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POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Failed Presidents

"Is the Presidency Failing?" by Donald L. Horowitz, in *The Public Interest* (Summer 1987), 10 East 53rd St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

Since World War II, says Horowitz, a Duke University political scientist, every American president except Dwight Eisenhower has "met with death, disgrace, or grave political disability."

But are failed presidencies the fault of the men who have been president? Or is failure inherent in the office? The answer, Horowitz argues, can be found in the conflicting sentiments of the Founding Fathers.

The Framers of the Constitution did not want a strong president. George Mason, for example, considered a single executive an "imitation monarchy." Roger Sherman of Connecticut thought the executive should be completely subordinate to the legislature. "Executive power," Horowitz argues, "was, for most delegates, not a positive good." Yet the Framers did not want to continue the genteel anarchy that resulted from the Articles of Confederation.

Hence, while the Constitution included a chief executive independent of the legislature, "antimonarchical and antiauthoritarian sentiment" frequently resulted in failed presidencies. Even George Washington and John Adams "occasionally yielded to cabinet majorities." Thomas Jefferson "lost virtually all his support" because of his embargo on trade with Britain and France. Thus, recent popular and congressional rejection of presidents, "rooted in deep resentment of executive power, has early antecedents."

Strong presidents, Horowitz argues, gain their political strength mostly by serving "during popular wars, depressions, and crises, when people feel helpless." In periods of stability, the president normally acts as a national father figure, "the unconscious analogue of parents and other authorities." Of late, the evolution of an "unusually democratic, egalitarian" American family style bodes ill for future popular support of the president, the "authority figure *par excellence*." More obvious and important is the steady ebbing of party loyalty among the public and in Congress—giving the president fewer dependable allies and less leeway. Public opinion has become highly volatile, especially on foreign policy issues.

Hence, Horowitz predicts, failed presidencies will recur as political parties decline, and the mass media persistently seek flaws in presidents. Formidable opposition to presidents is "ready to be activated at any sign of trouble, and the trouble reflex is in excellent condition."