The primary question that Kenneth T. Walsh addresses in this accessible book is how modern presidents can “break free from the White House ‘bubble’ of isolation” and “stay in touch” with the American people. His description of the challenges involved in escaping from, in Bill Clinton’s words, the “crown jewel of the federal penitentiary system,” offers an intriguing lens through which to examine and assess presidential leadership. Unfortunately, Walsh’s argument that “the presidents who did the best job of staying in touch had the most successful presidencies” and prescription that “the main goal should be for presidents to try as hard as they can to remain connected to the lives of Americans outside Washington, D.C., using all the means at their disposal” (p. x), feel unimaginative in comparison to the provocatively ominous nature of his diagnosis. Despite this, this book is worth reading for many reasons; chief among them, the rich case studies of each president’s struggles – from Franklin D. Roosevelt through Barack Obama – to escape the splendid isolation of life in the White House.

Walsh introduces his book as “the logical extension of my quarter century of covering the White House as a journalist” (p.ix). As chief White House correspondent for the U.S. News & World Report, where he has worked since 1986, Walsh received extraordinary access to key players and confidential information. His journalistic style makes for engaging reading, but it does not deliver the systematic analysis that would be expected from a scholarly contribution. Nor does Walsh address scholarship (apart from brief mentions of Thomas Cronin and Michael Genovese) that is immediately relevant to his concern, such as that of George Edwards, Martha Joynt Kumar, Fred Greenstein, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, and James David Barber. Of course, situating his contribution within this academic context is not Walsh’s aim; but his “inside look” at the modern presidency would have a stronger impact if his conclusions were placed alongside those of others who have studied similar questions.

Over forty years ago, former senior advisor to Lyndon B. Johnson, George Reedy, identified “maintaining contact with reality” as the “most important, and least examined, problem of the presidency” (1970, p. 3). Since then, this challenge has only become exacerbated with relentless scrutiny through the 24-hour-news cycle and free-for-all blogs and social media. As Walsh notes, every image or utterance, every action or inaction is interpreted to death. These pressures are compounded by the pomp and history of the presidential office, which encourages presidents to see themselves in lofty terms, and deters those around them from speaking their minds or delivering bad news. Before long, presidents’ interactions with others begin to instinctively take on the logics of political calculation, and emersion in the wonkish language of politics and policy further remove them from the world of “normal” Americans. Additionally, the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the shooting of Ronald Reagan also increased the security presence around presidents to the point in which personal interactions are limited and highly staged. Walsh’s discussion of the formidable nature of this problem is interesting and insightful.

What can be done? Walsh argues that “the best way for a president to stay in touch is to make an intense, multifaceted effort to do so” (p. 14). He identifies four ways in which modern presidents have attempted to stay in touch with the American people: (1) intuition, developed
from prior experiences; (2) polls and focus groups; (3) consuming information about American life, through media, both news and popular; and (4) contact with members of Congress, friends, and associates. In his conclusion, Walsh offers six “prescriptions for ending or at least reducing presidential isolation,” which overlap with the four ways previously identified: (1) remember your roots; (2) make use of the pollsters, but don’t overdo it; (3) break out of the bunker; (4) listen to Congress; (5) consult former presidents; and (6) don’t ignore the media (pp. 205-212). The bulk of the book offers minimally-systematic assessments of each modern president, based on these prescriptions, and is divided into sections focusing on “Four Who Lost the People” (LBJ, Nixon, Carter, and Bush I), “Two Defiant Princes” (Kennedy and Bush II), and “Five Who Stayed Connected” (FDR, Truman, Reagan, Clinton, and Obama).

Walsh’s case studies are fascinating in and of themselves, but the way which he draws lessons from them is not always convincing, considering the shifting historical and political contexts in which each president was situated and the highly varied skills, personalities, and worldviews that shaped how each responded to challenges. Despite his acknowledgement of the largely structural nature of presidential isolation in his introductory chapter, and the distinct presence of these structural hindrances in the case studies, Walsh’s analysis of the cases predominately focuses on individual personalities. For example, in regards to those who failed to stay in touch with the people, Walsh argues that Johnson understood public opinion, but was too stubborn to heed it; Richard Nixon was driven by insecurities and resentments; Jimmy Carter’s sanctimony and arrogance wouldn’t allow him to be flexible; and George H.W. Bush lacked the intuitive sense to understand most Americans. The methodological challenges involved in studying various personalities occupying the same office, which itself evolves over time, is at the heart of much of the best research on the modern presidency. It is disappointing that the book does not acknowledge this complexity.

In an odd, though interesting stand-alone chapter, Kennedy and George W. Bush are grouped together as presidents who distinguished themselves from others by proudly declaring their independence from public opinion polls. According to Walsh, what made Kennedy successful at staying in touch and Bush less so, was the former’s intuitive sense of the public and the latter’s overconfident convictions. Walsh’s assessments are again largely based on past experiences and personality traits, which doesn’t suggest how a president can become a better leader, as much as propose what types of candidates voters should or should not be electing president (akin to the controversial work of James David Barber). For example, Walsh tells us that Kennedy “was a spoiled rich kid who was smart and self-indulgent...[but] at the time of his assassination in November 1963, his empathy was clearer than ever,” and that Bush “was another child of privilege”...who “didn’t learn humility or empathy” (p. 80). If these are indications of the “make or break” qualities for presidential leadership, then it would seem that Walsh’s aforementioned six prescriptions for staying in touch would have little impact.

Walsh argues that what set the five presidents who succeeded in staying in touch apart from the others was that they recognized the isolation of the White House and made “special efforts” to stay connected (p. 83). Sometimes these efforts came in unexpected forms, such as FDR’s reliance on his wife, Eleanor, who served as his “eyes and ears” when meeting citizens during her travels back and forth across the country. However, Walsh’s reliance still primarily rests on the personal qualities of presidents themselves. FDR used polls, read letters, and held press conferences, but also had an intuitive “insight into common men” (p. 84). Harry Truman embarked on his famous “whistle stop tour,” but success came from his down-to-earth style and his ability to stay connected through persistent effort, a humble approach, and “faith in the
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‘common man’” (p. 100). Walsh argues that “Reagan never forgot his middle-class roots…and this helped him stay in touch” (p. 107). Additionally, he relied heavily on polls to gauge the national mood, read letters, kept track of news coverage, and gained insights from his wife, Nancy, who was able to have more personal interactions with citizens. But, Walsh concludes, “[m]ost of all, he relied on his life experience…to inform his judgments as president (p. 124).

In recent decades, the science of public opinion polling has largely replaced intuition in presidential decision-making. Clinton, who famously asked pollsters to weigh in on the destination of his family vacation, relied heavily on polls “to keep him grounded in American life” (p. 125). Following the case studies, Walsh offers a chapter acknowledging the importance of this transition; but its extended biographies of the modern presidents’ key pollsters (so-called “Wizards of the White House”) adds little value to his overall argument. Of course, polling was of central importance to Clinton and Bush II, and remains at the heart of Obama’s efforts to keep his finger on the pulse of the American people. It is, undoubtedly, the primary tool that modern presidents use to take measure of life outside the White House. But how should we synthesize this understanding with Walsh’s claim that Clinton was “one of the most empathetic presidents in history” (p. 141)? Must this personal quality necessarily complement a reliance on polls? What about intuition? Or might the polls be enough? Walsh doesn’t tell us.

The claim that isolation within the White House bubble is one of the fundamental challenges of the modern presidency is, in itself, the significant contribution of this book. It is this observation, rather than Walsh’s claim that “the more contact a president has with the outside world, whether through polls or direct interactions with real people, the better” (p. 168), that makes this book worth reading. This dilemma deserves to be explored in more analytical depth and further developed as a critical concept by presidency scholars. The challenges that Obama has faced in the few months since this book’s publication suggest why. In his final case study, Walsh explains that the current president has tried to avoid isolation in various ways, including polling, familiarity with new media, letter reading, and bus tours, then concludes that “Obama, despite the criticism of his personal aloofness in dealing with Washington insiders, has kept as close to the country as any president in recent history” (p. 162). The Obama Administration’s close reading of polls offered support for the President’s “no negotiation with those who would hold the government hostage” strategy during the fall 2013 government shutdown. And undoubtedly, the capitulation of the Tea Party faction among the House Republicans was seen as a political win within the White House bubble. However, outside the bubble, both the President and Congress emerge from this debacle looking completely dysfunctional. Certainly the White House knows this. But does the thrill of the victory inside the bubble make it that much harder to care about the world outside?

REFERENCES