

VLADIMIR PUTIN THE MACHO MAN: THE MYTHIC PRESIDENCY,  
POLITICAL IMAGES, AND THE IMPACT OF  
VISUAL RHETORIC IN POLITICS

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To my dad – the best writer and scholar I know.

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# **I. VLADIMIR PUTIN THE MACHO MAN: THE MYTHIC PRESIDENCY, POLITICAL IMAGES, AND THE IMPACT OF VISUAL RHETORIC IN POLITICS**

Images have the unique ability to condense an entire era or time period into a snapshot; pictures can become iconic and impact generations. Images are circulated and replicated over time and space, making their potential influence both local and worldwide. Despite the common belief that images are purely representational and thus an accurate replication of reality, many pictures are adjusted and altered to present different perspectives. Rarely are images presented in their original form, but rather are edited, photoshopped, and amended to fulfill a certain visual requirement or convey a particular meaning. Ultimately, visual symbols are rhetorical and are never objective. Therefore, the way an event is portrayed connects to certain attitudes, values, and beliefs that are characteristic of the times. Politicians, in particular, have a long tradition of using photographs to further campaigns, increase voter participation, and enhance individual images. The way a politician or political event is framed and documented impacts the perceptions that are formed regarding the candidate or situation; photographs are sites of deep rhetorical significance.

Examples of the rhetorical effect of images are found in the photographs of Michael Dukakis, former President George W. Bush, and even O.J. Simpson. In both

election examples, leadership and strength as a Commander-in-Chief were questioned. Dukakis, attempting to appear tough on military and national defense, posed in a tank, which ended up being a mistake because the opponent ultimately used the image to destroy Dukakis' campaign (Schulte, 2008). Instead of depicting him as strong regarding our national defense, Dukakis' photo was parodied and used as comedy material in the media (see Appendix, Figure 1). During President Bush's terms in office, he was repeatedly photographed with his mouth open or with a casual expression on his face; these images helped to shape public opinions about his ability to run the country (see Appendix, Figure 2). Finally, during the O.J. Simpson trial in 1995, images of Simpson appeared on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*. Simpson's police mugshot was used in both images, but the one on the cover of *Time* was altered, darkened, and set behind the words "An American Tragedy" (see Appendix, Figure 3). While *Time* claimed that no racial implication was intended, the image impacted perceptions about Simpson's guilt (Carmody, 1995). These three examples illustrate that images can and should be analyzed for their persuasive functions because a photograph's meaning is a compilation of media staging, media handlers, framing, and audience readings. Critiquing the compositional dimensions of images yields a better understanding not only of the visual event but also of the expectations of the particular culture that produces and circulates the image regarding gender norms, appearance, and political leaders. Not only do pictures capture reality, they have the ability to influence perceptions especially when circulated and framed as part of a larger story.

One political figure who has dominated both the political scene and been the subject of a wide variety of photographs is Vladimir Putin, former and current president

of Russia. For approximately eighteen years, President Putin has controlled the political state of Russia, either overtly or from behind the scenes (“Vladimir Putin,” 2012). Putin has been photographically documented engaging in various activities including battling forest fires, spearing whales, riding horseback shirtless, competing in judo competitions, cuddling animals, and congregating with bikers (“Vladimir Putin’s Unusual Adventures,” 2010). Photographs of him are widely circulated both in Russia and in the United States. Putin admitted that his photographs are staged, explaining that his intentions are to draw public attention to certain issues regarding wildlife and environmental conservatism; he confessed that some of his wildlife excursions are documented per his request (Radia, 2012; Bryanski & Dyomkin, 2012). Although Putin claims his images are intended to focus attention on issues concerning the wildlife and are not related to politicking, his images have appeared in several American publications including *Time Magazine*, *Huffington Post*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Economist*; they are being seen around the world and influence perceptions regarding his personal image.

The cross-cultural appeal and circulation of Putin’s images make him a particularly interesting and significant political figure. Putin has been a prominent political figure in Russia for nearly two decades and the numerous images of him that circulate in the United States all indicate his prominent status in America’s political and social world as well. By looking at images that are featured both in the American and Russian publications, as well as the discourse surrounding the images, myths and expectations the general public holds about political figures are revealed and emphasized. Therefore, this thesis examines photographic images of President Vladimir Putin as rhetorical artifacts. Specifically, the study analyzes the visual components of Putin’s

images to determine the compositional elements that are indicative of presidential leadership and competence. Furthermore, this analysis highlights how images influence perceptions of presidential leadership, which leads to conclusions about future presidential hopefuls and their use of images to foster particular perceptions.

### **Significance of Vladimir Putin and His Images**

Images in general, and political images in particular, are always relevant topics because we exist in a visual world where images are inescapable and politics has become a visual event itself. Politicians must be aware of their image almost constantly and photographs play a central role in the success or demise of political images (Schill, 2010). The media has popularized the presidency and many politicians are perceived as local, national, and international celebrities. Photographic images of politicians appear in news related and popular magazines, newspapers, and on websites. Politicians recognize the necessity of using such media sources in elections, and rely on the media to keep them relevant (Cohen, Tsifti, & Sheaffer, 2008). The persuasiveness of images contributes to the significance of this analysis, as well as foregrounds the pertinent function of images in political campaigns. By understanding the communicative techniques used in constructing and manufacturing photographs, future researchers will better comprehend the persuasive and practical function of images.

This critique of Putin's images is also relevant and important in light of the current rhetorical situation. The year 2012 held two crucial elections that changed the landscape of the political culture in both the United States and in Russia. In 2008, President Dmitry Medvedev signed a constitutional amendment extending the presidential term from four years to six years, paving the way for Vladimir Putin to

assume the presidency for a third term (Pan, 2008); and in March 2012, Putin won a controversial election and assumed the presidency for a third time. Because it occurred through the alteration of the constitution of the recently democratic state, Putin's election caused disagreement among the Russian people. Olga V. Kryshtanovskaya, a member of Putin's Russia party, even speculates whether the people will allow him to remain in public office for the entire six years ("Vladimir Putin," 2012). Also in 2012, the American public faced one of the most polarized and critical elections in U.S. history. Political images and commercials were circulated in a fury as Mitt Romney and incumbent President Barack Obama campaigned for the coveted position. Ultimately Obama succeeded in securing the presidential office, and the images that were disseminated about the candidates were undoubtedly influential in the outcome of the election. Similar to previous elections, the photographic images of Obama and Romney shaped perceptions regarding their competence as potential leaders. Analyzing the images of Vladimir Putin will highlight trends and norms regarding political images, demonstrate the mythic qualities and components necessary for politicians to embody, and reveal his unique strategies. This thesis offers the tools necessary to analyze and evaluate the images that were being created and circulated during this crucial time, as well as examines how perceptions of political candidates are potentially influenced by the images produced.

Third, there is an international significance to understanding perceptions of presidential images. Putin's election was met with controversy and discussion about an uprising or coup ("Vladimir Putin," 2012). The relationship between the United States and Russia is at best unstable, as the countries operate under two different sets of values

and beliefs (Baker, 2012). Aleksei Pushkov, the head of Russia's parliamentary foreign affairs committee, further acknowledges, "There is a crisis in the Russian-American relationship" (Baker, 2012). Shortly after Putin's inauguration for his third term as president, the United States and Russia experienced differences regarding the conflict in Syria and how to handle it (Smith, 2012). Following the relationship between Russia and the United States will be critical for future foreign relations. An analysis of Putin's images will hopefully illuminate how Western opinions of those images can potentially influence the perceptions of international leaders and governments. Additionally, this critique will highlight the difference between "Putin the manly man," and "Putin the functional leader," which, as will be explained later, has changed from his earlier years in office.

### **Theoretical Framework: The Mythic Perspective**

Scholars and political practitioners alike have used myth as a way of linking persuasive goals to larger, transcultural narratives. In essence, a rhetorical myth is a story that has achieved a level of cultural significance and is thus utilized as a framework for understanding and simplifying events, people, and relationships (Braden, 1975). Smith (1950) labels myths as "an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image" (p. xi). Marx (1964) continues by describing myth as a "cultural symbol" that is a product of the collective imagination. Rushing (1983), in her depiction of the American western myth, suggests that myths represent collective values that help societies make sense of the world. These myths are passed down from generation to generation and expose the symbolism and rituals that characterize particular cultures. Finally, Osborn and Osborn (1994) conceptualize the rhetorical myth by saying "It

illustrates the values, faith, and feelings that make up the social character of a people” (p. 408). While myths are often used as a rhetorical device, inserted into speeches for a variety of reasons, they are much more complex than just a story. Myth is a strategy, permeating the entire structure and development of a presentation, not an isolated device (Braden, 1975). Myths are subtle, powerful, and are frequently used in political discourse to convey the essential values characteristic to the culture.

Myths work at global and personal levels, making them extremely effective when engaging or reaffirming values. Myths are narrative in structure, but are more archetypal and operate on a deeper level. Myths represent universal themes found in dreams, religions, and works of art, providing models or answers to life’s big questions (Campbell, 1973). Myths are linked to the “collective unconscious,” exist independently from individual thought, and provide fundamental structures used to give meaning to our world (Campbell, 1973). Because political success rests on the assumption that political figures can access and embody cultural myths, understanding the specific design and function of myths will help in analyzing Putin’s images.

Myths are persuasive largely because they incorporate slices of truth into the larger story. Lippmann (1946) notes that myths are a combination of “truth and error, fact and fable, report and fantasy” (p. 92). Biblical parables commonly fuse together fact and fiction to arrive at the lesson needing to be learned. For instance, the parable of the Good Samaritan is a fictitious story that integrates elements of the truth to make the point that one should help their neighbor in times of need. Myths have the unique ability to combine not only fact and fable, but also emotions and concepts, resulting in an emotional reaction from the audience (Braden, 1975). For instance, the myth of rags to

riches tells the story of individuals who have gone from poverty, bleak beginnings, or troubled pasts to success, wealth, and happiness. Generally, those stories are emotional for those who experience them, and prompt emotional responses in those who hear them, indicating that myths function on a pragmatic and sentimental level. Also, myths are not just personal narratives individuals tell; they can function on a cultural or global level, relating to many groups of people and uniting them in similar memory and imagination.

Myth creation is an extensive process. Myths are the result of multiple rhetors, collective memory, and oversimplification of events, people, or relationships (Braden, 1975). As rhetors use myths in their discourse, the myths are tweaked and modified to fit the situation and the personal style of the speaker. Thus, myths are not infallible, but are resistant to change, with change happening over a long period of time. Myths also appear in many forms, including stories, movies and oral traditions, and are a powerful rhetorical and cultural force because they create identification within their audiences.

Kenneth Burke's concept of consubstantiality closely aligns with the function of identification in myth. Consubstantiality describes how individuals form selves and identities based on properties found in other individuals, values, or beliefs (Burke, 1969). Two individuals may not be identical, but as long as they have similar interests, or characteristics, they can identify with each other. By identifying with each other, the pair becomes "substantially one," or "consubstantial" (Burke, 1969). Consubstantiality is therefore necessary to any way of life because the self is partially formed by relating to properties and characteristics found in other individuals. Burke suggests that persuasion only works insofar as the rhetor creates something for the audience to identify with;



consubstantiality is important for rhetorical myths to be effective (Burke, 1969). When identification and consubstantiality are strong, the audience may experience a sensation close to hypnotism, accepting the myth without judgment or criticism (Braden, 1975). While the ability to bypass rational judgment is a quality of myths that make them effective, if used in an unethical way, rhetors also can potentially exploit their followers.

Myths work by connecting to the audience's values, morals, and beliefs in a similar manner to Burke's idea of consubstantiality. Consider, for instance, the American Dream myth, which states that Americans have equal opportunity, can pull themselves up by their bootstraps to be successful, and live in the suburbs and neighborhoods with white picket fences. The myth implies a wide range of values and beliefs to which Americans can relate. By stimulating emotion and facilitating a sense of unity, myths maintain the persuasive characteristic necessary for their survival as a grand narrative. Grand narratives, as Lyotard describes, are large claims that are to be wholly understood in terms of production and transmission of meaning (Readings, 1991). Grand narratives, also termed metanarratives, are the large stories that guide our lives, such as the American Dream. The American Dream promotes common values and emotions, such as hard work and pride, indicating that those qualities are necessary for the acceptance and continuance of the grand narrative.

Myths are powerful rhetorical strategies because they create identification and appeal to collective values, yet they cannot be functional and effective in discourse without their survival through constant replication. In defining myths and their role in the public discourse, Braden (1975) outlines several features of myths required for their success and continuance. Myths must first be accepted without questioning or reflection

(Braden, 1975). Myths become powerful because they are for the most part universally accepted as the truth. For instance, the American Dream and the myth of the hero are rarely doubted because they reflect values and characteristics that are prioritized in America, such as courage, self-determinism, and commitment. Myths gain acceptance and power through repetition. The values that are associated with the American Dream and the myth of the hero have repeatedly been discussed and epitomized in rhetoric. That repetition solidifies the values as good and desired, which helps the myths be accepted as true and valid without question or critical reflection from the listeners.

Another distinguishing feature of myths is that they confirm, intensify, or amplify sentiment by actualizing beliefs that people already possess (Braden, 1975). Braden (1975) suggests that myths often are like blank checks that people can fill out. Listeners can attach any meaning they wish to the myths they hear and ignore certain meanings that are disturbing or unpleasant; they use myths to justify or intensify their personal beliefs regarding a situation and lessen the cognitive dissonance that myths can potentially cause. For instance, in political debates, mythic themes emerge from both parties. Members of both sides of the political spectrum generally interpret the myths from their respective political ideologies. Thus, the myths demonstrated in political debates rarely change political affiliations, but rather intensify and amplify sentiment already possessed by the listeners. Through everyday conversations myths persist as a cultural force. The myths that are of particular interest for this analysis are political myths, including several enduring myths concerning the political state of the nation.

## **Political Myths**

The success of political candidates rests on their ability to tap into the myths about a country and the office they seek, as well as how they align themselves with myths concerning the image of the position. Dorsey (1995) states that myths are used by U.S. presidents to “shape the audience’s identity and prescribe social behavior” (p. 1). For example, presidents must convey interest in upholding and embodying the values of the country, as well as look, talk, and act like the way people feel that presidents should look, talk, and act. In the twentieth century, a presidential paradigm shift occurred and the media allowed presidents to have direct communication with the public (Tulis, 1987). Ever since politics became this modern-day spectacle, with the media propelling politicians to a celebrity status, politicians have been expected to have a certain image. Likewise, if a presidential hopeful does not address certain myths in their discourse, they violate a sense of nationalism and cultural values. Therefore, the use of myths in the political context is crucial, and if utilized correctly, can result in political and personal success for the candidate.

Political myths function similarly to general myths in that they promote the dominant structure of a particular culture to reinforce particular values. Edelman (1975) argues, “Political language can evoke a set of mythic beliefs in subtle and powerful ways” (p. 131). Political situations tend to fall into symbolic molds that have been established over time (Bennett, 1980). While the exigence and the actual speech delivered in response to the situation may differ, themes of political myths remain constant and run throughout political discourse. Myths are rarely explicitly stated and typically the values and characteristics of myths are hidden in stories or anecdotes rather than introduced as a

“myth.” Good politicians are masterful orators who can skillfully weave mythic elements in and out their speeches without sounding overtly manipulative. Myths have a powerful grip on psyches and when myths are presented, critical evaluation and scrutiny are bypassed (Braden, 1975). Myths often shape a public’s perception of political reality, and they do so by evading analytical review. The framing of situations, historical events, and political figures are all shaped by the underlying myths that are presented. The frontier myth and the American Dream myth are two myths that have been used repeatedly in politics.

The frontier myth presents a tension between civilization and savages, and individuality and communal values. The frontier myth portrays the frontiersman or cowboy exploring the unsettled land of the Wild West in search of free land and unlimited opportunities (Jones, 2011). The frontier myth encompasses ideals about challenging the unknown, crusading the limitless frontier, and becoming epic heroes for conquering the west (Dorsey, 1995). The myth encompasses expectations about gender, denoting men as the hero and women as secondary characters. In the frontier myth, the men are rugged, individual cowboys, outlaws, or educated Easterners utilizing business knowledge to capitalize on the unexplored opportunities, and are the ones who possess the epitomized values (Rushing, 1983). The frontier myth provided the foundation for the American Dream myth (Rushing, 1986).

Presidents Kennedy, Reagan, and Roosevelt all invoked the frontier myth to symbolize values of commitment, prosperity, and progress in various ways (Dorsey, 1995; Dorsey, 1996, & Sallot, 1990). For example, Kennedy, when discussing the Vietnam War and the Peace Corps, utilized the frontier myth to justify the expansion of

the organization (Dorsey, 1996). Kennedy argued that the Peace Corps was a “reincarnation of American pioneers who braved a new world of dangers in pursuit of global welfare” (Dorsey, 1996, p. 44). Furthermore, Sallot (1990) claims that Reagan did not just play the role of the epic hero, but he was the hero. Reagan was the perfect image of courage, fearlessness, and grace; values and characteristics Reagan embodied in both his professional and personal life (Sallot, 1990). During the early 1900s, President Theodore Roosevelt used the myth of the western frontier to support his policy on conservation. Roosevelt took the frontier myth and altered it to mean less about expansionism and more about environmental management (Dorsey, 1995). Instead of exploration and conquering new property, Roosevelt used the frontier myth in his discourse to stress how opportunity would cease to exist without an agenda of preservation. The frontier myth helped Roosevelt transcend legislative concerns regarding the environment as well as cement conservation as a moral imperative in the minds of citizens (Dorsey, 1995). All three presidents employed the foundational tenets of the frontier myth as justification for their political agenda.

The American Dream myth references how individuals navigate life’s challenges to achieve success and wealth. This myth typically has two themes that are articulated. The first theme consists of the “rags to riches” saga and materialistic values (Fisher, 1973). The American Dream is about having nice cars, extravagant houses in the suburbs, and a heterosexual, nuclear family. The second theme of the American Dream consists of egalitarian values, the belief that anyone can be a part of the American Dream as long as they are willing to work hard (Fisher, 1973). The two themes are intertwined, suggesting a direct relationship between hard work, self-reliance and material wealth. If one is

independent, autonomous, and is willing to work hard, then they can be included in the American Dream myth. More specifically, the values that the American Dream myth promotes include freedom, equality, democracy, religious independence, wealth, Puritan work ethic, new beginnings, and consumption and leisure (DeSantis, 1998). Ultimately, the myth implies that anyone can achieve the American Dream with effort, cooperation, hard work, and optimism; with those who do achieve the American Dream reap the benefits of prosperity and relaxation. While the American Dream is often discussed as the ultimate destination, the myth is in crisis; as Hoerl (2002) notes, it is in decline due to the economic crisis, cities becoming more expensive so that the suburbs do not indicate upward mobility, diversification of the suburbs, and the shrinking middle class.

The values in the most prevalent political myths that continue to be used in American politics are transnational and can be applied to Russia's political and social context, especially in terms of Vladimir Putin. For instance, the frontier myth portrays heroes with characteristics of courage, expansionism, fearlessness, masculinity, and patriarchy. Traditionally, Russia and the larger Eastern European culture have been male-dominated, with strong masculine figures and values at the center of the political and social scenes (Plamper, 2012). Even after the iron curtain collapsed, Russia still looked for a strong, authoritative president to reunite the splintered culture and charter the new political system (Plamper, 2012). More specifically, Putin often is photographed engaging in behaviors that would be considered courageous, fearless, and masculine. Putin is unlike any former Russian president in that he is more than just a president; he is athletic, adventurous, and charts new territory, qualities that are closely aligned with the characteristics demonstrated in the frontier myth.

The American Dream myth also has values that are transferrable to the Russian political context and Vladimir Putin. In the American Dream myth, the individual can gain success and wealth by hard work, dedication, and going the extra mile. Putin has strategically molded his political career by joining the KGB, representing the interests of a bifurcated country, and by adapting to the changing political state around him, if only for egotistic reasons (Plamper, 2012). Putin undoubtedly is aware of his personal and professional status and through hard work, capitalizing on photographic opportunities, and strategically planning and executing political moves, Putin has successfully stayed in power for over eighteen years and enjoys a great amount of personal wealth. Putin is an example of hard work, dedication, expansionism, fearlessness, and courage; these are values demonstrated in the American Dream.

Likewise, as Russia attempts to become more westernized and move from a controlled economy to a more free market economy, the ideals of the American Dream are becoming more prevalent in Russian culture. Between the years of 1999 and 2008, Russia was one of the fastest growing economies in the world, largely due to values that closely align with those in the American Dream myth (Guriev & Tsyvinski, 2010). For instance, the values of self-enhancement, materialism, and wealth increasingly are associated with Russian culture (Magun & Rudnev, 2012). Furthermore, the values of competition, personal success, and power also are manifested prominently in the culture (Magun & Rudnev, 2012). After the USSR collapsed, the country experienced more freedom to pursue personal prosperity and affluence, resulting in the economic peak during Putin's first and second terms in office. Even as the culture and economy are still transitioning, elements of the American Dream are represented. This myth is present in

both the United States and Russia; it thereby provides a theoretical framework for interpreting Putin's images.

### **Gender Myths**

Closely related to political myths are gender myths, which highlight the interdependent nature of politics and masculine characteristics. The myth of the hero is one myth where the masculine is epitomized. The myth of the hero describes the masculine journey full of adventure, challenges, trials, the ultimate "boon," and self-actualization (Campbell, 1973). Women in myths are secondary characters who are overwhelmingly dominated by men and have only two roles: the good and the bad (Rushing, 1983). In the myth of the hero, the woman is either the goddess or the temptress, aspects incarnate in every woman, which the hero needs to master. The hero embarks on the journey intended for growth and awareness, to bring back knowledge, consciousness, and insight as a "master of two worlds," (Campbell, 1973). In the frontier myth, the feminine is overthrown by masculine values and expectations, as the frontier was a mythically masculine place that celebrated exploration and heroism. The characteristics associated with frontier masculinity include physical and moral strength, adventurism, independence, freedom, and aggression (Lewis, 2011). Masculinity also is demonstrated in the language of exploration, referring to the West as "The Virgin Land" (Lewis, 2011). Masculinity and patriarchal ideologies are found all throughout literature and permeate popular culture, particularly politics.

Many cultures, including the United States and Russia, traditionally were founded on patriarchal values. The word patriarchy means, "rule by the fathers" (Wood, 2011). Patriarchal cultures were created and ruled by men and the ideological assumptions of the



culture reflected the male perspective. The concept of patriarchy, and the values associated with patriarchy, are thus a cultural construction. A patriarchal society is one where men hold privileged positions, are the primary decision makers; these cultures embody values such as masculinity, aggression, power, and strength (Hatfield, 2010; Wood, 2001). In Russia, traditional gender roles and patriarchy were key characteristics in both Soviet and post-Soviet times (Ashwin, 2000). Women were defined by their role as mothers and their duty to produce future workers for the country. Men, meanwhile, were to serve as the workers and leaders of the state. Ultimately, the principles of patriarchy were and continue to be woven into the fabric of Russian culture. Despite its cultural change, patriarchal values and the notion of traditional masculinity are still dominant.

Gender myths are particularly prevalent in social media and film. Hegemonic masculinity is the idealized form of the masculine character including “toughness and competitiveness, the subordination of women, and the marginalization of gay men” (Connell, 1990, p. 94). Tujillo (1991) notes that hegemonic masculinity includes physical force and control, occupational achievement, patriarchy, and heterosexuality. Masculinity has been linked with powerful social positions, and traditionally was defined and portrayed through sex-role ideologies (Hatfield, 2010). Sports is one area where the ideals of masculinity are prevalent, and more recently, action and adventure films, being very male-dominated and male-defined, have transformed the meaning of masculinity. Adding to the already existing hegemonic ideas of masculinity, sports underscore that masculinity means aggression, weapons and machinery, strength, athleticism, and power

(Hanke, 1998). These films define men in terms of how aggressive, powerful, and authoritative they are in relation to other individuals.

The physical element to masculinity that is portrayed in the media, is muscularity (Hanke, 1998; Morrison & Halton, 2009). Muscular body types are the most common male body type appearing in the media, and more muscular men are associated with characteristics of assertiveness, confidence, aggressiveness, athleticism, and success (Morrison & Halton, 2009). In Nakayama's (1994) analysis of the film *Showdown in Little Tokyo*, he notes that masculinity is marked from the outset of the film, as the film begins with images of "hyper-masculinized torsos, bulging arms, pectorals, and bulging shoulders" (Nakayama, 1994, p. 167). Muscular bodies, threatening weapons, and codes of violence and power are seen throughout the movie, and masculinity is the central source of the main character's representational power. Nakayama (1994) states that whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity have remained relatively unharmed by critical gaze because masculinity, as it is defined in the media, is generally accepted as what men should be. This lack of critical reflection about masculinity accounts for the perpetuation of gender myths in both the media and the political context.

Political discourse is assertive, policy driven, aggressive, and confident. The myth of gender in politics thus defines that government as reserved for more masculine behaviors, messages, and experiences (Meeks, 2012). In general, strong myths regarding the appropriateness of gender professions exist, especially in executive offices. According to Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (1996), "The presidency is associated with institutions that have historically barred women from entrance, including politics, the military, and athletics" (p. 343). The masculine traits of strength, aggressiveness,

assertiveness, independence, athleticism, manliness, and competence are perceived as more related to capable leadership than feminine traits of warmth, compassion, emotionality, and congeniality (Banwart & McKinney, 2005). Perceptions about leadership ability also are based on the body of the leader. Masculinity is associated with muscularity and athleticism; these characteristics also are indicative of presidential competence. For instance, Kiewe (1999) suggests that politics still is considered a masculine occupation, and that those on top of the political system must assume a “healthy body”; the body politic is “an extension of masculinity” (p. 89). Voters draw conclusions based on perceptions of candidate character and political competence through demonstration of either masculine or feminine characteristics (Meeks, 2012). Gender myths posit that good politicians are those who possess the typical, gender appropriate, masculine traits associated with public office.

Gender and political myths are largely interdependent. Gender myths suggest the prominence of patriarchal values while political myths reveal the emphasis on masculine traits. Most nations are founded on concepts of patriarchy, including Russia (Plamper, 2012). As demonstrated in fundamental myths, patriarchy implies male dominated and privileged institutions, particularly government. In order to be successful, politicians must integrate myths of gender plus political myths with which the country can identify.

Media and popular culture play a principal role in producing, promoting, and reinforcing gender and political myths. The media is fundamental in reflecting the dominant myths that exist in a culture. The individuals who exist in a particular culture, in turn, interpret messages from the media in particular ways and reemphasize the overriding myths that are filtered through the media. In the age of social media,

individuals actually can become producers of media, resulting in a cyclical process of the media and culture influencing each other to co-construct meaning and perpetuate myths. For example, images of Presidents Reagan, Bush and Obama depict masculine qualities. In the photos, the presidents are riding horses, chopping wood, clearing brush, or playing golf or basketball, which are all very manly activities (see Appendix, Figures 4, 5, 6). At every site of meaning, production, construction, the image itself, or where and how various audiences see the image, masculinity is at the forefront. The images of the presidents exemplify the intersection of gender and political myths by connecting masculinity with political mythic values of heroism, opportunity, conquering the land, and strong work ethic in both professional and personal realms. Ultimately, the media sets the agenda for what culture should focus on, aligning the content with gender and political expectations; consequently, the media play a critical role in co-creating and disseminating myths.

The discussion of myths is important for this thesis for several reasons. First, narratives that totalize cultural order and explain knowledge and experience provide citizens with models for their lives and are used by politicians to convey their visions for society. These narratives imply a collective and accepted knowledge; hence, their use strengthens the messages. Also, while the majority of research conducted on myths details the ones that are prevalent in American culture, some myths are transcultural. The masculine gender expectations of presidents and other political offices are similar around the world and especially in Russia (Plamper, 2012). Putin exhibits mannerisms and characteristics similar to American presidents including domination, manliness, and athleticism. Both countries expect presidents to be masculine, aggressive, and stately, so

mythic theory is an essential tool when dissecting Putin's images during office. Third, mythic research has mainly focused on the presence of myths in stories, speeches, movies, and candidate personas. This analysis will focus on the presence of myth in Putin's photographs and the mythic frameworks employed by audiences to interpret his images. Myth, as it is applied to still photography, allows researchers to expand the use of grand narratives to explain cultural and political norms.

### **The Atlantic**

Vladimir Putin has been seen in photographs engaging in wild excursions and excavations, posing with children and bikers, and embracing animals for the purpose of raising awareness for cultural and society issues. For the purpose of this thesis, the photographs taken from 2009 to 2011 were selected as the focus for several reasons. First, Putin left the presidency and returned as Prime Minister of Russia in 2008. Putin was then reelected as president in 2012. Putin spent the years of 2009 through 2011 preparing to run as president once again; therefore the images at this time were important because they signify a transition period for the country and for the political career of Putin. Second, there is an increase in the amount of images during these years. Putin has been photographed his entire eighteen years in office, but the majority of images circulated internationally have come from these years. Finally, since the 2012 election was controversial with Putin returning for a third term as president, which was previously outlawed in the Russian constitution, the images leading up to the election are significant. This thesis examines how images have the power to alter perceptions through their composition and mythic dimensions.

The artifacts for this thesis are found at the website *The Atlantic* (“Vladimir Putin, action man,” 2011). While Putin’s images have circulated in many American and Russian publications, *The Atlantic* has a compilation of over thirty photographs from 2007 to 2011. This archive provides not only the photographs, but also the date they were taken, by whom, and what Putin was doing in each image. Putin’s images also have been featured in numerous American and international magazines and newspapers. For instance, many of Putin’s images that are collected in *The Atlantic* also appear in *Time Magazine*, *Huffington Post*, *The Economist*, *Reuters*, an international news agency headquartered in London, and *The Moscow Times*, an English language Russian magazine. The number of media that published Putin’s images indicates how widely his pictures circulated. Putin is internationally known, not only for his political hold on Russia, but also because his images are circulated throughout the world. *The Atlantic’s* collection of photographs provides for a comprehensive compositional analysis of Putin’s many styles of photos.

### **Preview of Chapters**

The remainder of this thesis is divided into three chapters. In chapter two, the existing literature of visual rhetoric including why photographs are essential to image creation, identification, and to altering perceptions of presidential candidates is reviewed. Also in chapter two, aspects of visual rhetoric and semiotic tools, in addition to the “mythic presidency,” which combines the myth and semiotic perspectives, creating the framework to analyze Putin’s images is detailed. In chapter three, further background information about Vladimir Putin is reviewed, including his rise to political success and leadership style. The mythic presidency developed in chapter two is then used to analyze

the artifacts. Finally, in the concluding chapter of this thesis, future implications of visual rhetoric and the mythic presidency, conclusions about Putin's images and whether they were effective, and future considerations about political images are discussed.

## **II. THE MYTHIC PRESIDENCY: VISUAL RHETORIC AND SEMIOTICS**

An analysis of Vladimir Putin's images presents a unique opportunity to uncover mythic themes by examining visual components of the images. Since the meaning of these texts lies in the visual elements found in the image, the semiotic perspective is used in conjunction with mythic analysis to analyze and more fully explain the impact of Putin's images. Semiology is an extension of myth and helps to further demonstrate cultural meaning and interpretation, in addition to providing a deeper understanding of the text (Barthes, 1972). Thus, this chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section visual rhetoric is discussed: what it is, how visibility defines culture, how images gain influence, and the specific type of visual rhetoric that Putin employs. In the second section, the semiotic perspective and the concepts that provide the tools necessary to critically analyze Putin's images are explained in detail. Finally, in the third section, the combinatory result of the mythic and semiotic perspective that is used to create the concept of the mythic presidency and is used to assess the nature and effect of Putin's images is discussed.

### **Visual Rhetoric**

Visual images are rhetorical. In the form of photographs, moving images, body rhetoric, monuments, statues, and visual events, visual rhetoric is influential in shaping perceptions and altering understandings. While electronic media undoubtedly have furthered the use and effect of visual images, images and visual rhetoric were present far



before computers, internet, and media in general. Gotthold Lessing, an eighteenth-century dramatist, was among the first to emphasize the power of visual rhetoric (Zelizer, 2010). Images can only capture a moment; the most poignant moment, decided by the photographer or viewer's attribution, often is what is represented visually. Images, therefore, represent the "decisive," "pregnant," and "story-telling" moment that evokes emotional responses and invites viewers to make inferences, leading to an impact on perceptions (Zelizer, 2010). Since the creation of photography, visual images have been used as a prominent method for capturing historical events. As technology progressed, the ability to capture and preserve slices of reality became more possible ("Early modern photography," 2012). With modern technology, the media, and the constant display of images, photography offered a chance to change paradigms of visibility and ways of seeing.

We are a society of the spectacle (Debord, 1967). Because visuals are pervasive, Evans and Hall (1999) conclude that we are a "visual culture," that is "distinguished by the ubiquity of visual forms of communication that appear in multiple media outlets at the same time (such as television, the internet, cell phones, and magazines)" (p. 7). This emphasis on the visual is defined as "ocularcentrism," the idea that while written and spoken texts still have an undeniable influence in western culture, what is seen has an even greater impact than what is heard (Jay, 1993). Thus, visual images function as "transparent ciphers of information through which a viewer looks to see fact"; because visuals are central in society they should be looked at for the inevitable encoded meaning (Sperling, 2011, p. 27). Images not only are persuasive in and of themselves, but in an ocularcentric and visual culture we learn ways of seeing and are socialized into a

particular set of ideologies that shape how images are decoded and internalized. Ultimately, culture teaches us how to see, and what is seen is culturally constructed. Therefore, images can function and be persuasive on both an individual and cultural level, with meanings infused both from personal experiences and perceptions and dominant cultural ideologies.

Visual rhetoric invariably is linked to our social, political, and cultural lives, whether consciously or unconsciously. Visuality is related to knowledge, and seeing is equated with believing. In the political context, for instance, inferences made about particular political figures by the viewing audience are based on the images that are circulated to the public. Joseph Stalin particularly was known for his use of images to control public discourse and opinions about his power, which unconsciously affected perceptions of his likeability (Plamper, 2012). Between the 1920s and 1950s, Stalin used oil paintings of himself to saturate the Soviet nation with positive images to increase his amiability, and the images were so pervasive and inescapable that Stalin established a cult-like following among the Soviet people (Pampller, 2012). In this example, the images were linked to the people's political, social, and cultural lives, resulting in years of leadership and power for Stalin.

Visual rhetoric constructs our sense of reality by altering perceptions, shaping understandings of the world, and creating identification with the viewers. As DeLuca and Demo (2000) state, "Images and visuals, not just pictures, are important not because they represent reality, but create it" (p. 244). Words and images, in conjunction with one another, have the ability to alter perceptions, create an experience, and highlight the ideological assumptions at play. Visuals also are an important rhetorical device because

they evoke common humanity, create consubstantiality, and select and deflect certain understandings (Gallagher & Zagacki, 2005). Since images present a snapshot of reality, thus freezing a moment in time, they are drawing attention to a very specific part of what is depicted. The image, then, helps to shape our understanding by highlighting what is featured in the image and deflecting what is absent from the image. Visual rhetoric is powerful because it creates identification with the viewers, evoking emotional responses that entice the viewers to recognize and empathize with the subject matter. Emotional responses often are necessary to achieve the intended effect of altering perceptions, which is what renders visual rhetoric so potent (Atkins-Sayre, 2010).

Regardless of the type of visual symbol, there are specific material qualities that create the visual that influence the way it is viewed, perceived, and interpreted. Rose (2012) suggests that meaning is created in three places: the production of the image, the image itself, and the audience. How an image is made can contribute to the effect that it has on its viewers. For instance, the look of early photography differs greatly from the appearance of current photography simply because the instrument used is different. Current photographic techniques allow photographers the compositional freedom to craft images in particular ways. The editing of an image, specifically through the use of current computer software such as Photoshop, also presents opportunities for new and unique ways of creating an image. Finally, where and when the visual symbol is created affects the perception of it.

The second site of meaning is the image itself, with the visual components such as color and frame creating the meaning (Rose, 2012). For example, Ansel Adams is famous for capturing picturesque landscapes in black in white, and his photographs are popular

largely because they present landscapes in a manner that differs from typical color photographs. Adams defends his compositional choices by saying that black and white landscapes highlight the majesty and sentimentality of the landscape in a way that color cannot (Hagen, 1995). The mere absence of color from Adam's photographs changes the interpretation of the image. The framing of the image is another compositional element that has connotative implications. Images isolate a particular scene and photographers make conscious decisions about what to include and exclude in the shot. Thus, an image's meaning is determined by what is represented in addition to what is absent.

The last site of meaning that has an effect on the interpretation of the visual is the audience (Rose, 2012). For instance, different ages, genders, geographic locations, and cultures will read images differently. When looking at an image, audiences must decode it, and can either accept the image for its intended effect, negotiate the meaning, or oppose it completely, a process which Fiske (1994) terms "audiencing." Decoding an image in the dominant position suggests that the audience or viewer decodes the visual image in an overriding, hegemonic, and ideological viewpoint (Hall, 1984). Audiences operating in this position decode the meaning of the visual directly as the production and handling teams encode it, and the visual is interpreted in the way it was intended. The negotiated position acknowledges the hegemonic position but makes situational exceptions (Hall, 1984). In this reading, the audience recognizes the ideologies at play, but can interpret the visual to represent something different. The third reading is the oppositional position, in which the audience opposes the hegemonic reading. Rather than accepting the message in the way it was designed, the audience detotalizes the message and retotalizes it within an alternate frame of reference (Hall, 1984). Each individual

brings with them a set of experiences, knowledge, and belief systems that impact the way a visual image is understood and how it is decoded.

Each site of meaning has three different aspects, also known as modalities, which contribute to the understanding of an image. The sites are where meaning is made, while the modalities are how meaning is made (Rose, 2012). The technological modality refers to the apparatus or instrument used to make the visual (Mirzoeff, 1998). The compositional modality refers to the visual elements used to create the image, including color, framing, editing, and space. Finally, the social modality includes the factors that surround an image and how it is interpreted, such as economic, political, social, and institutional realities. The three modalities are found in each site, which make the distinction between sites somewhat unclear. The sites and modalities of meaning highlight the complexity of visual rhetoric as well as note the importance of examining images from several vantage points.

Since politicians are removed from the average individual, our sense of “knowing” our political officials is brought about primarily from their representations in the media, whether in moving or still images. Visual rhetoric, when perceived as truth, can become what Baudrillard (1994) called a simulation, where individuals can no longer make the distinction between the real and unreal. Images are a representation of the real, and yet for some, the representation is the only access to the real so the images take the place of the real. Baudrillard (1994) asserts that simulation is conceptualized as a process that produces “simulacra”; the basic function of the media is to create these simulations. Political hopefuls understand the necessity of positive representations from the media, because without appropriate and flattering coverage, they can lose their race for office.

The images of political candidates that are disseminated to the public impact the way the voting constituency perceives them. The photographs of political candidates, or representation of the real, become “more real” than the candidates themselves, further demonstrating how visual rhetoric, the compositional elements, staging, handling, and circulation of the image have dramatic implications for understanding and explaining persons and events.

Visual rhetoric unquestionably is a prevailing source of influence and the media is largely responsible for the ubiquity and persuasiveness of images. By providing snapshots of reality, images have the ability to shape worldviews, evoke emotional responses, and create consubstantiality with their viewers. Many factors, such as production, visual composition, and viewership determine how images are interpreted, and since images mediate our understandings of historical, cultural, and political events, images become representations through which our reality is shaped. Therefore, in a culture defined as ocularcentric, understanding how visuals impact public opinions, reflect cultural values, and alter perceptions is essential.

### **Photographic Images**

Visual rhetoric comes in many forms. Photographic images are one type of visual rhetoric that presidential candidates repeatedly have used to convey a certain message. Photographic images, according to Hariman and Lucaites (2003), were once thought to be windows through which individuals had access to the “real,” and therefore are the “ideal medium for naturalizing a repressive structure of signs” (p. 37). Photographs also are said to be “texts inscribed in terms of what we may call photographic discourse” (Burgin, 1992). Memorable images are familiar because they petition to the viewer’s sense of

ideological and cultural affiliations. For instance, photographs of politicians all offer somewhat similar depictions of officials looking physically appropriate and engaging in activities befitting the office. Anyone can take a picture, but memorable photographs combine elements of aestheticism, beauty, fear appeals, boldness, and forceful depictions of events (Zelizer, 2004). Memorable photographs rely on decisions made by the many individuals who are a part of the production and circulation of those images.

Truly memorable photographs have the potential to become iconic, with their influence resonating throughout history. Photographs, when iconic, have more value than purely documenting the past. These photographs bear witness to something bigger than mere snapshots in time and represent moments in history marked with great significance. Iconic photographs provide definitive representations of political, social, and economical crises and function to motivate public action (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003). In order for photographs to become iconic, they must be highly recognizable by members of a culture, understood to represent historical events, elicit strong emotional responses, and be regularly reproduced (Lucaites & Hariman, 2001).

Iconic photographs have five vectors of influence and prevail as being the primary representations for significant persons and events because they establish collective memory (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). Iconic photographs reproduce specific cultural ideologies, communicate social knowledge, shape shared remembrance, model citizenship, and provide figural resources for communicative action (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). Furthermore, iconic photography and photojournalism underwrite democratic culture and are an important technology of democratic citizenship (Lucaites & Hariman, 2001; Lucaites & Hariman, 2007). For instance, photographs have the ability

to evoke emotional responses, and, when viewed, can motivate individuals to action. Images such as the Vietnamese girl running from napalm and the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima redefine our relationship with the political and social world because they force the viewer to contemplate the situation. Therefore, photographs are significant not only because they are pervasive, but also because these images equip the viewer to act as a citizen.

Iconic photographs achieve four purposes: they tell a narrative, dictate cultural norms and expectations, create a shared understanding of the past, and motivate change. For instance, during the civil rights movement Charles Moore documented the 1963 protests in Birmingham with some of his images receiving national and international attention (Johnson, 2007). During such a polarizing and emotional time, the images were critical in the creation of a cohesive narrative that proved to be vital for the civil rights movement. The images depict scenes of violence and brutality as police officers sprayed African Americans with water hoses and allowed their guard dogs to attack them. Thus, the narrative is one of juxtaposition, with violence contrasting with nature, humans in opposition with beast, good guys versus bad guys, and dissonance against order (Johnson, 2007). The images became evidence that the event happened by providing legitimacy for the claims of maltreatment of African Americans. The narrative of the images prompted an emotional response in both American and international audiences, thus making the invisible visible.

Images are a reflection of cultural ideologies and values, and also dictate those norms and expectations. For instance, Hariman and Lucaites (2007), in their article on the Times Square kiss, note that the contents of the photo prescribe certain cultural standards



that were characteristic for the time. The image portrays a soldier kissing a nurse after the announcement of victory over Japan, with Times Square as the backdrop. While the kiss was spontaneous, Hariman and Lucaites (2007) note that the physical position of the soldier and nurse suggests that men are the ones to act and women are to be acted upon. In the photograph, race becomes “invisible” because the characters are Caucasian, and war becomes just because the portrayal of victory and triumph over evil permeates the image. Finally, the image promotes heterosexuality, as it is a man and a woman who are featured in the photograph. The photograph reflects the cultural norms of the time, but as the image became more identifiable and circulated throughout the country, the ideologies the photograph represented were endorsed by the many publications that printed the photograph as the “right” ideologies.

Photographs often are the only visual documentation of historical events, and are therefore influential in shaping our understanding of those occurrences. For instance, in Atkins-Sayre’s (2012) article examining Eudora Welty’s collection of photographs detailing African American women during the Depression-era South she posits that the photographs are influential in challenging the typical idea of African American women at that time. The images showcase the women’s humanity and love, which contests the memory of the segregated South and highlights the more positive moments despite the traumas of the Great Depression. During an era characterized by pain and suffering, Welty’s collection diluted the trauma of African Americans by presenting an alternative view of how African American women experienced life (Atkins-Sayre, 2012). Similarly, images capturing the fall of the Twin Towers were influential in molding the language and emotions associated with September 11<sup>th</sup> and the War on Terror (Hatfield, 2008). For

instance, the images of the towers bellowing with smoke, first responders carrying wounded individuals away from the towers, and piles of debris amongst the chaos captured the world's attention by demonstrating an essence of fear. The images serve as a reminder of the terror associated with that day (Hatfield, 2008). The Great Depression and September 11<sup>th</sup> photographs play an important role in the formation of collective memory and our understanding of those historical events.

Finally, images are dynamic because they motivate change by creating emotional dissonance in the minds of viewers. Atkins-Sayre (2010), in her article analyzing the images created by animal activist group PETA, suggests that by blurring the lines between humans and animals and giving animals human characteristics, viewers are prompted to behavioral and attitudinal changes. PETA relies on the assumption that rational individuals cannot observe such disturbing and morphed images without empathizing with the subjects; this dissonance causes permanent perceptual changes.

Photographs are critical for providing snapshots through which individuals have access to the "real." Since memorable images are widely circulated and seen by many, images are necessary for crafting a cohesive narrative and shared understanding of the past. Not only are photographs a reflection of cultural values, but they also dictate cultural norms by promoting certain ideologies and expectations that are held by society. While still images appear to be relatively simple visual stimuli compared to moving images, they are a complex form of visual rhetoric that is comprised of many layers of compositional elements and signs.

## **Semiology**

Elements of semiology are used to examine the mythic qualities and visual impact of Vladimir Putin's images. Semiology, also referred to as semiotics, is a set of analytical tools designed for taking apart an image at the fundamental level, and tracing how it works in relation to a broader system of meaning (Barthes, 1964; Williamson, 1978). Semiologists operate under the assumption that images are not natural and they are interested in how images are constituted in the social world. Because images are the result of human creation, ideologies are embedded in the compositional elements; therefore, images are never neutral. Semiology strips down what is evident on the surface of the visual to reveal the layers underneath the obvious. Balaban and Bryson (1991) state, "human culture is made up of signs, each of which stands for something other than itself, and the people inhabiting culture busy themselves making sense of those signs" (p. 174). Thus, semiology is the study of signs.

In order to comprehend the complexities of language, Ferdinand de Saussure developed the concept of the sign to represent the basic unit of language (Saussure, 1959). Signs are comprised of two parts, the signifier and the signified; however, these parts are only distinguishable at the analytical level. The signifier represents the actual image, so it is whatever is present in the frame (Saussure, 1959). The signified is the idea or the meaning that is connected to the image. For instance, the signifier in a picture of roses would be the actual roses. The signified would be what the roses represent, such as love, affection, and romanticism (Saussure, 1959). The repetition of signs makes them familiar, and the relationship between signifier and signified becomes conventionalized; most individuals recognize roses to mean love. Balaban and Bryson (1991) note that it is

very difficult to differentiate between visual signs because the parts of an image have no clear boundaries, and the signifier and signified are largely interdependent. The first stage in a semiological analysis is to identify the signs of an image, finding the building blocks upon which the image was built on and achieved its meaning.

To further elaborate on the relationships between signs, Saussure determined that some signs gain their meaning syntagmatically and others paradigmatically (Saussure, 1959). Syntagmatic signs describe combinatory relationships, meaning the signs gain their meaning from the other signs around them. For syntagmatic signs, the sequence and placement of the images are crucial, which helps explain why editing plays a substantial role in the success or failure of most images (Culler, 1986). Paradigmatic relationships are the opposition of signs, with meaning obtained through contrast with all other possible signs (Saussure, 1959). To identify paradigmatic signs, one must look for what is present in an image and what is absent. Often, the decision to omit a particular component from a visual is as important as the decision to include a component.

Other elements of semiology that are necessary for an analytical examination of Putin's images include anchorage, synecdoche, and metonymy. Signs can have many possible interpretations. Anchorage is the element, visual or textual, that allows the viewer or reader to make certain inferences about the intended meaning (Barthes, 1977). When images can be understood and decoded in several ways, there must be certain features that relay the proper information. Signs can also be synecdochal or metonymic, meaning that they carry a higher-level range of significance (Rose, 2012). Synecdoche and metonymy are defined as two of Burke's (1969) four tropes; synecdoche is representation and metonymy is reduction. More specifically, signs that are synecdochal

represent a relationship of a part of something standing in for a whole (Burke, 1969; Willerton, 2005). For example, photographs of the White House have come to represent all aspects of the United States presidency. When an image of the White House is viewed, there is no question about what it represents, and viewers can deduce its meaning quite simply. Metonymy, conversely, is a relationship of reduction, and a single sign represents an entire concept or idea (Burke, 1969; Willerton, 2005). For example, images such as the Statue of Liberty, a bald eagle, or the American flag often are used to embody America and concepts of patriotism, nationalism, and loyalty. All of America can be reduced to a single image of a flag. Signs can work in different ways, further demonstrating the multifaceted nature of images.

Signs refer to larger systems of meanings, often categorized as codes (Hall, 1984). Codes are a conventionalized way of making meaning based on a certain culture group and belief structure, and thus are the expression of ideologies. Codes allow semiologists access to broader ideologies in a society by examining their use. Furthermore, codes become dominant when they are widely used and understood as a norm. Images gain momentum and strength from familiarity and repetition, and we understand the meaning of images based on their frequently occurring visual structure. Therefore, individuals come to recognize certain visual structures to have specific meanings. Advertisements, in particular, rely on dominant codes and familiarity to sell their product. Williamson (1978) states that print images use already existing mythological language, sign systems, and dominant codes to construct a relationship between the signified and the signifier. Political images, in particular, provide examples of the complexities and layers embedded

into the compositional elements of an image, and semiology, signs, and codes provide the analytical tools to examine the images for their mythic significance.

### **Mythic Presidency**

Chapter one's discussion of myth indicated that several mythic themes run consistently throughout culture, as reflected in academic literature. Political myths such as the American Dream and the frontier myth, in addition to gender myths, all suggest topics, qualities, and characteristics that are expected of political leaders. Previous analyses indicate that politicians are expected to weave mythic tenets into their language and actions, and embody certain physical characteristics in order to be perceived as competent and capable; this is a visual, rhetorical, and cultural dimension that I term "mythic presidency." By using semiology to reveal the visual components that comprise Putin's images, how the mythic presidency is either revealed or concealed is explored in this thesis.

The mythic presidency is an extension of the rhetorical presidency. The rhetorical presidency is a result of the twentieth century generally and the media more specifically (Tulis, 1987). The rhetorical presidency began with Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, as these two presidents represent the bridge between the old and new rhetorical style of the office. Prior to the twentieth century, presidential communication was official and ceremonial and presidents preferred written communication between the branches of government to oral address straight to the people (Tulis, 1987). Instead of using mediated communication through Congress to speak to the people, Wilson transformed the nature of the presidency by adopting more direct and popular rhetoric.

The rhetorical presidency transformed traditional speech patterns and offered the idea of a “popular” president as an antidote for our pluralistic constitutional system (Tulis, 1987).

In addition to changing speech patterns, the mass media also contributed to the rise of the rhetorical presidency. Through the use of television and the internet, presidents are able to connect with the public on a more intimate level. The media presents the opportunity for presidents to address diverse audiences at one time, and media outlets often are the only access the public will have to their elected officials. The rhetorical presidency requires presidents to convey their values and political stances to the public directly, and the media provides the platform through which those principles are enacted. The mythic presidency further develops the rhetorical presidency by suggesting that presidents need to embody certain physical characteristics and personality traits in order for the performance to be believable and to become a “popular” president.

Politicians use mythic themes as a vehicle of persuasion. The American Dream and frontier myth are two myths that repeatedly have permeated political discourse, and those who utilize the myths do so in the attempt to create consubstantiality with the audience. Likewise, gender myths suggest that there are certain expectations about a president’s physical appearance and mannerisms. If these myths are used effectively, politicians can connect with the audience’s values, morals and beliefs regarding political ideologies and assumptions about the office. The result is the mythic presidency, which combines the behavioral characteristics, personality traits, and physical features that constitute political and gender myths.

There are four main components to the mythic presidency: *ascendancy*, *masculinity*, *identification*, and *physicality*; these four components include the behavioral

characteristics, personality traits, and physical features expected in “popular” presidents. Each component represents a separate feature necessary to achieve the mythic presidency, and while they are analyzed individually, the four components are interdependent and combine to create an overall effect. If one component of the mythic presidency is missing or overlooked in the representations of a political figure, the expectation of what a politician should be is not upheld. Thus, political figures need to be multifaceted, demonstrating how they possess the individual traits of the four components, in addition to harmoniously combining ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality into an entire persona.

To align with the mythic presidency and the component of *ascendancy*, presidents must embody the behavioral characteristics of power, strength and dominance, all of which are represented in the frontier myth. The frontier myth portrays the frontiersman or cowboy exploring the unsettled land of the Wild West in search of free land and unlimited opportunities (Jones, 2011). The acts of conquering new land, challenging the unknown, and crusading the mysterious West represent the fundamental behavioral characteristics of power, strength, and dominance. When presidential hopefuls campaign for votes, they often propose new policy initiatives and directions for government, stating that the previous administration failed to lead the country in an appropriate manner. Any time candidates campaign for office or recommend a new direction for the country they must show that they have the physical and mental strength to see the process through, as well as authority to command the nation’s loyalty and respect. These behavioral characteristics must be consistent in the politician’s entire persona, both oral speech and



visual representation; while power, dominance, and strength must be present in verbal and written discourse, the public must see these characteristics in their images as well.

The mythic presidency also requires presidents to possess a collaboration of personality traits that combines both *masculinity* and *identification*. Both the American Dream myth and the frontier myth convey masculine personality traits such as being assertive, fearless, hard working, courageous, heroic, individualistic, patriarchal, and having an attitude of expansionism (DeSantis, 1998; Dorsey, 1995). Political discourse is typically assertive, policy driven, aggressive, and confident, and gender is a performance, with masculinity achieved through words, acts, and gestures (Campbell, 1998). As leaders, politicians must present themselves as able to lead a country, represent the interests of the public, and charter new territory.

Typically, the more masculine characteristics are interpreted as signs of these abilities. Politicians need to capture the rags to riches mentality, showing how determination, drive, and a strong work ethic can turn meager beginnings into a successful career, all while demonstrating that their personal and professional accomplishments are the result of individual measures. Furthermore, politicians must express an attitude of progressivism to keep up with the changing cultural environment, while still maintaining features from traditional, patriarchal values. Gender myths in politics indicate that government is reserved for these more masculine behaviors, messages, and experiences (Meeks, 2012), and perceptions about the ability of an individual to lead are influenced by these masculine characteristics. Therefore, political images must portray individuals engaging in the visual equivalent of these manly personality traits in order to adhere to the mythic presidency.

While the presidency is predominately a masculine environment, the mythic presidency also includes humanistic personality traits and the ability to *identify* with the average individual. Identification with a politician and the myths they use is a critical component of the political process. Politicians win and lose elections based on their ability or inability to relate to the voting public and show that the interests of the country will be served under their administration. Thus, in addition to demonstrating the masculine characteristics that are necessary for political stamina, the mythic presidency includes the capability to appear relatable, personable, and imperfect. For instance, politicians weave the mythic themes of the American Dream throughout their discourse to convey a sense of connection with the audience. The American Dream myth references how individuals navigate life's challenges to achieve success and wealth, and consists of "rags to riches" and egalitarian values (Fisher, 1973). The public needs to feel as though their political representatives can identify and sympathize with their lives and experiences. While the majority of our political leaders are highly educated and come from wealthy families, most candidates frame the stories from their past to mimic the experiences that are typical for the average American. Politicians need to be perceived as less removed from the everyday American individual. Since our relationship with politicians is primarily mediated, the images that are produced must show not only the masculine personality traits associated with mythic presidency, but the personal and human qualities as well.

The last element of the mythic presidency is *physicality*. Politicians are expected to be healthy, athletic, and physically fit, and the body politic is an extension of masculinity (Kiewe, 1999). Gender myths suggest that voters draw conclusions about a

candidate's character and competence based on their physical appearance. For example, Franklin Delano Roosevelt suffered through great pain and discomfort to appear able-bodied enough to lead a country, despite having polio (Kiewe, 1999). Elements of the frontier myth, such as exploration and conquering uncharted land, also allude to muscularity and physicality. A politician would need to be healthy and muscular to embark on a journey marked by uncertainty and potential danger. Also, muscular body types are the most common male body that the media features, and more muscular men are associated with traits such as assertiveness, confidence, and success (Morrison & Halton, 2009). Since the public expects their presidents to interlace the values of these myths, it can be concluded that the public holds a certain physical presumption about the body. Muscularity is especially important in political images since the body is often the focal point of the images. Because photographs seemingly present a snapshot of reality, politicians often capitalize on the opportunity to portray a healthy, athletic, and physically fit exterior. Physicality becomes a crucial part of the mythic presidency.

To identify the mythic presidency and components of ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality in Vladimir Putin's images, a semiotic analysis examining color, shading, setting, framing, atmosphere, and activity is used to determine how the signs of the image align with the characteristics of the mythic presidency. The mythic qualities of the American Dream and frontier myths, in combination with gender expectations and representations in the media, provide the critical framework for identifying the visual equivalent of the mythic presidency. Signs of the mythic presidency are recognized through comparison of syntagmatic and paradigmatic signs, the signs in the image in addition to signs that are absent from the image. Because the mythic

presidency requires presidents to adhere to the values of a culture as represented in political and gender myths, the compositional elements of Putin's images are examined for their synecdochal and metonymic value. The visual components of Putin's images are evaluated in relation to how they reflect or deviate from the mythic presidency.

The mythic presidency extends the rhetorical presidency by suggesting that presidents must convey a certain set of behavioral characteristics, personality traits, and physical features in order to become the "popular" president. In the mythic presidency, politicians should convey power, strength, and masculinity, while being relatable, healthy, and able-bodied. The advantage of combining myth and semiology for this analysis is that this model provides a more complete examination of the unique visual qualities that characterize the politicians that are now household names and international figures. The rhetorical presidency allows politicians to communicate directly to the public, and since there are such stringent expectations about what politicians should communicate about and how they appear, the mythic presidency synthesizes those expectations to articulate the specific visual components that represent the typical, accepted, and anticipated president.

### **III. AN ANALYSIS OF THE MYTHIC PRESIDENCY IN VLADIMIR PUTIN'S IMAGES**

Vladimir Putin is widely known for his images, and has been documented engaging in an extensive range of activities from flying planes, swimming in Siberian waters, and riding horses to spearing whales, tracking tigers, and playing piano at benefit concerts. Because photography serves as a primary way of documenting Putin's agenda and power, his images are used to test the components of the mythic presidency. In the mythic presidency, politicians must convey ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality through their images in order to be desirable to the voting public.

This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, a detailed biographical account of Putin, including his KGB involvement, his rise to power, and his style of government is provided. In the second section, the semiotic approach is used to examine Putin's images and to test the assumptions of the mythic presidency. The scrutiny of Putin as historically known and Putin as displayed visually will provide a better understanding of how individual personalities and political profiles are conveyed via the mythic presidency in visual representations.

#### **Putin's Biography**

Vladimir Putin was born in Leningrad, Russia, on October 7, 1952 ("Vladimir Putin biography," 2013). Coming from humble means, Putin spent his childhood living in

a communal flat known as a *kommunalka*, which experts say helped shape his optimistic communist opinions (Roxburgh, 2012). While the conditions of the *kommunalka* were deplorable, with very few amenities shared by many people, the communal living and demonstration of post-war reconstruction represented the strength and unity of the communist party. Putin later attended Leningrad State University, graduating in 1975 with a degree in International Law. Putin joined the Communist Party of the Soviet Union during college and remained a member until the party dissolved in December 1991 (“Vladimir Putin biography,” 2013). Soon after earning his law degree, Putin joined the KGB as an intelligence officer and held the position until 1989; he stated that his ideas about the KGB “were based on romantic stories about the work of intelligence agents,” and that he was a “successful product of the Soviet upbringing” (Roxburgh, 2012).

Putin spent the first decade of his KGB service in Leningrad, Russia. While it is not known exactly what Putin did during this time, there is enough evidence from his work in counter intelligence and monitoring of foreigners to suggest that he was completely dedicated to the Soviet cause, which included incarcerating dissidents, confiscating literature proposing alternative forms of ideology, and controlling contact with anyone outside the Russian providence (Roxburg, 2012). Putin was promoted to the rank of major in 1985, and moved to East Germany to gather information about political figures who posed potential threats to Russia. Putin remained in East Germany until 1989, witnessing the gathering unrest of the people and the fall of the Berlin Wall. From this location, Russia’s future democratic president observed the beginning of the fall of the Communist Party and was reported as saying that he “resented the loss of influence and regarded it as a national humiliation” (Roxburgh, 2012).

Putin retired from the KBG as the rank of Colonel, and returned to Leningrad, which was soon renamed St. Petersburg. Putin began work in foreign relations, and met Anatoly Sobchak, who would prove to play an influential role in Putin's rise to political power. Sobchak, as the elected mayor of St. Petersburg and one of the leading free thinkers during this period, promoted Putin to deputy mayor, thus beginning Putin's political career ("Vladimir Putin biography," 2013). Putin claims that he supported and shared the democratic values of Sobchak and was a proponent of the coup against Gorbachev (Roxburgh, 2013). However, after Sobchak was voted out of office in 1996, Putin found himself without a job and headed to Moscow.

Boris Yeltsin was the acting president of Russia during this time. As the first leader of the new political system, he called for radical social and economic reform (Greesen, 2012). Despite Yeltsin's commitment to the reorganization of Russia, the country was battered, traumatized, and disorganized. Yeltsin had been ill for quite some time; many believed he drank heavily and described him as lethargic (Greesen, 2012). In his second term as president, Yeltsin's behavior became even more erratic as he missed crucial state dinners and political appearances, and he grew discontented with his administration, firing anyone who opposed him politically. Russia's hope for a democratic state with a fair but firm leader quickly diminished the longer Yeltsin was in office, and by 1999, Yeltsin's popularity rating was in the single digits (Greesen, 2012).

Through a combination of luck and acquaintances, Putin was appointed the deputy chief of staff in 1997 under the Yeltsin administration, the director of the Federal Security Service in 1998, and the head of the National Security Council in 1999 (Roxburgh, 2012). Consequently, Putin became a part of Yeltsin's inner circle known as

the Family, which was a crucial influence in Putin's ascent to the presidency. Yeltsin named Putin the prime minister of Russia in August, 1999, and his position was confirmed after a majority vote in the Duma, the Russian council (Greesen, 2012). Putin was the complete antithesis to Yeltsin. While Yeltsin was viewed as sickly, a drunkard, and unreliable, Putin was seen by the public as young, healthy, likeable, and the perfect candidate to replace Yeltsin as the leader of Russia (Greesen, 2012).

In September of 1999, towards the end of Yeltsin's second term in office, Russia experienced a series of bombings that furthered demonstrated the different governing and rhetorical styles of Yeltsin and Putin. When Putin addressed the explosions erupting over the country, he used the language of a strong, reliable leader who planned to rule with an iron fist (Greeson, 2012). Putin's strong personality and distinct oratorical style was a welcomed change for the polarized nation, and his popularity with the Russian public soared. When Yeltsin mysteriously resigned in December of 1999, Putin became the acting president of the Russian Federation. Yeltsin's resignation resulted in an accelerated election season, and Putin won the March presidential election in the first round with a fifty-three percent majority vote (Roxburgh, 2012).

Putin served two four-year terms as Russia's president between 2000 and 2008. During his second term, Putin handpicked Dmitry Medvedev as his successor, and appointed him to be the first deputy prime minister in 2005 ("Prominent Russians," 2013). Putin and Medvedev were former colleagues and Medvedev was thought of as Putin's protégé ("Vladimir Putin biography," 2013). As Putin prepared to leave office, he still was the most popular politician in Russia, and his popularity transferred to Medvedev as Putin's successor. Medvedev won the 2008 election in a seventy percent



landslide vote (“Prominent Russians,” 2013). Medvedev promised that if he won the election, Putin would be reappointed to be the prime minister, and days after the election Medvedev fulfilled his promise. Medvedev called for political and judicial reform, promises that won him favor in many Western countries. However, compared to the strong persona and rhetoric of Putin, Medvedev was viewed by other members of Russian government as a weak executive whose initiatives were subject to veto by Putin (“Vladimir Putin,” 2012). Although Putin was now second in command, he clearly still held a firm grip on the country’s direction and agenda (“Prominent Russians,” 2013), and that suspicion was intensified when Medvedev signed a law extending future presidential terms from four years to six years in what many saw as preparation for Putin’s return as Russia’s president (“Russian presidential term extended,” 2008).

In September of 2011, Putin confirmed the months of speculation by stating that he did indeed have intentions of running for a third term in office (Brooke, 2011), and in March 2012, Putin won the presidential election with a reported sixty-four percent of the vote. Despite the apparent majority vote, Putin’s opponents complained of widespread election fraud, and the election prompted protestors to speak out in opposition to Putin regaining power for a third presidential term (Heritage & Faulconbridge, 2012). Putin has remained in power for over a decade.

Putin has yet to relinquish his authoritarian rhetoric and leadership style. For instance, in June 2012, Putin signed a law imposing heavy fines on those who participate in unsanctioned demonstrations, limiting free speech (“Vladimir Putin,” 2012). In August 2012, three members of a female Russian punk rock band were sentenced to two years in prison for charges of “hooliganism” after criticizing Putin in one of their songs (Smith-

Spark, 2012). In a third example, Putin banned the adoption of Russian children by United States families, which took effect on January 1, 2013, stating that American families were abusing Russian children ("Russia's Putin signs," 2012). Following the USSR's collapse, and Yeltsin's poor attempt at reuniting the splintered country, Putin imposed a strong, centralized approach to power. Putin's style of governance can best be described as "monolithic, personified power, and its democratic legitimacy through regular elections" (Shevtsova, 2005). This combination of democracy and centralized power according to Shevtsova (2005), allows us to see Russia's, and especially Putin's priority: to remain a strong world power while simultaneously recognizing the need for modernization and democratization. While Putin has been well liked and received by the Russian public, his popularity is faltering ("Vladimir Putin," 2012). As Putin continues to be the prominent political figure and the one directing Russia's agenda, the public is becoming more insistent on a truly democratic leader.

Putin always has been a strong, commanding individual, and significantly, the images that represent Putin often are the only way to "know" him. The mythic presidency suggests that presidents must embody elements of ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality to become attractive to the media and the voting constituency. The visual representations of Putin potentially can convey the mythic presidency and influence public perceptions of him. In the next section, six of Putin's most widely circulated images in international and national publications are analyzed according to the assumptions of the mythic presidency.

## Images

Vladimir Putin seems to never miss a photographic opportunity, and consequently, a plethora of images exist that have come to characterize Putin's presidency. Several criteria were used to determine which images were significant for analysis. The images were selected based on their international and national recognition and their correspondence to the time frame from 2009 to 2011, which was Putin's interim between presidencies. Putin's influence extends beyond Russia; he is an international figure and his images circulate widely both in Russia and the United States. Therefore, the six images selected for analysis have been published both in international and United States publications, were taken by Russian photographers, and represent Putin between 2009 and 2011. These images signify a transition period for the country and for the political career of Putin. An influx of images also is evident between 2009 and 2011, possibly connected to Putin's preparation to run for a third term as president and his need to bolster his image.

The artifacts for this thesis are located on the website *The Atlantic* ("Vladimir Putin, action man," 2011). This compilation contains thirty-four photographs from 2007 to 2011, including the photographic image, the name of the photographer, where the image was featured, and a description of the activity in which Putin was engaging. The original thirty-four images were organized into six broad categories based on the general theme: for the people, animals/sensitivity, outdoorsman/adventurous, macho/manly, pedagogical, and professional/presidential. After the images were categorized, those that were taken between 2009 and 2011, and were featured in *Reuters*, an international news agency headquartered in London, or *The Moscow Times*, a daily Russian newspaper,

were selected for the analysis. These six images are examined from the semiotic perspective to discover the ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality dimensions of the mythic presidency.

Even though the images used in this thesis were circulated in Russian and American publications, it is important to note that the semiotic interpretation is primarily from a western perspective. The mythic presidency predominantly is grounded in western academic literature, drawing on American political myths, such as the American Dream and the Frontier myth, and gender expectations in American politics, which provide the fundamental assumptions of the theory. Also, to identify the mythic presidency in Putin's images, the visual signs must be decoded for their individual and combinatory meanings and the interpretation of these images is inevitably performed from a cultural position. Visuality and ways of seeing are the result of societal expectations, norms, and standards, and Putin's images were initially viewed in American publications, which conveyed their own perspectives to the interpretation and visual representation of Putin. However, information about Russian culture and style of government, both historically and presently, indicates that similar western values, such as the ones the mythic presidency was grounded in, are shared between the two cultures.

Russia traditionally is an autocratic nation, with a strong sense of patriarchy, hierarchy, and a tough, dominant leader (Ashwin, 2000; Plamper, 2012), traits that are similar to the mythic presidency characteristic of ascendancy. As the USSR collapsed and the country faced confusion, disarray, and turmoil, the need for a strong, dominant, authoritative president became even more crucial. Much like American presidents who campaign for a new direction and change under their administration, Putin also ushered in

the possibility for a new Russia, leading through strength, assertion, and control (Shevtsova, 2005).

The mythic presidency also suggests that presidents, in both speech and action, need to enact a predominately masculine performance. Masculinity combines characteristics such as assertiveness, determination, drive, personal and professional success, and progressivism while still maintaining traditional values. Putin's personal orientation and Russia's cultural history both are masculine. Documentation of Putin's KGB involvement indicates that influence in his current authoritarian leadership style, as does the clear juxtaposition between democratization and traditional Russian governance under his rule (Ashwin, 2000; Plamper, 2012; Shevtsova, 2005; Shevtsova, 2007). Putin has achieved a great deal of personal and professional success and has remained a prominent figure in Russian politics for over a decade; he has demonstrated the characteristics of stamina and resolve. Moreover, the nation has not fully transitioned from a totalitarian regime to a democracy under Putin's rule, hence it holds to tradition in the midst of change. Therefore, Russia's transitory government, Putin's personal governing orientation, and a long legacy of patriarchal values all indicate that similar understandings of masculine behavior and the cultural dimensions of masculinity are shared between the United States and Russia.

Less shared, but still relevant to both cultures, is the mythic presidency characteristic of identification. Political leaders are only effective insofar as the people feel a sense of solidarity with them. Even in totalitarian or dictatorial systems, compliance from the citizenry is crucial. Stalin understood this reality and used oil paintings and positive portrayals of himself to command the respect and loyalty of the

community (Plamper, 2012). Likewise, by the end of Yeltsin's administration his popularity ratings were in the single digits (Greesen, 2012), and the contrast between Yeltsin's low popularity rating and Putin's extremely high appeal with the Russian public shows their understanding of the importance of creating identification with the voting constituency. Finally, Putin's athleticism and vigor are notable, and his personal commitment to health and fitness was a popular change from Yeltsin's apparent disregard for such a lifestyle (Greesen, 2012). His muscularity is recognized in both cultures, and Putin frequently displays his athletic build, thus emphasizing his strength and physical fitness.

While there is no way to prove that the Russian audience would interpret Putin's visual representation in the same way an American audience would, the individual components of the mythic presidents are for most part mutually understood by both cultures as being similar. Also, according to Dr. Dennis Dunn (2013), a Russian expert at Texas State University, Russia is approximately sixty-percent along the Westernization continuum, and "basically share the same perception of strength because it is an element of human nature in a country that is still a peasant land that has had a long history and preference for autocratic government, hierarchy, open plains, and raw power" (email correspondence). If audiences in United States and Russia have a joint comprehension of the elements in the mythic presidency, then their recognition of the visual symbols of the mythic presidency also should correspond.

The six images were categorized based on the semiotic signs that were present in the image. The images catalogued as "For the People" portray Putin interacting with large groups of people for their enjoyment. The images categorized as "Animals/Sensitivity"

show Putin interacting and being caring with animals and the images titled “Outdoorsman/Adventurous” depict Putin alone in nature, engaging in exploratory and daring activities. The images categorized as “Macho/Manly” portray Putin as overly masculine and the images described as “Pedagogical” feature Putin as an intellectual rather than macho. Finally, the images in the “Presidential/Professional” category depict Putin as stoic, serious, and dignified.

### **For the People**



Figure 1-Vladimir Putin Image: For the People. Russian Prime Minister attempts to bend a frying pan with his bare hands during his visit to the summer camp of the pro-Kremlin youth group “Nashi” at Lake Seliger, on August 1, 2011. (*Reuters/Yana Lapikova/Ria Novosti*)

Putin is notorious for demonstrating his strength and muscularity by engaging in athletic activities. He is a master in the art of judo, and regularly promotes sports and a healthy way of life as part of his personal and administrative agenda. In figure one, Putin displays this athleticism by attempting to bend a frying pan as an audience watches.

While physical fitness and athleticism are qualities that Putin values personally, the act of bending a frying pan as the youth observe is done primarily as entertainment.

There are several prominent compositional elements in the image. First, Putin is the main focal point, taking up the majority of space in the photograph. Even though his arms are not extended to their full capacity and his hands are centrally located on the frying pan, his wingspan reaches to each corner of the photograph. Over ten individuals are featured in this image, but Putin's body and arm span covers and dwarfs the others. Putin is in the front of the image, making him appear bigger, stronger, and the one in control. His facial expression demonstrates a great deal of concentration and focus, contrasted with the expressions of amusement of the youth observing the event. The gaze of the observers further draws the viewer's attention to Putin, as they are all looking at him with hopeful anticipation of the act, and the frying pan also helps to draw the attention of the viewing audience to him. The circular lines on the bottom of the frying pan act as a bull's-eye, with the center of the target located strategically on Putin's chest. The combination of Putin's gaze and facial expression, the crowd's gaze, and the location of the frying pan indicate that Putin is the main attraction.

The crowd in the background of the image is crucial to its interpretation. The image only reveals a small number of people, but the framing suggests that a large crowd has assembled to observe Putin demonstrate his strength. The crowd is smiling, standing close together, and taking photographs of Putin as he attempts to bend the frying pan. Those in the crowd appear to be young; they gather around and are close to each other as if they were at a concert or another festive event. The youth of the crowd signifies that Putin is not solely concerned with election votes or political success, but engages in this



type of sport for amusement and fun. The crowd in the photograph renders Putin as the spectacle, with an element of competition for the sole purpose of entertaining them.

Although those in the crowd are casually attired, they visually characterize the red, white, and blue colors of the Russian Federation flag. Though Putin is wearing slightly more sophisticated attire, his lack of tie and unbuttoned top button, in addition to strategic color choices, display the informal, communal nature of the event.

The paradigmatic signs of this image are equally important as the syntagmatic signs. While there are quite a few visual signs represented in the image, there are visual elements that are absent. For instance, there are no signs of opposition or competition to Putin. Since no one else is attempting to bend the frying pan, Putin is represented as the embodiment of athleticism and strength without rival. Furthermore, the image was taken before the frying pan was actually bent, rather than after the act was completed. The viewing audience can enthymematically assume that Putin is competent and capable to engage in such an act; the outcome of frying pan event is irrelevant. Putin may not have actually been able to bend the frying pan, but the viewer's assumption that Putin could potentially complete the task, which the photograph communicates, is the relevant meaning conveyed.

Putin demonstrates the four tenets of the mythic presidency in this image. For political figures to exhibit ascendancy, they need to embody power, strength, and dominance. The framing of the image with Putin as the main visual element provides a strong depiction of dominance and control. Not only is he commanding the visual representation, but as it takes considerable power and strength to bend a frying pan, the picture enthymematically suggests that he has this capability. Among the elements of

facial expression, the act, and the look of anticipation from the crowd, Putin simultaneously exemplifies masculinity and physicality. Bending a frying pan is an extremely physical endeavor, a feat only capable of fit and muscular men. Despite the competitive scene, the viewer can identify with Putin because he is not acting as the president of Russia, but rather as one of the people, reducing his status to provide enjoyment and entertainment for the youth watching. The closeness of the crowd suggests an element of community and solidarity, and the casual attire of the subjects eliminates the political status that differentiates Putin from the people. Also, Putin seems willing to let himself appear somewhat foolish by attempting to achieve what in all practicality is impossible; hence, Putin becomes one of the people by competing in sport for the amusement and excitement of the community, not necessarily for the outcome. Putin is the figurehead and leader of Russia, yet the image depicts a more personable and human side.

## Animals/Sensitivity



Figure 2-Vladimir Putin Image: Animals/Sensitivity. Vladimir Putin takes part in an expedition to Ubsunur Hollow Biosphere Preserve to inspect the snow leopard's habitat in Tyva Republic in the Siberian Federal District, on October 29, 2010. (Reuters/Ria Novosti/Alexei Druzhinin).

Putin is an avid animal lover and repeatedly is photographed posing with animals such as tigers, whales, dogs, and horses (Radia, 2012). He claims that environmentalism and wildlife preservation are part of his administration's agenda and that he uses photography to bring awareness and promote conservation (Radia, 2012). Photographs that feature Putin interacting with animals deviate from his manly portrayals, showing a much softer and sensitive Putin. In figure two, there are several visual components that shape the interpretation. First, there is a strong contrast between beast and human. While Putin regularly is depicted as controlling the space in most of his images, figure two features two focal points, Putin and the horse. The space is shared and Putin adopts a less aggressive posture: the horse stands tall and erect, yet Putin is hunched and gazes at the

ground. Typically, a bow signifies obedience and compliance, and the downward gaze and arched posture suggests that Putin is willfully submitting to the animal. He is holding onto the horses' reins; however, his loose grip on the animal further demonstrates his dependence on the mild temperament of the horse for his safety.

Although Putin is subservient to the size and might of the horse, the closeness of his face to its snout indicates a sense of guardianship and responsibility. Many might feel apprehensive or uncomfortable having their face so close to such a powerful animal, yet Putin's facial position and expression suggest a level of comfort and familiarity. He appears to be concerned about and affectionate towards the horse, assuming the role of protector. This image suggests that Putin's stewardship as the leader and guardian of Russia is applicable to animals as well, which fits with his conservation and environmentalist agendas. The colors of this photograph also hint at a softer, more gentle demeanor. The neutral color pallet depicts a natural, calm setting in contrast to the more harsh and vibrant color schema of some of his other photographs. The background of the photograph is blurred, which highlights the closeness and tenderness between Putin and the animal. From the partial shoulder that is in the image it is clear that other individuals are present during this event, but the framing of the photograph demonstrates an intimacy and solidarity that bridges the gap between human and animal.

The aspect of the mythic presidency that this image most clearly and strongly communicates is identification. Most individuals hold a special sensitivity towards animals and treat them with kindness, affection, and tenderness; the image confirms that sentiment. Affection often is shown through direct body contact, thus Putin's face to the nose of the horse signifies caring and fondness. Many people treat their animals as family

members; Putin's attachment to the horse demonstrates a similar feeling. The framing of this image conveys the intimate moment, inviting the audience to relate their expectation of animal/human relationships with Putin's experience. The syntagmatic signs that are present in this image, however, less clearly represent the mythic presidency characteristics of ascendancy, masculinity, and physicality. Putin does not hold the position of power, but rather assumes a hunched posture, and his gaze is towards the ground showing submission. His grip on the reins is weak, and instead of engaging in a traditionally recognizable masculine or athletic activity, such as riding the horse, he is nuzzled up against the animal, exhibiting gentleness rather than aggression or assertion. In contrast to Putin's macho image, this photograph depicts a much more personable president who cares for all living creatures.

### Outdoorsman/Adventurous



Figure 3-Vladimir Putin Image: Outdoorsman/Adventurous. Vladimir Putin swims in a lake in southern Siberia's Tuva region, on August 3, 2009. (*Reuters/Ria Novosti/Alexei Druzhinin*)

Putin often engages in wild excursions and participates in activities that are not typical for the average person or president. He is an adventurous, enthusiastic outdoorsman, and repeatedly is photographed in nature. Figure three illustrates one of Putin's most famous outings and widely known photographs. There are four main visual components to this image that support the mythic presidency elements of ascendancy, masculinity, and physicality: the butterfly stroke, his body position, the facial expression, and the setting.

The most significant element in this photograph is Putin's butterfly stroke. Putin's arms stretch from one side of the image to the other in a commanding presence and his wingspan is fully extended; his arms are expanded to their fullest length, and are raised to be level with his shoulders and close to his head. When

arms are raised they become authoritative, commanding, and an intimidating force. A freestyle stroke would position Putin's body less invasively as parallel with the water with only one arm raised at a time, but Putin's depiction in the butterfly stroke strategically frames him as a more imposing, imperious, and forceful individual. In addition, the muscle definition and tension of Putin's body convey his overall strength, determination, and athletic ability. From the photograph it is clear that Putin is actively swimming; as he is shirtless, the viewer can observe his flexed muscles and extreme muscle definition. Putin is clearly experiencing tension throughout his body from the exhausting activity, yet instead of body fatigue the image demonstrates endurance and resolution.

Putin's facial expression in figure three also conveys a sense of determination and fortitude. First, his gaze is very forward toward his destination; there appears to be a clear objective for this extreme sport and Putin's fixed focus implies tremendous concentration. Second, this photograph captured Putin with his mouth wide open as he gasps for air on the upward motion of the butterfly stroke. Putin readily admits that the majority of his photographs are staged (Radia, 2012; Bryanski & Dyomkin. 2012), and this image may in fact be staged as well; however, his mouth and the authentic bodily posture in swimming communicate Putin's competence to engage in such a feat. The image signifies that he is physically proficient.

The last visual component of figure three that contributes to the meaning of the image is the water. Putin is not just swimming in an indoor pool or in docile water conditions. Rather, he is isolated in the middle of a lake, all alone in open waters (sans his photographer), surrounded by rocks, forest, and other natural

elements; the ripple effect of the water suggests that Putin is swimming against the wind. Furthermore, the caption of this photograph states that Putin is swimming in Siberian waters. Russia, and especially Siberia, are particularly notable for the cold climate, and although this image was taken in the summer the water still presumably is extremely frigid. The visual and textual combination of the Siberian waters, the less than ideal swimming conditions, and a shirtless Putin further demonstrate the physical and mental stamina of Russia's president.

Unlike figure two, where Putin displays the mythic presidency through identification, this image accomplishes everything except portraying Putin as fallible. The visual signs of figure three reflect the dimensions of ascendancy, masculinity, and physicality. The sheer amount of space that Putin's wingspan controls in this image establishes ascendancy and power; he looks in control of the situation. His butterfly stroke and expression of determination connote that he rivals the most skilled and seasoned swimmers. Also, the nature of this activity and the fact that it is taking place in Siberian waters exemplify masculinity. The masculine component of the mythic presidency is grounded in the expectation that presidents weave elements of aggression, assertion, heroism, and a desire to conquer uncharted territory into their rhetoric and behavior. Strong willpower and determination would be necessary to willingly swim in open waters and in isolation and Putin exhibits these characteristics in this photograph. Finally, presidents are expected to have a healthy and strong body; this requirement can effectively be met by a visual representation of muscularity and strength. Although



ideas of beauty, health, and fitness are a cultural construction, Putin's body, tension, and muscle definition signify signs of physicality.

The aspect of the mythic presidency that is not represented syntagmatically in this photograph is identification. Swimming is a physically exhausting sport, one that requires training and extensive stamina, and the isolation and frigid waters contribute to the impression of Putin's superior athletic ability and resolve. Instead of appearing personable and human, Putin looks superhuman and herculean; he displays behavioral traits and personality characteristics that are atypical for the average person.

### **Macho/Manly**



Figure 4-Vladimir Putin Image: Macho/Manly. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin rides with motorcycle enthusiasts during his visit to the bike festival in the southern Russian city of Novorossiisk. Putin kicked off an election campaign revving up his three-wheeled Harley-Davidson at the head of a bikers motorcade, on August 29, 2011. (*Reuters/Alexei Druzhinin/Ria Novosti*).

Historically, those who ride motorcycles are perceived as hard and manly.

Motorcycle gangs often are associated with crime, violence, and disregard for the law;

bikers have an individualistic, rebellious, and idiosyncratic connotation. Although some perceive bikers negatively, many find the biker culture appealing because it represents independence, indifference, and freedom; bikers are tough and exciting. In figure four, we see Putin leading a biker motorcade as part of his election campaign in the summer of 2011. Putin's frequent characterization as manly is conveyed in this photograph. The compositional and technological elements of color and focus in this image depict Putin as fearless and unstoppable.

Several color combinations in this photograph signify drama and vividness, including the contrast between black and white, and blue and red. All the bikers, including Putin, are dressed entirely in black: leather jackets, pants, biker boots, and gloves. Black conventionally is a harsher, more masculine color, and in the image the color signifies and validates the masculinity associated with the biker culture. Equally represented in the photograph, however, is the color white. The white headlights illuminate the motorcycles, the ground also reflects a white light, and there is a white car to the left of Putin's motorcycle. The contrast of white and black often represents the tension between good and evil, light and dark, or night and day, yet in this photograph the color white conveys that the motorcycles and Putin are manly and dangerous because the contrast of the white colors makes the black more daunting.

The contrast between red and blue also signifies the dramatic and powerful nature of the scene, and further depict Putin's boldness and fierceness. Specifically, red is a color associated with passion, danger, and aggression; the red lighting under Putin's motorcycle not only helps to draw the viewer's focus to him, but also hints at his macho nature. The source of the red light is unknown, but it is reflected onto the bike, setting it

aglow, almost as if it were on fire. The result is that Putin appears as ablaze, marking him as the ultimate man; he is fearless, courageous, and the leader. While the color blue only appears on the flags of the first two bikes, the flags signify the Russian Federation and the cultural pride shared by the bikers and Putin. The distinction between the red and blue colors also adds visual interest by drawing the attention to the front of the image where Putin is featured.

Another component that makes figure four, and particularly Putin, visually intriguing is the focus of the camera lens. This image clearly was taken as Putin and the other bikers were in motion, yet Putin and his motorcycle are the only images that are in complete focus. The other bikers, the other vehicle, and the road are all slightly blurred, which conveys an element of mystery, shows the speed of the motorcycles, and visually displays the possibility of peril. Also, because Putin is in the forefront of the image and the only element in complete focus, the viewer's attention is automatically on him. The motorcade may be for a campaign gimmick, yet he appears as the authentic leader of the motorcycle gang and therefore the most fearless and powerful man among them.

Putin clearly embodies ascendancy and masculinity in figure four, with less traditional displays of identification and physicality. This image connotes ascendancy and power because Putin is characterized as a leader, autocrat, and commander. Motorcycles and bikers are perceived as masculine; the black and the hues of red lighting Putin's bike further establish a sense of toughness. Also, Putin is riding a three-wheeled motorcycle rather than a two-wheeled motorcycle. Visually, the three-wheeled motorcycle takes up more space in the image, signifying that Putin is in charge. In addition, the Gestapo from Nazi Germany used to ride three-wheeled motorcycles as a mode of transportation. By

riding a large motorcycle that has historical roots with a powerful and forceful group, Putin is connoting ascendancy and masculinity. Notably, Putin is helmetless; he seems to laugh at danger, and perhaps death, by embracing risk. The image signifies that he is free and not bound by trivial, restricting rules, or the need for safety; hence, there is nothing feminine about this image. This photograph does not convey Putin's uncanny athletic ability and muscularity in the traditional sense, but the overt display of masculinity and manliness signify physicality. Riding a motorcycle requires a certain level of physical strength, and the reputation of bikers is that they are tough, dangerous, and physically competent.

The last element of the mythic presidency is identification, but the initial impression from figure four is similar to figure three: Putin does not appear personable, but rather exceptional. The distance between political figures and citizens resides in the perceived difference in status and power; typically, presidents are photographed wearing suits, looking stately, and engaging in politically appropriate tasks. However, in figure four Putin clearly is deviating from the norm of the presidency by interacting with members of a biker gang, using transportation devoid of the pomp and circumstance of his usual motorcade, and wearing atypical clothing. The viewer may not be able to identify directly with this image of him as pretentious, overly manly, and slightly precarious, yet he does appear human. Despite the negative connotation associated with the biker culture, many people have an affinity towards motorcycles and their rebel implications. Restoring old cars and collecting vehicles is a pastime that many enjoy, and the visual representation of Putin interacting with a culture many are familiar with and fantasize about diminishes the distance between president and citizen.

## Pedagogical



Figure 5-Vladimir Putin Image: Pedagogical. Vladimir Putin talks to a member of the “Lena-2010” Russian-German scientific expedition on Samoilovsky Island in Far Eastern Federal District. Putin traveled beyond the Arctic Circle to look into evidence on climate change after a record heat wave devastated central Russia that summer, on August 23, 2010. (*Reuters/Alexei Druzhinin/Ria Novosti*).

In addition to representations of Putin as the epitome of manliness, he regularly is photographed participating in more intellectual undertakings. Putin’s images convey a Renaissance man playing the piano, joining archeological digs, flying planes, driving tanks, molding iron, and partaking in scientific expeditions, as figure five captures. Putin’s images signify his competence in every endeavor he attempts; here he is represented as intellectual and pedagogical. Syntagmatically, figure five has several visual components that signify Putin’s intellect, interests, and the mythic presidency characteristics of ascendancy, masculinity, and identification.

The prominent visual element in this image is the setting. Putin and the other person present in the image appear to be in a deserted, uncharted location. The image captures what seems to be miles of open land, so much so that the mountains in the background are miniature images. The grass is unmaintained, and the only sign of human involvement is the wooden bridge that Putin and the man are standing on. Putin virtually is alone in the wilderness; the image suggests that his mission is not to attract a crowd or gain personal recognition for his actions. The isolation demonstrates Putin's personal interest in even the smallest details of his country. In an increasingly Westernized Russia, Putin's interest in a space completely void of human development signifies a resolve to be involved in many areas of Russia's culture, including the political, social, and educational.

The wide-open space and the contrast between the technological and scientific equipment establishes Putin as a conqueror of uncharted territory. Amidst a backdrop of nature and tranquility, an industrial computer and scientific gear with connections that seem to be part of a measuring device interrupt the scene. The strong contrast between nature and modernization signifies Putin as an explorer who brings contemporary solutions to the furthest and most desolate parts of Russia. Putin's crouching body position and the sustained focus displayed on his face indicate that he is both the leader and the pupil. He is broadening his scope of knowledge by taking the time to investigate.

The scientist's youthfulness and hair aids in connoting the complex teacher/student relationship that is present in this image. The scientist appears to be much younger than Putin and of a generation that is more comfortable with lenient appearance standards. While the scientist is a man, his hair touches his shoulders; the image suggests

that the scientist is contemporary, free-spirited and relaxed in his look. Putin's hunched position and sustained focus indicates that he is willing to overlook age, appearance, and the status associated with professional attire and hair to be taught by an individual who deviates from the norm and expectation of professionalism. The appearance and unmaintained hair of the scientist is irrelevant; Putin's body signifies his recognition of aptitude by yielding power to a man despite his casual, modern, and relaxed presentation.

The signs in figure five that exhibit mythic qualities include the setting, the contrast between nature and modernization as represented by the technological equipment, the body position of the two individuals in the photograph, and the facial expressions. These signs represent the mythic presidency characteristics of ascendancy, masculinity, and identification. When politicians campaigns for office they must demonstrate that they possess skills to challenge the unknown and crusade for change. In figure five, Putin enacts the signs associated with exploration and progress. The depiction of seclusion in a barren land represents ascendancy. Also, to personify masculinity in speech and action, political figures must be assertive, fearless, courageous, and open to change. Although this image portrays Putin in an academic endeavor, rather than the brute force visual representation of masculinity, the demonstration of his intellectual hunger, adventurism, and desire for exploration, demonstrates assertiveness and courage.

This photograph also captures the element of identification. Putin and the scientist equally dominate the image, yet a few visual components imply that Putin occupies the secondary status. For instance, Putin's furrowed brow indicates a high level of concentration, signifying that he is struggling to comprehend the sophisticated information. Because his hand is not directly on the paper the scientist holds, the image



conveys a teacher/student context. In a political culture with expectations for leaders to be highly educated, hold prominent positions in the community, and be experts in their field, the visual representation of Putin as a student signifies him as personable and open. Putin's depiction conveys that he embraces educational values. He does not exemplify physicality in this image; rather, his hunched and squatted body position conveys that he uses his mind, not his muscles.

### **Presidential/Professional**



Figure 6-Vladimir Putin Image: Presidential/Professional. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin adjusts his sunglasses as he watches an air show during MAKS-2011, the International Aviation and Space Show, in Zhukovsky, outside Moscow, on August 17, 2011. (Dmitry Kostyukov/AFP/Getty Images/*Moscow Times*, November, 2012).

Putin was portrayed in the other five images as a participant in activities with other people. Figure six is the sole image among the sample where Putin is photographed alone and not in an active pose. Putin is known for his theatrical images and wild excursions in nature, but this image is among those that signify Putin as “presidential.” In figure six, Putin is depicted in a pensive pose while watching an air show in what appears



to be a presidential observation box. The reflection in Putin's sunglasses conveys that Putin is inside sitting or standing at a table, and the photographer captured the image and the reflection by shooting the image through a glass window. The conflicting visual representation of Putin appearing to be outside while the reflection in his glasses suggests otherwise, however, does not detract from the visual components of figure six that contribute to the signification of him as presidential. These elements include his clothing, the position of his hand, his facial expression, and the lighting.

Putin's attire is notable because it signifies professionalism. Compared to casual attire or no clothing at all, in this image Putin is fittingly dressed in a suit. Suits in general largely are associated with powerful individuals and the color combination of the suit and the high-end accessories demonstrate the Russian presidency and all the clout associated with the position. Beneath his jacket, visible cuff links, and his accessories of a leather watch band and sunglasses, further signify that he is professional. Putin's suit matches the colors in the Russian Federation flag; the tie is not distracting or overly vivid, but rather indicates his status and position as Russia's president and directs the focus of the image to Putin himself. Presidents and political figures are expected to be both fashionable and stylish, yet professional and conventional; Putin's attire in this photograph conveys both meanings.

Putin's body communicates his values and personal agenda. In this image, his hand placement and facial expressions are signs of status, power, and clout. Putin's hand can be read as raised in an attempt to adjust his sunglasses. However, the pose in the image also signifies the motion of a salute. Salutes convey two meanings: to show respect to a national symbol such as a flag or lost soldier, or to acknowledge a higher authority.

The individual of lesser status salutes first and typically is more strict and rigid with the salute. The individual of high status will respond with a salute, but the salute is more relaxed and casual, conveying the dominant position. Putin's hand signifies a salute, yet his posture is relaxed; his power and prestige are demonstrated in this gesture.

Putin's facial expressions in many of his images are similar: he is stoic and focused. In figure six Putin's face is the main focal point of the photograph. Putin characteristically is depicted in concentration, with his lips pressed together; in this image the furrowed brow, although possible due to the lighting, signifies intensity and focus. The close up image also features Putin's angular jawline, a physical feature associated with manhood and his overall youthful appearance. The combination of vigor, masculinity, and concentration signifies a prototypical professional president.

The lighting creates dynamism in the image. The reflection in Putin's sunglasses signifies an interior space, yet the sunglasses and the bright light illuminating Putin also connote outdoor exposure. This exterior sign draws the attention of the viewer to Putin's face, and the contrast between Putin's dark suit and the dark, blurred background and the brightness of Putin signifies celestial and deific connotations. Putin's illumination further portrays him as the savior of Russia; in a time characterized by turmoil and disarray, he is the ultimate political leader.

Figure six wholistically signifies ascendancy and masculinity. Every visual element in this photograph, from clothing to Putin's facial expression connotes power, dominance, and control. Putin visually dominates the entire photograph, and his attire signifies strength and professional control. Putin is depicted with little to no emotion in this photograph, and has a very masculine, concentrated look about him, a set of signs in

opposition to feminine smiles. Physicality and athleticism are less clearly identified in the signs of figure six since the image only shows the top part of Putin's body, he is fully clothed, and is not actively engaging in an activity. Likewise, the overemphasis of political power and status as achieved through the clothing, hand position, and pensive facial expression signify professionalism and status, rather than identification. He is stately, composed, and presidential.

### **Summary**

Through a semiotic analysis, at least one of the components in the mythic presidency was revealed in every image in the sample. Figure one signifies the four components of the mythic presidency completely. In the full set, the images connote how Putin embodies ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality in their entirety. Although the western perspective limits the scope of the mythic presidency, the similar cultural values indicate that the signs and meanings in Putin's images are comparable. In the next chapter, the consistent themes that were highlighted during this image analysis are discussed, in addition to the implications about the mythic presidency, conclusions about Putin's leadership, and how visual rhetoric plays a crucial role in the perception of presidential competence and ability.

#### **IV. AN EVALUATION OF THE MYTHIC PRESIDENCY AND VLADIMIR PUTIN**

Images are an integral part of the political process, used as a primary means to reach the public for the purpose of shaping perceptions. Vladimir Putin especially capitalizes on the strength of visual rhetoric to portray certain characteristics and personality traits. We know, from the rhetorical presidency, that presidents are expected to have a direct line of communication with the people (Tulis, 1987), and that through the use of the media, political figures can address many audiences at one time to express their beliefs and goals. What the rhetorical presidency fails to discuss, however, are the qualities and characteristics that the public needs to see their representatives personify in order for that “popular” presidency to become a reality.

Through the use of mythic literature and the semiotic perspective, the mythic presidency was formulated and used to analyze Putin’s images. The mythic presidency posits that political images need to convey ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality in order for the photographs to fulfill the expectations of the viewing audience. The mythic presidency is grounded in literature that is used as the foundation for many rhetorical arguments, yet the mythic presidency has strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, this chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, Putin’s images are evaluated based on their mythic presidency qualities. In the second section,

the strengths and limitations of the mythic presidency, in addition to a few general findings of the theory are explored. Finally, the scope of political images and the future considerations of the mythic presidency are discussed in this chapter.

### **An Evaluation of Putin's Images**

This thesis analyzed six of Putin's most prominent images that appeared in both international and American publications and were featured between the years of 2009 and 2011. After combining elements from the mythic and semiotic perspective, the mythic presidency was used to examine Putin's images for their mythic properties. Putin fulfilled all the assumptions of the mythic presidency, signifying ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality. After viewing his images and exploring their mythic characteristics, it can be concluded that Putin embodies ascendancy and masculinity more often than identification and physicality. His images represent the extremes of the mythic presidency, in that Putin appears to be an overly involved president. Putin's reputation and over-reliance on the mythic principles of ascendancy and masculinity overshadow identification, even when it is shown.

Five of the six images in the sample displayed signs that signified ascendancy and masculinity. The image where Putin is cuddled up next to the horse is the only image where power and assertiveness are not as clearly communicated, yet even in that image, his willful submission signifies a level of control. When interacting with a powerful animal, the unpredictable nature and undeniable strength require caution to be taken to prevent injuries. This caution includes staying far away, and if close, maintaining a tight grip on the reins. These measures would indicate that the human is in control, letting the animal take a dominant position; trusting the training and temperament of the animal also

connotes a level of control and confidence. This control and trust are both masculine personality traits. Thus, even in Putin's least masculine and ascendant image in the sample, the visual signs still signify a powerful, dominant leader. The predominance of Putin's ascendant and masculine images alludes to the priorities of his administration and the Russian nation. The collapse of the USSR left Russia splintered and in need of a strong, authoritative leader. Yeltsin failed to competently reorganize the country politically, economically, and socially, and Putin was responsible for restoring Russia as a world power. Putin always possessed a strong, dictatorial, rhetorical style, and his images needed to match his speech. The necessity to appear as a firm, competent, and dominant president explains why the majority of his images possess masculine and ascendant signs. Putin's images signify all four characteristics of the mythic presidency; the visual signs syntagmatically suggest ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality. Based on the framework of the mythic presidency, Putin's images are seen as successful; he exemplifies the mythic values that viewers expect to see their politicians personify.

However, Putin widely is known for his over-exaggerated displays of manliness, which begs the question: can the mythic presidency be overdone, thus making politicians appear foolish rather than presidential? Political images are sites of deep rhetorical significance and are designed to impact perceptions of political leadership and competence. But when images are hyper-political or hyper-dramatic, they potentially have the opposite effect. For instance, in 1988, Governor Michael Dukakis, the Democratic presidential nominee, posed in a M1 Abrams tank to demonstrate that, if elected, he would be tough on national defense. Dukakis intended for his tank image to

be positively perceived, but instead the image was parodied and used as comedic material (Schulte, 2008) (see Appendix, Figure 1). Likewise, in 2001, President Bush was photographed clearing the brush on his Texas ranch with his chainsaw. The image was scrutinized because it seemed to be an obvious attempt at appearing tough and manly (Rein, 2005). In the image, President Bush is in nature, surrounded by unmaintained brush; he holds the chainsaw in a manner that signifies a phallus, wears working clothes, and has a tough facial expression (see Appendix, Figure 5). Discussion about the image suggests that the viewers notice his masculinity, physicality, and can identify with his strong work ethic. However, the image is overdone and therefore slightly ridiculous (Rein, 2005). Although the image fulfills the ascendant, masculine, and physical expectations of the mythic presidency, the image is overstated, making Bush look ridiculous rather than professional.

A dual audience views Putin's images. Although the signs in his images signify roughly the same characteristics and values in both the United States and in Russia, and Putin is consistently viewed as a tough and authoritative leader in both cultures, the discussion surrounding Putin's images in the United States indicates that his images are hyper-masculine, perhaps having the opposite effect than what he intended. For instance, on *The Atlantic*, viewers have the ability to comment on Putin's images. Some of the comments include, "Chuck Norris cries when he meets Vladimir Putin," "He doesn't always drink beer, but when he does he prefers Dos Equis... Vladimir Putin is... the most interesting man in the world," "Where's the photo of him doing brain surgery?" "Very disappointed that of all things he's not a ninja," and "Like a boss" ("Vladimir Putin, action man," 2011). Even *The Atlantic's* title for the website is somewhat sardonic.

Before one has the opportunity to view Putin's images, the title "Vladimir Putin, Action Man" connotes the Putin is adventurous, exciting, and dynamic. In addition to the comments, some of Putin's images have been photoshopped to have a more comedic effect. For instance, in one of the photographs taken on the same day Putin swam in Siberian waters, he is featured riding a horse bare chested through the waters. The parodied image replaces the horse with a bear, and includes the caption, "Obama shot a gun? Aww how cute!" (see Appendix, Figure 7). His strength, dominance, athleticism, masculinity, aggression, and assertion are apparent in his images; viewers agree that he's embodying these characteristics. However, Putin appears to signify the extremes of the mythic presidency, suggesting the possibility that politicians are only successful in their visual representations insofar as the mythic presidency is appropriate and understated.

Putin's images portray him as a renaissance man. He participates in a wide range of activities and the visual components of his photographs positively frame Putin's competence. Not only do Putin's images suggest he is an active president, personally busy and physically proficient, but the images also signify that Putin is an actively engaged president. Putin is involved in many aspects of Russian culture, not just the political culture. The images in this sample suggest that he is interested in Russia's environment, animals, youth, specific groups of people, and entertainment. While Putin's involvement signifies his priority is the well-being of people, animals, and nature, his over-involvement in the many segments of Russia's culture also indicates his paradoxical leadership style. Putin struggles with being the democratic leader while preserving his and Russia's autocratic style. In both speech and behavior, Putin exemplifies dominance and control, and his images visually display how involved he is in the everyday workings



of Russia. Although such an energetically engrossed president is what a country hopes for, Putin's exceptional immersion is another demonstration of how content he is to maintain his power, and the lengths he will go to appear competent and capable. Much like celebrities rely on media exposure to maintain their relevancy, Putin uses images and staged photographic opportunities to leave his footprint on all things Russian; his desire for power and control are visually demonstrated through the amount of images circulated, the activities he engages in, and the visual signs that are present in his images.

In addition to his manly and dominant portrayals, Putin also personifies the mythic presidency characteristic of identification. In the majority of images in this sample, the status difference between president and citizen is decreased, connoting that he is one of the people. He participates in sport, sympathizes with animals, rides with bikers, and becomes the student. The signs that contribute to this interpretation include causal clothing, hunched posture, downward gazes, common activities, furrowed brow, and pensive facial expressions. Isolated, these signs indicate that Putin is one of the people. However, signs must be analyzed for their individual and combinatory meanings; even though Putin embodies identification in these images, his personal reputation and the dominant presence of masculine and ascendant characteristics overshadow his ability to relate to the average person. This overshadowing is demonstrated by the comments and parodies of Putin's images. Hence, the personal narratives of those featured in the images may also be important to the success of the mythic presidency. For instance, a political figure can fulfill the assumptions of the mythic presidency through the semiotic signs of an image, and yet still be perceived as predominately masculine, feminine, strong, weak, authoritative, or democratic. Putin has a long legacy of enacting a strong and

commanding leadership style; his personal narrative is one of athleticism, competition, KGB ties, and allegiance to the communist party. Even though Putin's images signify identification and humanism, there is juxtaposition between what people know and what people see; his attempts to appear as one of the people, concerned with the little man, and caring are overshadowed by the other qualities of the mythic presidency Putin embodies.

### **An Evaluation of the Mythic Presidency**

The political world is complex, and in recent years the multi-faceted nature of politics exponentially has increased. The career of politicians once was confined to legislation and representing the public's best interest; the rhetorical presidency theory noted the shift of presidential paradigms that occurred between President Roosevelt and President Wilson (Tulis, 1987). The original presidential paradigm valued ceremonial speech and communication within the branches of government, rather than a direct line of communication between the president and the people. However, as the media has helped to turn politics into a spectacle, the definition of "politician" has expanded to include public figure, celebrity, and media personality. The mythic presidency articulates the qualities and characteristics that the public expects their political representatives to possess: ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality. Because the mythic presidency is in its beginning stages as a theoretical framework, it is important to note the strengths and weaknesses of the theory. Specifically, the mythic presidency acknowledges the dual role that politicians must enact, can be used to examine the production site, has practical application, represents an accumulative process, and is not limited to photographs. However, the mythic presidency is limited because of the

subjective western perspective and because the theory assumes that all politicians desire to be the “popular” president.

### **Strengths**

Politicians are very much in the public eye; congressional representatives and presidents often are interviewed on mainstream television shows, appear on the covers of popular magazines, and their biological history and personal record is subject to scrutiny by the media. In fact, some politicians, such as Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger, began their career as celebrities, and used their fame as a platform to move into the political context. Politicians are only effective at changing or impacting government and legislature insofar as they get elected. Therefore, the framework of mythic presidency acknowledges the dual role that many politicians must enact, and recognizes the need for politicians to be desirable to the public. While politicians have commonly used myths as a vehicle for persuasion, those narratives are only vehicle, a means to an end. The frontier myth and the American Dream myth have been used countless times; however, each politician uses them differently, and the strength of grand myths is that they are moldable to fit individual personalities and stories. While the Frontier myth and the American Dream myth have basic cornerstones and foundational elements, these narratives are ambiguous enough for any politician to mold them to fit personal experiences and examples.

The strength of the mythic presidency is that it isolates the qualities in the mythic literature that the public expects their representatives to use and to personify in their media portrayals, and articulates the definitive traits and attributes that candidates need to embody. The mythic presidency asserts that in order for political images to be effective

and political candidates to be seen in a positive light, they must personify the characteristics of ascendancy, masculinity, physicality, and create identification with the audience. By identifying the mythic properties associated with the “popular” president, and by knowing how ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality are visually represented in the media and understood in the twenty-first century, this new theory strengthens the link between the mythic perspective and semiotics, thus expanding the scope of visual rhetoric in the political context.

Because the mythic presidency materializes the visual mythic expectations of political figures, another strength of the theory is that it can be used to examine the production site of political images. The meaning of an image is made in three places: the production of the image, the image itself, and the audience (Rose, 2012). If the mythic presidency articulates the visual components that result in more meaningful images, then that knowledge can be used in the image creation process to ensure, with greater certainty, political image effectiveness. For instance, photographers are hired specifically to document politicians and political events. These photographers are tasked specifically to guarantee that the candidate appears in a favorable manner, and most political photographs are staged for that purpose (“Political Photo Ops,” 2012). Unscripted moments carry too much risk and politicians have a limited amount of time to make an impression on the public and maintain relevancy. Therefore, if both the candidate and the media handlers understand the assumptions of the mythic presidency and the expectations of the public when creating these photographic opportunities, then the meaning embedded in the image can be more deliberate and hopefully be interpreted by the audience in the intended way. Much like speechwriters recognize the benefit of capturing

the values of a culture and are tasked with connecting with the audience when creating speeches for political figures, the mythic presidency allows for a more fruitful production site. The mythic presidency has both academic and practical worth and potential.

Another strength of the mythic presidency is that it has individual and combinatory potential. There are four characteristics of the mythic presidency that are identified as the primary qualities politicians need to embody: ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality. Ideally, each image would contain elements of all four components; yet, having only one or two elements of the mythic presidency still fulfills the visual expectation of the viewers. For instance, only two of Putin's images contained all four characteristics of the mythic presidency. In the other four images, often one, two, or even three of the elements were not as strongly represented. However, having unequal representation of the mythic presidency does not disqualify the image from being seen as effective or "successful." Rather, the mythic presidency is an accumulative process. Images still uphold the assumptions of the theory if only one of the components is present; however, the more characteristics an image encapsulates, the more rhetorically and culturally significant the image is. Also, images are rarely seen in isolation; the perception of the mythic presidency accumulates over time. While the original relationship between the parts of the mythic presidency was thought to be interdependent, meaning that if one element was missing the whole theory collapsed, the analysis of Putin's images shows that the relationship between the four characteristics is both independent and interdependent. The mythic presidency allows politicians to be multifaceted in their portrayals. While the mythic presidency has individual and combinatory value, if politicians cannot capture ascendancy, masculinity, identification,

and physicality in every picture, the key is to have enough images circulating in the media to adequately fulfill the assumptions of the mythic presidency.

The final strength of the mythic presidency is that the scope is not limited to still images. The mythic presidency can be applied to any visual representation of political figures, whether still or moving images. The relationship between citizens and political figures primarily is mediated. The majority of the voting public does not have direct access to their representatives, so opinions and perceptions are formed from the representations of politicians. Photographs are a prominent form of promoting political candidates; however, other media also are common. For instance, it is typical for candidates to create biographical videos that combine character testimonials, personal statements, and a presentation of the candidate's values. Videos, much like photographs, are the result of compositional choices, with the editing, framing, lighting, angles, and people included in the shots all designed to convey the dominant message. Political videos are intentionally crafted to portray the candidates in a specific and deliberate way, and generally provide the cornerstone to presidential and vice presidential campaigns. Also, political advertisements are staples of presidential campaigns; there are negative and positive advertisements and a variety of appeals that politicians can utilize to promote their candidacy. The mythic presidency can be used to promote the desirable qualities in positive advertisements and demonstrate how a candidate does not uphold the mythic presidency components in negative advertisements. By understanding the mythic expectations of the voters, the mythic presidency can be used to convey how a politician is the antithesis of ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality. Videos, advertisements, still images, and other visual media are cultural constructions: they are

embedded with ideologies, use sign systems to create meaning, and therefore can be analyzed under the framework of the mythic presidency. The mythic presidency expands the field of communication by allowing for more opportunities to analyze political messages and uses of visual rhetoric.

### **Limitations**

The main limitation of the mythic presidency is the subjective perspective, both in regard to the creation of the theory and the application of the theory. The mythic presidency is grounded in western academic literature. The myths that created the mythic presidency, the presidents that used the myths in their speech, and the values that provided the visual expectations in presidential images are all primarily American. Although Russia and the United States share many of the same values that are represented in the mythic presidency, the assumptions of the mythic presidency cannot be thoroughly tested in Putin's images because there is dual viewership. Despite Putin's international presence and his images appearing in both Russian and American publications, Putin is ultimately a Russian politician, and the perception of the Russian citizenry is crucial for his continued political success.

While we can interpret the sign systems in his images for their mythic presidency qualities, there is no guarantee that the Russian culture decodes the images in the same way. Without access to the perceptions, opinions, and interpretations of the Russian culture, the components of the mythic presidency cannot fully be tested in this case. In addition to the western orientation of the mythic presidency, the interpretation of visuals is a subjective process in general, providing the second limitation of this theory. Dominant sign systems represent specific values and ideologies, yet interpretations also

will deviate from these central sign systems. For instance, audiences can interpret images and other visual media in the dominant, negotiated, or oppositional position (Hall, 1984). Individuals bring with them a set of experiences, knowledge, and belief systems that influence the way a visual image is understood and how it is decoded. Analyzing images for their visual qualities and components is idiosyncratic, and using a theory based in literature that is particular to a culture adds to the subjectivity of the resulting analysis.

Another limitation of the mythic presidency and its western orientation is that it assumes all politicians desire to be the “popular” president, one that is well liked and has an attractive personality. Not all countries and governments share the notion of democracy and voter participation. For instance, countries such as North Korea, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Sudan, Libya, Jordan, and Cuba value central leadership and despotism. Centrality of leadership is not only a government style, but also a personal leadership orientation. Historically, countries with absolute power rulers expect compliance, no opposition, and the ability to impose laws and regulations without explanation (Dowswell, 2005). In present day, the extreme totalitarian and dictatorial governments are not as common; however, the foundational principles of central leadership still exist (Dowswell, 2005). Tyrannical governments serve the interest of the ruler, not the people (Lansford, 2007). In these countries, the approval from the people is not needed to obtain prominent government positions. When the public are not as actively involved in the election process, the necessity for candidates to promote themselves and remain relevant in the public eye is diminished. In democratic countries, political figures and the public are dependent on each other. To be elected, candidates need to appeal to the public’s values, and guarantee that their interests will be served. Therefore, the



mythic presidency assumes that all politicians depend on the public for their political careers and strive to portray ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality in their representations, when in reality that might not be the case.

### **Additional Findings: Gender and the Audience**

One finding of the mythic presidency concerns gender. According to Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (1996), “The presidency is associated with institutions that have historically barred women from entrance, including politics, the military, and athletics” (p. 343). Even though women are becoming more prominent in the political context, politics is still considered a more masculine occupation (Kiewe, 1999). The mythic presidency does not address gender specifically, and the tenets of the theory are predominantly masculine, begging the question: can women uphold the assumptions of the mythic presidency? Ascendancy and masculinity are the most masculine characteristics of the mythic presidency; the popular president must demonstrate power, dominance, strength, determination, drive, and assertiveness. Identification is neither masculine nor feminine, but rather points to how politicians need to embody values and characteristics that are similar to the voting public, such as work ethic and success as a result of individual efforts. Physicality in the mythic presidency is referenced in a more masculine way primarily because there have been more men in politics to demonstrate the necessity of a healthy and fit body. However, since the mythic presidency is based on expectations of the voting public, women are not excluded from the mythic presidency, but rather must work harder to personify the necessary elements.

The performance of femininity, as opposed to masculinity, includes self-disclosure, longer narratives, and conversational tone (Campbell, 1998). Typically,

women in politics who possess the more masculine rhetorical style and image are criticized as being too masculine and for deviating from the expectation of femininity. For instance, Hillary Clinton was often scrutinized for straying from the feminine oratory style and personal appearance that is expected of a woman in the role of first lady, Senator, and Secretary of State (Campbell, 1998). However, too much femininity in politics can be problematic as well. Sarah Palin was repeatedly criticized for her feminine appearance and rhetorical style, appearing too womanly and therefore a less qualified leader (Gibson & Heyse, 2010). The result is “femiphobia,” the fear of both men and women to be seen as too feminine (Gibson & Heyse, 2010). Clinton and Palin are examples of the predicament women face in the political world. Women need to be masculine enough to signify ascendancy and the competence to be forceful, assertive leaders, but still feminine enough to still uphold cultural expectations. Voters still expect their female candidates to personify power, dominance, control, assertiveness, knowledge, and a desire to change policy. Palin is an example of how important the characteristics of ascendancy and power are to both male and female candidates; she was scrutinized for lacking these characteristics. In the Russian culture, both men and women have abided by traditional gender roles: that a woman’s place is in the home, while the men are the breadwinners (Ashwin, 2000). The fact that a woman has yet to be elected president in either Russia or the United States demonstrates the value placed on a strong and dominant leader. Women are not excluded from this standard; they have just yet to completely balance control and forcefulness while remaining true to cultural expectations.

The balance between masculinity and femininity is crucial for women politicians; hence, the mythic presidency component of identification especially is important for female candidates. To equalize being overly dominant, and thus diverging from the cultural expectation for women to possess more sensitive and nurturing characteristics, female candidates need to appear personable, human, and fallible, just like men. Because women are cultured into using inclusive language, telling longer narratives, are more expressive nonverbally, and are expected to exhibit more nurturing mannerism, women might actually signify identification more readily than male politicians. Putin's images demonstrate this reality. Although the signs in the majority of his images signified identification, his overly masculine performance diminishes the means for audiences to identify with him. Whereas women struggle to appear powerful and dominant in their images without being perceived as too masculine, men struggle to identify with the public and appear personable and human without deviating from their manly and authoritative portrayals and looking soft or overly sensitive.

Finally, women in politics also are expected to visually fulfill the mythic presidency expectation of physicality. The element of physicality represents the relationship between healthiness and political competence. Individuals who value health and fitness demonstrate a level of determination, assertiveness, and commitment (Morrison & Halton, 2009). Leaders are expected to possess the qualities that the country values and lead by example. As obesity increases and personal health becomes a social priority, leaders need to demonstrate that they find physical fitness important. When leaders do not fulfill the expectation of a healthy, fit leader, they face scrutiny, as Franklin Delano Roosevelt demonstrated. Roosevelt suffered through great pain and

discomfort to appear able-bodied enough to lead a country, despite having polio (Kiewe, 1999). A recent example of how physicality is required for women in politics as well was seen when Hillary Clinton suffered a blood clot in the brain; despite making a full recovery within weeks, the health complication was said to diminish her future political aspirations (Cillizza, 2013). News sources say that even though the blood clot has no long-term effects, it will influence the way she is talked about and covered in the future (Cillizza, 2013). Clinton is in her mid sixties, will be sixty-nine by the 2016 election, and has had two blood clots within the last ten years. Her health difficulties, much like FDR's, are out of her control, yet because they are part of the discourse about her, they demonstrate that the necessity to be portrayed as healthy and able-bodied equally applies to men and women: both are expected to uphold the mythic presidency assumption of physicality.

The discussion of gender in relation to the mythic presidency reveals that for both men and women to fulfill the expectations of the theory, there needs to be a balance in their visual representation of ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality. Each component needs to be conveyed to the viewing audience, and depending on the gender of the politician, some characteristics will be more difficult to embody than others. The voting constituency values a leader who is dominant, in control, assertive, fearless, health conscious, and able to identify with their lives and experiences. Those characteristics are important for both men and women to realize; because the mythic presidency has both academic and practical application, the mythic presidency can be used to further the political careers of both men and women.

The last finding of the mythic presidency concerns the audience. The framework of the mythic presidency is not exclusionary; politicians are not the only ones who can utilize this theory to embed cultural myths into their representations. Rather, the audience can bring understandings of the mythic presidency to both staged and candid political images and make inferences about their political representatives in light of the qualities and characteristics outlined in this framework. Politicians often are photographed in an undesirable manner; images are taken out of context, photoshopped, and often portray candidates as unprofessional or incompetent. Those unflattering images still are widely circulated and popularized in the media, much to the politician's dismay. Images work in and of themselves; audiences can interpret any candidate portrayal in light of the ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality. The image of George Bush with his mouth open provides evidence of the mythic presidency's comprehensive scope (see Appendix, Figure 2). President Bush did not intend to be photographed in a ridiculous manner. However, the audience still assessed his competence to be president based on the mythic properties that were displayed in his image; the visual signs did not convey dominance, aggression, power, assertiveness, or identification. Therefore, the mythic presidency is much more than an academic theory used to analyze staged political images. The mythic presidency articulates the framework that audiences already use to assess all types of political images.

### **Future Implications of Political Images and the Mythic Presidency**

In addition to the creation of the mythic presidency and an analysis of Vladimir Putin's images, this project provides a commentary on the nature of political images. This thesis further validates and establishes that photographs, whether positive or negative, are

critical in the political context. Politicians are becoming more like celebrities; hence, remaining relevant in the public eye is crucial for their continued success. As Putin's case demonstrates, it is better to be talked about in a negative or satirical way than for one's name not to be recognized. Putin is the president of Russia, but without his images, the international audience may not be as familiar with him. Even individuals who are not as versed in the political world know who Putin is largely due to his images. Also, politicians have a limited amount of time to connect with their voting constituency. Outside of the campaign season, politicians do not make as many public appearances, speeches, and advertisements. Photographs are a way to showcase the continued activities, undertakings, and interests of our political figures; these representations are necessary to remind the public that, even during interim years, the interest and values of a nation are being served and that the election of a candidate was the correct choice.

Political images are necessary and can lead to the acceleration or demise of political careers. The primary images of a politician that are circulated in the media need to individually or collectively capture the qualities outlined in the mythic presidency. However, as Putin, Dukakis, and Bush have demonstrated, there is a fine line between showing enough power, control, assertion, and athleticism, and providing the extreme versions of the mythic presidency. Therefore, in future images that are staged for the purpose of demonstrating specific qualities, politicians need to represent the mythic presidency in a subtle manner and within the scope of their individual rhetoric. Undoubtedly, photographers will capture and disseminate photographs of political figures without their prior knowledge. Hence, political figures have media handlers and communication coaches to train and stage them to personify the values of their voting

public and offset their candid portrayals. Political speeches and advertisements allow politicians adequate time to individually represent ascendancy, masculinity, physicality, and create identification; depending on the subject, candidates can appear more dominant, and then be more sensitive. Speeches, videos, and advertisements permit for more extended displays of the mythic presidency. Photographs represent a snapshot of reality and a brief moment in time, explaining the tendency to present hyper-masculine and hyper-dominant versions of politicians; images signify the most poignant moment. The mythic presidency is effective because not all four components need to be present at the same time to adhere to voter expectations. Rather, understated signs of the mythic presidency still allow for politicians to remain relevant in the public and embody the culturally expected values, but diminish the chance for their photographs to appear comedic, satirical, or foolish.

Political photographs also must align with the personal narrative of political figures for the images to benefit the candidate. Putin is a judo master, was a KGB officer, and has repeatedly demonstrated his affinity toward physical fitness. His images, extreme as they may be, correspond with his personal biography, thus making them less comical than if another president was photographed engaging in such antics. Likewise, the images of Reagan and Bush on their ranches confirmed their historical biography and the rhetoric that surrounded their personal images. Reagan was featured in several western movies and was the host of television shows, so his portrayal of the rugged individual fit with his story. Even though Bush's ranch images were satirized for being overly manly, commentators do note that doing ranch work was not outside the realm of possibility (Rein, 2005). When a politician's images deviate from what the public knows about the

individual, they receive scrutiny. For instance, Dukakis attempted to appear tough on national defense by posing in the tank. However, the political narrative that was attributed to him proved to be the antithesis of tough and ultimately his campaign failed (Schulte, 2008). While politicians must signify the elements of the mythic presidency in their visual representations, there are countless examples from both men and women of how extreme representations and images that do not align with personal narratives can be more harmful than beneficial, especially the images that politicians do not control.

### **Future Applications of the Mythic Presidency**

The mythic presidency is in the beginning stages of its use and application. Because the political context is complex, the mythic presidency can be utilized to analyze and evaluate images in light of race, sexual orientation, and age. For instance, the political context is becoming more racially diverse. Government leadership historically was reserved for the white male, but currently, minorities are becoming more prevalent in politics. For instance, President Barack Obama is celebrated as the first African American president in the United States; he represents drive, determination, and perseverance. Future analyses should examine if the race of a politician alters the decoding of ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality, or if race transcends the necessity to accumulatively portray the mythic presidency. President Obama may not need to convey overt signs of ascendancy, masculinity, and identification in his images because his personal narrative of being the first African American president to be elected to a historically white office might be enough to convey the mythic expectations of hard work, chartering new territory, expansionism, assertion, and the American Dream.



The mythic presidency is grounded in mythic literature supporting patriarchy, traditional gender roles, and heterosexual relationships. For instance, the frontier myth suggests that men are the conquerors of uncharted land and crusaders of the unknown while women represent the nurturers and mothers. The social and political world is changing to allow for homosexual relationships and blurring of traditional gender roles. Future analyses should test the mythic presidency in light of heterosexual and homosexual relationships to examine if the assumptions of ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality are broad enough to encompass differences in orientation, yet specific enough to articulate the particular qualities voters expect in their political candidates.

Finally, the mythic presidency as it intersects with age is an area for future research. Youthfulness is quickly becoming a necessity for political success. Similar to the mythic presidency assumption of physicality, age is indicative of vitality and political competence. Because younger politicians are better equipped to demonstrate physicality and fortitude, an interesting study would be to examine the political images of an older and younger politician in a comparison analysis to see if the visual signs of the mythic presidency are influenced by age. We know that older politicians will have a harder time demonstrating physicality; future studies could analyze which components of the mythic presidency are used to compensate for physicality when competing against younger candidates, and which visual signs are used to convey physicality when age limits the possibilities.

Cultural myths are powerful because they are resistant to change; they often are accepted without critical reflection and are constantly replicated. Even though the

political and social world is changing to allow for different genders, races, orientations, and ages to enter the political context, the mythic presidency asserts that there are fundamental characteristics and traits that transcend the shifting political culture. In a masculine environment, women still are bound by voter expectation to convey ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality in their visual representations; hence, race, sexual orientation, and age should be no exception. Grand myths are effective because they are adaptable; politicians mold them to align with their experiences and narratives. The mythic presidency articulates the fundamental characteristics and personality traits that politicians need to embody. The mythic presidency does not prescribe one way to convey ascendancy, masculinity, identification, and physicality; rather, politicians must simply demonstrate that they do possess these traits.

## APPENDIX

### 1. Michael Dukakis in Tank



Detroit, MI: Presidential candidate, Mike Dukakis wearing an army tanker's helmet, peers behind the loader's weapon of an M1A1 Abrams Main Battle Tank during a demonstration ride in the tank at the HQ of General Dynamics Land Systems Division in Detroit, where the tanks are manufactured, on September 13, 1988. (AP Images/Tracy Baker /Bettmann/Corbis)

## 2. George Bush with Mouth Open



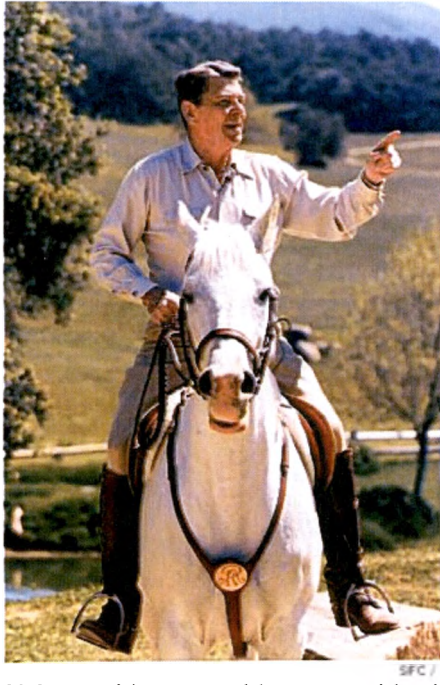
George Bush at the global economic summit in 2008. (AP Photo)

## 3. O.J. Simpson Magazine Covers



O.J. Simpson *Time* and *Newsweek* magazine cover, featured June 27, 1994. (Photographer: Matt Mahurin).

#### 4. Ronald Reagan on Horse



U.S. President Ronald Reagan rides his horse at his 688-acre Rancho del Cielo, "Ranch in the Sky," located 30 miles northwest of Santa Barbara, Ca., in April 1985. (AP Photo/Pete Souza)

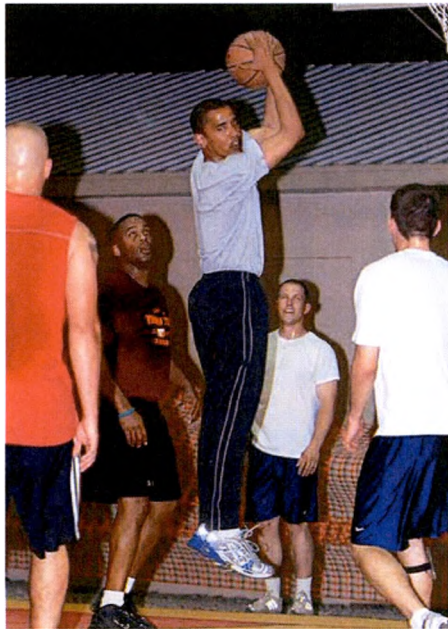
#### 5. George Bush with Chainsaw



President Bush uses a chainsaw to cut up a hackberry tree on his ranch in Crawford, Texas, on August 25, 2001 (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

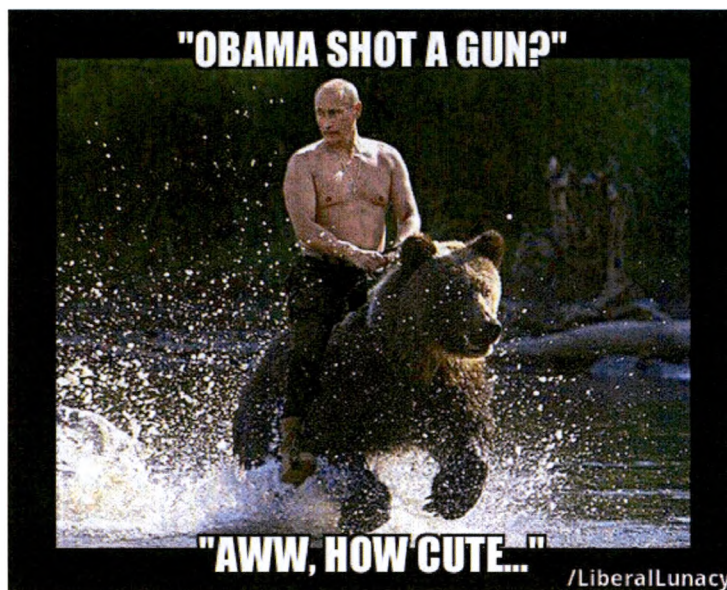


## 6. Barack Obama Playing Basketball



Democratic presidential hopeful Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill. goes for a shot while playing basketball at Maple Crest Elementary gym during a game in Kokomo, Ind. on Friday April 25, 2008. (AP Photo/Kokomo Tribune, Tim Bath)

## 7. Vladimir Putin Bear Parody



Photoshopped image of Vladimir Putin riding a bear. The original photograph taken in southern Siberia's Tuva region, on August 3, 2009 (Reuters/Ria Novosti/Alexei Druzhinin).

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