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## Since the JFK assassination, an ever-shifting balance between security and openness



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In the wake of the shootings in Tucson, Northeastern University Professor of **Political Science** Robert Gilbert discussed the issue of increased security for elected officials who still need to meet openly with constituents and do "the people's business." Gilbert offers some historical and present-day perspective on how personal contact with our leaders has changed, and the impact of change on our republic.

**How has access to our elected officials changed over the decades, beginning in the aftermath of Lincoln's assassination?**

I think that earlier assassinations had less of an effect on the public's access to the president than the Kennedy assassination in 1963. Even after Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley were assassinated (in 1865, 1881, and 1901 respectively), presidents still felt free to take walks, largely unprotected, on the streets of Washington, D.C. Coolidge regularly strolled through the city, generally accompanied by a single bodyguard. Truman was famous for his frequent walks in the capital, at least until he came close to being killed in a 1950 attack.

However, Kennedy's assassination seemed to be the defining moment, perhaps because film clips of the event — shown repeatedly on television — were so horrific and traumatizing. The near-assassination of Reagan in 1981, also heavily covered by television, underscored the powerful message. Now presidents typically stroll nowhere except at Camp David and they no longer ride in open cars. The distance between the public and its leader has grown significantly — but for good reason.

**Many members of Congress say they do not want to change their public outreach efforts. How have presidents and other holders of high office sought over the years to work around increasing security restrictions to try to stay in touch with the people?**

Presidents try hard to maintain some sort of contact with the public, but now substitute electronic for personal contact.

For example, speeches by U.S. presidents formerly were very rare. Even the annual State of the Union address was typically read to Congress by clerks, rather than being delivered in person by the president. Now, of course, presidential speeches on TV and radio have become common. Such speeches allow presidents to reach a national audience, while protecting their personal safety.

A "rhetorical presidency" has clearly emerged and new forms of "rhetoric" appear from time to time. President Obama has become the first president to make appearances on the Jay Leno and David Letterman late-night entertainment programs, and he has already engaged in an "Internet chat" with some of his constituents. Variations on these themes may filter down to lower political levels, not in terms of national TV, but perhaps involving cable and local access television. And the Internet is already a communications tool for some members of Congress.

**Does democracy truly lose something tangible when physical access to elected officials grows more**

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**tightly restricted?**

Strangely enough, we've actually increased public contact with candidates in the United States because primary election victories — rather than party leader support — has become essential to winning a nomination. Even presidential candidates must "press the flesh" in public. On the congressional level, some interaction between the public and members of Congress is inevitable, not only during campaign periods but even after election. Congress prefers to be seen as "the people's branch."

But without some face-to-face interaction, such a designation would be difficult to maintain. Some senators and members of the House had already begun to tighten security procedures surrounding their public appearances. The recent shootings in Arizona might well result in increasingly high barriers — and increasingly onerous security measures — being instituted between members of Congress and their constituents. This would indeed be a loss, since the "people's branch" should not ideally be a fortress.

**Has restricting the physical connection we are able to have with our elected officials diminished the bond we feel with them? In the case of the presidency, for example, do you believe that this has contributed to the phenomenon of the "Imperial Presidency?"**

French President Charles DeGaulle once said that to be effective, leaders require an aura of some mystery about them, and I think he was correct. Distancing presidents from the public has made them seem more remote and even has transformed them into mythological figures. This has contributed to the development of the institutional charisma of presidents. Institutional charisma is the special aura that attaches to the office of the presidency and that every occupant of that office inherits upon inauguration. It means that, although few presidents are personally charismatic, all have a form of charisma that should benefit them greatly.

But the distancing of presidents from the public has indeed contributed to the development of the "Imperial Presidency." In certain respects, this phenomenon may actually help the president achieve his or her objectives but at the same time, it can create public expectations that cannot reasonably be met. For presidents, this is a two-edged sword.