POLITICS

Rose Garden Campaign Strategy Can Prove Thorny for Incumbents

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WASHINGTON — In the run-up to his 1936 reelection campaign, Franklin D. Roosevelt had farm votes in mind when he pulled aside his agriculture secretary and ordered, "I want cotton to sell at 12 cents. I do not care how you do it."

The raw power of an incumbent president to use the levers of his office to woo an important group of voters--in this case, Southern farmers--had just been vividly demonstrated.

Campaigning for president 28 years later, Republican candidate Barry Goldwater had this complaint about Lyndon B. Johnson, the incumbent: "Every time we raise an embarrassing question, Lyndon leaves town to dedicate a dam."

In 1976, President Gerald Ford impressed Florida primary voters with promises of a new veterans' hospital and money for highways and mass transit.

"If he comes here with the same bag of goodies to hand out that he's been giving away elsewhere, the band won't know whether to play 'Hail to the Chief' or 'Santa Claus Is Coming to Town,' " said Ronald Reagan, his unsuccessful challenger.

Just the opposite complaint was heard later that year from Democrat Jimmy Carter. Ford, he said, had shifted to a "Rose Garden strategy" and was hiding in the reflected glory of the White House, signing bills, making pronouncements, getting free publicity, while Carter had to battle for attention.

Four years later, Carter was to use the same Rose Garden tactic--to the same effect as he lost to Reagan.

There are things that a challenger can promise, but that only an incumbent can do. Although modern presidents have had mixed success in using the power of the presidency to win reelection, it is a distinct advantage as President Clinton seeks a second term.

A year out from his own reelection contest, Clinton can tell California, with more voters and electoral votes than any other state, that he has dispatched billions of dollars in federal dollars--more than $13 billion by some counts--to pay for recovery from wildfires, earthquakes and storms.

There have been billions more dollars to help offset the impact of military base closings and economic hard times.

As of now, the president has visited California 23 times.

"It's amazing how many goodies are spread around California these days; the president never comes empty-handed," said Stephen Hess, senior fellow in governmental studies at the Brookings Institution.

And it's not just California.

As an incumbent, Clinton was also able in February to personally announce to flood victims and voters in Washington state, Oregon, Idaho and Pennsylvania that he was dispatching millions of dollars in flood relief.

But often the ability of an incumbent president to dispense largess has meant little in the end. As Hess noted, "the history of recent incumbents is pretty grim. Ask Ford, Carter and [George] Bush."

Still, the overall record since the reelection of George Washington in 1792 shows that

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a sitting president who chooses to run has succeeded by a 2-to-1 margin.

In recent years, incumbent Democrats have done somewhat better than Republicans.

The only Democrat to lose outright in this century was Jimmy Carter in 1980. Two other Democrats, Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson, chose not to seek additional terms at points when their popularity was low enough to suggest they might not have won had they tried.

Four Republican incumbents were evicted by the voters in the 20th century--William Howard Taft in 1912, Herbert Hoover in 1932, Ford in 1976 and Bush in 1992.

With four terms, Franklin Roosevelt was the winningest incumbent in history. His success, however, inspired the 22nd Amendment, limiting chief executives to two terms.

In 1936, in the first of his three successful bids for reelection, Roosevelt took great advantage of his office, as told by historian William E. Leuchtenberg.

"The president perceived that, for all the good will the New Deal legislation had won, his strongest card in bidding for reelection would be hard evidence that the country was 'in the money' again," Leuchtenberg wrote in "The FDR Years," published this year.

"He instructed Agriculture Secretary Wallace, 'Henry, through July, August, September, October and up to the fifth of November, I want cotton to sell at 12 cents. I do not care how you do it. That is your problem. It can't go below 12 cents. Is that clear?' "

In 1940, in the midst of World War II, Roosevelt opened his campaign standing on the deck of a destroyer. "His opponent couldn't stand on the deck of any destroyer," Hess said.

Peace candidate Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.), Richard Nixon's 1972 challenger, was undercut when Henry Kissinger, the president's secretary of state, announced in October that "peace is at hand." It wasn't.

Even without overt acts, the modern presidency gives incumbents a glamour that challengers can rarely match.

On the road, its symbol is the blue and silver of Air Force One, the Boeing 747 that carries presidents and forms the backdrop for the obligatory photo of the president waving farewell as he leaves airport after airport.

There's the limousine, the motorcade, the motorcycle escorts, the hovering protective helicopter, the Secret Service, the brass bands playing "Hail to the Chief."

And only if they win do challengers get to speak from the Oval Office or schedule events in the Rose Garden or the East Room or preside over the glitter of state dinners.

But from John Adams in 1800 to Bush in 1992, history has shown that incumbents do lose, even though it seldom looked that way at first.

Of the first seven presidents, only Adams and his son, John Quincy Adams, failed at reelection.

But in 1840, opponents portrayed incumbent Martin Van Buren as wallowing in luxury in the White House, awash in virtually royal trappings.

Van Buren's defeat was the prelude to a dark night for presidential incumbents. The only presidents to win reelection from 1840 to William McKinley's second-term victory in 1900 were Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant. Democrat Grover Cleveland got two terms, but they were interrupted by the administration of Republican Benjamin Harrison.

For some, incumbency was no help at all.

Ford's pardon of his predecessor, Nixon, was never forgiven by voters. Carter's handling of the economy, the oil crisis and the Iran hostage ordeal angered the electorate. Voter wrath over a long economic recession overshadowed Bush's triumph in the Persian Gulf War.

And the Depression destroyed the presidency of Herbert Hoover, making him the whipping boy for Democratic candidates for the next half-century.

Before Carter fruitlessly sought reelection in 1980, his chief of staff, Hamilton Jordan, titled a campaign memo "The Myth of the Incumbent President."

"Over the 200-year history of our country, the myth developed and was sustained by events that incumbent presidents are always reelected," Jordan wrote.

He contended the myth had been shattered by the splintering of party power, the entrance of television as a major factor and presidential performance in an era of crises that defy easy solution.

"We will be reelected or not reelected based largely on your performance as president," Jordan wrote.

Or, as House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) put it in 1992: "Being president beats not being president only if you look like you know what you're doing."

He was talking about George Bush.

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