

PERIODICALS

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POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

The Mandate Myth

"Myth of the Presidential Mandate" by Robert A. Dahl, in *Political Science Quarterly* (Fall 1990), 475 Riverside Dr., Ste. 1274, New York, N.Y. 10115-0012.

When Ronald Reagan swept into the Oval Office in 1980, politicians and pundits fell over one another declaring his 50.9 percent victory a "mandate" to govern—just as they had upon the election of most presidents chosen during this century. Indeed, writes Dahl, a Yale political scientist, "it has become commonplace for presidents and commentators alike to argue that by virtue of his election the president has received a mandate for his aims and policies from the people."

"A backward glance quickly reveals how empty the claims to a presidential mandate are," Dahl says. In 1960, for example, John F. Kennedy won less than 50 percent of the popular vote and still claimed a mandate. Richard M. Nixon's 1968 "mandate" came from just 43 percent of the voters, Jimmy Carter's in 1976 from 50.1 percent. The presidential mandate is a pernicious myth, Dahl argues.

Nowhere in the Constitution is it written that the president outranks Congress as a representative of the people, or that his policies should prevail over those of the legislators. In fact, Dahl says, the Framers deliberately chose to elect presidents indirectly, through the Electoral College, instead of by popular vote because they wanted Congress to serve as the closest link to the people.

The nation's first presidents claimed no mandates. Thomas Jefferson, for example, believed that it was the president's task to

aid the work of Congress. James Madison was so deferential to the legislature that his own policies were almost unintelligible. His successor, James Monroe, remained silent on the question of slavery in the Louisiana Territory, believing that Congress should decide domestic issues without presidential interference.

"If anyone could be said to have created the myth of the presidential mandate," Dahl contends, "surely it would be Andrew Jackson." After being deprived of the presidency by the U.S. House of Representatives when the Electoral College became deadlocked in the election of 1824, the frustrated Jackson finally won the prize in 1828. It became his "settled conviction" that "the president was an immediate and direct representative of the people," historian Leonard White observed. Jackson even suggested amending the Constitution to provide for direct election of the president. But it was Woodrow Wilson, with his admiration for the firm leadership of the prime minister in the British parliamentary system, who "brought the mandate theory to what now appears to be its canonical form." Wilson lifted the president above Congress, arguing that he is the "one national voice in the country."

By elevating the president "to an exalted position" in our constitutional system at the expense of Congress, Dahl contends, the mandate myth undermines the democratic process. The president's unlimited

access to the news media allows him to manipulate public opinion. As a result, many Americans no longer carefully deliberate political choices, but rely on presidential packaging of issues. Under the pre-

text of expanding democracy, Dahl concludes, the mandate myth expands only the president's personal power, and thus breeds what he calls dangerous "pseudodemocracy."

No Help Wanted

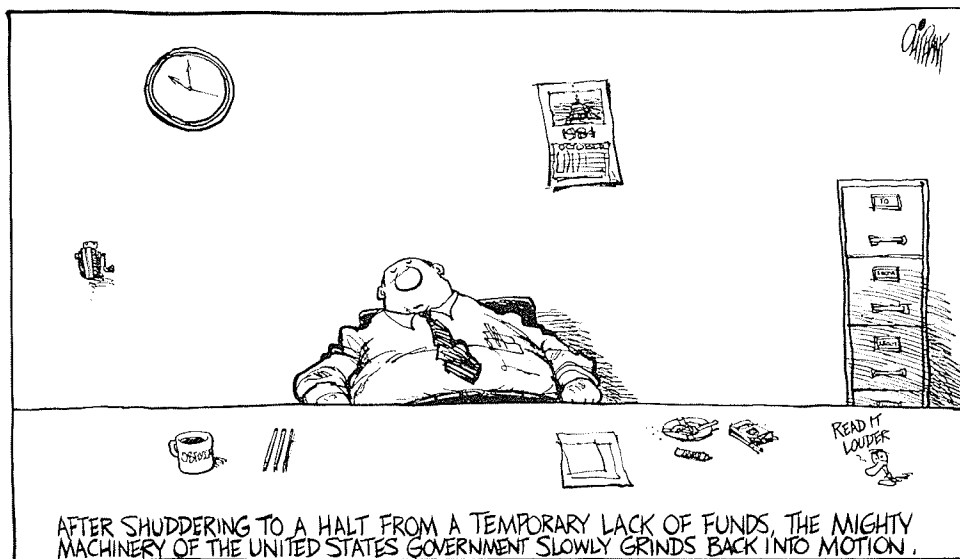
"Uncle Sam Doesn't Want You" by John Heilemann, in *The Washington Monthly* (Dec. 1990), 1611 Conn. Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

Ask a classroom full of college honors students where they hope to work after graduation, and they'll likely tell you IBM, or CBS, or Arthur Anderson. Ninety percent of them, however, never even consider working for the nation's largest employer: the federal government.

Exactly the opposite was true six decades ago when Franklin D. Roosevelt was president. "Washington was deluged with an endless stream of bright young men" eager to get a piece of the New Deal, wrote historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Thirty years later, President John F. Kennedy's administration received a similar flood of applications. Yet today, half of college students are convinced that government jobs are inherently boring and futile, according to one survey. Oddly, writes Heilemann, a

journalist, "Washington has done remarkably little to counter these perceptions." Instead, under President Ronald Reagan, "federal recruiting was actually designed to reinforce them."

Reagan entered office promising to slash the size of the federal government. Government agencies "were commanded to stop visiting campuses and developing recruiting materials." Heilemann argues that "by making the process of getting a government job as cumbersome, slow, and red-tape-riddled as possible, the administration guaranteed that even the most determined would-be bureaucrats" would ultimately be discouraged. Still, the federal bureaucracy actually grew by 7.5 percent during Reagan's tenure, to more than three million. But the declining quality of



The negative image of federal employees may not turn out to be so funny after all: One report finds a "crisis of competence" within many federal offices.