirited commentary from animal rights activists. In conversation, LBJ struggled to understand what the issue was, as he tried to pose his pup for a quality picture.²¹

Consequently, the President’s best friend, companion, image booster, and bow on his legacy will always be the dog.

¹⁸ Forrest Maltzman et al., “Unleashing Presidential Power: The Politics of Pets in the White House,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 45, no. 3 (July 2012): 397.

¹⁹ A connection can be made between the influence of the Nixon children and the Obama children in the presence of a dog. Nixon received this dog from a Republican Texan who heard that his daughters wanted one. And Obama vowed to buy a puppy for his daughters, regardless of the election turnout.

²⁰ Maltzman et al., “Unleashing,” 396; I make this remark also for the fact that there was a First Cat, Chelsea Clinton’s cat Socks. However, Americans are more attracted to dogs because of the themes they convey of loyalty and dependability.

²¹ Lyndon B. Johnson, telephone conversation with George Reedy, 1 May 1964, 1:20 pm, Recordings and Transcripts of Telephone Conversations and Meetings, LBJ Presidential Library.

In the end, can Trump tear a page out of former presidents' books and unite this partisan nation under one love for a dog? Or is our political system too broken that even this almost two-century old tool cannot repair the divisive political climate? At the very least, it is worth a try or the rest of Trump's presidency will be ruff.

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Harry Truman once reckoned that “if you want a friend in Washington, get a dog.” With the intention of sharing his cynicism about genuine friendship in party politics, Truman also highlighted an important cultural tradition. Dog is man’s best friend and can be America’s beloved when coupled with a president.

Since the days of Washington, various animals, exotic and domesticated alike, have stood by their sides. In 1921, Harding ushered in the trend of a canine sidekick and from there, no one has wavered—until President Trump. Our chief executive is currently missing the quintessential furry companion.

This must change and fast.

Not only breaking with tradition, Trump overlooks the social, health, and political benefits that come with pet ownership. To make his mark on Washington, he will need a leash in tow. Otherwise, Americans will question his ability to do a few key things. One, form meaningful relationships. Two, serve another term. And three, to disguise crisis.

It takes a village to support any president and their agenda in a divisive political climate. Yet, Trump stands alone. His lack of compassion, generosity, and temperance reflects his lacking true human connection. And this has been a detriment to his leadership. Thus, Frank Bruni implores Trump to open himself to companionship.

There is a strong correlation between dogs and the fulfillment of social needs. Overall, owners claimed that they felt less depressed, lonely, stressed, and neurotic. Cold War Eisenhower shared this sentiment as he felt ever grateful for his “extremely affectionate and seemingly happy” Weimaraner, Heidi.

Moreover, Trump's critics are wary to believe that he doesn't live in mounting isolation. Owning a pet could serve as a social resource that aids him in garnering more human to human interaction. Americans love an adorable pooch.

However, there's no causal relationship between owning dogs and the success of the presidency. Also, many would argue that pet ownership is a personal choice, not a requirement for a fulfilling life. Looking at Trump's history, he's shown no interest in the ownership of nonhuman subjects. Further, Trump has proclaimed himself to be a "germaphobe," thus any animal would disgust him with their transmittable disease.

Already setting his sights on a future second term, Trump aims to serve for a while. But oh, his advanced age? Adding a dog to his life could prove to be fruitful to his vitality. Research has shown that an animal's unconditional love eases an owner into a secure mode of attachment, which reduces heart disease and lowers blood pressure. Dogs encourage physical activity. Any American could relate to Obama playing with Bo on the Lawn.

Further, apolitical pets have helped build relationships between past presidents and the people. Fala, a small, black terrier helped a stoic FDR by hopping into his inaugural automobile. After, waves of letters described welcoming him into their homes as a "Good Neighbor," although he was guiding the nation into war.

Plus, getting a good-natured dog like Harding's Laddie Boy opens a chance for an improved view of Trump's personality.

Something else the Trump administration could recognize, as his predecessors have, is a dog's political value. Capitalize off their cuteness—when appropriate. The First Pet is released during times of war or scandal, but not when the economy sours.

Can Trump tear a page out of former presidents' books and unite this partisan nation under one love for a dog? Or is our political system too broken that even this century old tool cannot repair the divisive political climate? At the very least, it is worth a try or the rest of Trump's presidency will be ruff.

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