



The Presidency

The coming of a new President often spurs scholarly reëxamination of the presidency as an institution. Intellectual fashions change; most recently, for example, Vietnam and Watergate have brought a sharp reaction against earlier academic enthusiasm for the “strong presidency” with Franklin D. Roosevelt as model. Analysts now write of curbing presidential powers, not expanding them. Other researchers focus on less-publicized issues, such as White House organization and the process of governing. Here, Stephen Hess, scholar and former presidential aide, portrays the modern presidency as it appears to the man who occupies the Oval Office. And, in what they call a “cautionary tale,” political scientists Jack Knott and Aaron Wildavsky discuss what good government seems to mean to our 39th President, Jimmy Carter.



PORTRAIT OF A PRESIDENT

by Stephen Hess

Twice I have served on White House staffs—at the end of one administration (1959–61) and at the beginning of another (1969). All presidencies, of course, are different. But one could hardly fail to observe differences that were exclusively a product of time. *Beginnings* and *endings* are different. There are differences of pace, attitude, objectives, and response, not only between administrations but also within each one.

What follows is a composite portrait of a President over the course of his years in office. (Exceptions to generalities are noted.)

I attempt to see the presidency as it appears to a President, in the "presidential context." Much of the current literature focuses on the powerfulness of the office. My conclusion is not that the office is unpowerful. Rather, the accent is on presidential constraints. Often in the following pages the President will seem a hapless giant, surrounded by enemies, hemmed in by competing power centers, responding to events that he did not create and cannot control. This is how the presidency increasingly looks to the man who occupies the White House. The vantage point may help to explain why Presidents act the way they do.

Every fourth even-numbered year, on a Tuesday between the second and eighth of November, a President is elected. If he is not the incumbent, he has a period of grace until January 20 during which he can organize his administration without having to assume the responsibilities of office. He brings to this task certain knowledge and experience, obligations and commitments.

The odds, however, are great that he has not held an executive position in the federal government.* He may, in fact, never have been an executive. Some of his experiences will be of considerable value; for example, Lyndon Johnson's understanding of the workings of Congress and Dwight Eisenhower's understanding of the workings of the Pentagon. By the act of running for the presidency, all elected Presidents should have gained some useful understanding of public opinion. But no matter how much he may have thought and read about the presidency, the most startling fact about a new President is the depth of his ignorance about the *job* to which he has just been elected. At least two recent Presidents have commented on this phenomenon. The

* Of the modern Presidents, Franklin Roosevelt through Gerald Ford, only FDR had ever served as a political executive in Washington, having been Assistant Secretary of the Navy during World War I.

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learning period for a new President has been estimated by one scholar as taking about 18 months. One consequence is that a new President makes some of his most important decisions at a time when he is least capable of deciding wisely.

The White House staff will be largely filled by those who have surrounded the candidate during the campaign and who have his trust. They bring to their jobs an understanding of the President, loyalty, and in some cases a set of skills that are transferable from the campaign, such as press relations and scheduling. Their primary interests, however, usually have been in the art of politics, not governance. While they are apt to begin their White House duties in a personal-services relationship with the President, they will eventually acquire more and more governmental responsibilities; Presidents have a habit of giving the jobs at hand to the persons at hand. Some of these former campaign workers may be qualified to assume operational assignments, but not because they were campaign workers. One need only look at why they were in the campaign. Often their chief qualifications—and an important one in a campaign—was availability; their chief motivations may have been the expectation of excitement, an excess of zeal, or hero worship.

The policy commitments of a new President are found in his campaign speeches, in the party platform, and to a lesser degree in the promises of other members of his party. These commitments are usually vague, given the tendencies of elective politics. In no sense can they be considered a presidential program. A program has a price tag and relates to available funds. One consequence is that at the time Congress is inclined to be most responsive to the wishes of a President, he is least able to make his wishes known in concrete terms.

People Problems

On the morning after his victory, a President-elect is consumed with thoughts of Cabinet-making and other matters of personnel selection. No shadow Cabinet waits in the wings. A new President suddenly discovers how few people he knows who are qualified to assume major posts in government. "People, people, people!" John Kennedy exclaimed three weeks after his election, "I don't know any people. I only know voters."

A President-elect has obligations and political debts, but they are not necessarily to those with the backgrounds he now needs. Sometimes he picks incompetents for his Cabinet. Often he turns

to strangers. With each appointment, a President makes a contract to share his responsibilities. If it turns out that the appointee and the President disagree, the appointee can quit or the President can fire him. Either action is a tacit admission of failure on the part of the President. More often, the President and the appointee split their differences and the President loses some part of the direction of his administration.

The Danger of "Afterglow" Disasters

The problems of presidential transition may be exacerbated by animosities between the incoming and outgoing Presidents and/or by tensions between the incoming President and the civil service.* If the newly elected President is from the party out of power, he probably campaigned against "bureaucracy," "red tape," and the "failures" of government programs. Almost all Presidents-to-be ascribe an alien political coloration to the permanent government. Franklin Roosevelt considered it too conservative; Richard Nixon considered it too liberal. The new President is not necessarily paranoid. He is committed to change and perhaps even to reductions in programs and personnel. As a result, the permanent government may well see its interests as threatened.

On taking office, the new President finds he is confronted with a backlog of decisions that need to be made. Government has a way of treading water during presidential campaigns as it waits to see who will be its next leader. And decisions postponed build pressure for resolution. Thus the President at first is presented with great opportunities and great dangers.

The dangers are compounded by the arrogance of the incoming administration. For two years or more the candidate and his closest advisors have been working toward a single goal. The goal has been incredibly difficult and complex to achieve. Gaining it has been a rare achievement that comes to few. They have a right to believe that they succeeded because of their skill, intelligence, political understanding, and hard work. It is not surprising that some of the greatest presidential disasters—even to second-term Presidents—have come in the immediate afterglow of election victories.†

* The problems are naturally greatest when the President-elect has defeated the incumbent President (FDR and Hoover in 1932) and least when both are of the same party, although problems can still exist in the latter case (Theodore Roosevelt and Taft in 1908), but they are apt to be caused by bruised egos rather than lack of cooperation.

† Among the disasters that followed election victories have been the Roosevelt court-packing plan (1937), Kennedy's Bay of Pigs (1961), and Johnson's decision to escalate the Vietnam war (1965).

The new President also finds he has inherited a variety of organizational arrangements that were created to deal with his predecessor's problems. Each administration over time invents a variety of offices that reflect the special talents or deficiencies of appointees, rivalries between advisers, pet projects of the President, and constituent pressures. Sometimes new Presidents will overreact to this legacy, as when Kennedy quickly jettisoned the National Security Council machinery of the Eisenhower administration so that he was left without an appropriate evaluative capacity at the White House when an early foreign policy crisis arose.

Each President soon comes to agree with Woodrow Wilson: "Governments grow piecemeal, both in their tasks and in the means by which those tasks are to be performed, and very few governments are organized as wise and experienced men would organize them if they had a clean sheet of paper to write upon." Yet no matter how inefficiently or illogically the government is organized, there are those who like it that way. Congress, special-interest groups, and bureaucrats have grown comfortable with existing arrangements and have a vested interest in their continuation. The public is not usually much concerned and hence is hard to mobilize for such bloodless matters as structural change. Presidents fret a lot about the ill-fitting shape of government, but generally they conclude that serious attempts at restructuring are no-win propositions. Neither the voters nor the annals of history reward them for such efforts. So (with the exception of Roosevelt and Nixon) they propose only marginal reforms.

Responses to the Past

Much of the tone of the new administration is a response or reaction to the outgoing administration. Eisenhower felt strongly the necessity of establishing a sense of calm after what he considered the divisiveness of Harry Truman's government. In the wake of Kennedy's assassination, Johnson stressed the need for continuity. Gerald Ford's open behavior was meant as an antidote to the dark side of the Nixon presidency.

Other elements of a President's inheritance start to come into focus. He finds that it will not be until his third year in office that he will be able to operate under a budget that his own appointees have initiated. Even then much federal spending will be in "uncontrollables" (e.g., veterans' benefits, Medicare) and not subject to his influence. His power to appoint only extends to some 3,000 people out of a government civilian work force of over 2 million.

Some officials have term appointments and cannot be removed before their time is up. The new President must abide by laws and treaties that were not of his making. There are traditions that he cannot ignore except at great risk. He begins to realize that government is like a continuously moving conveyor belt. He jumps on while it is in motion. It cannot be stopped in order for him to engineer change.

His ability to act, he finds, is also limited by external considerations: whether the nation is in the midst of war or peace, whether the gross national product is rising or falling, the rate of inflation, the balance of payments, the composition of the Supreme Court and Congress, and the size of his electoral mandate. Once in office, President Kennedy was fond of quoting Thomas Jefferson's dictum, "Great innovations should not be forced on slender majorities."

Yet the new administration begins in a state of euphoria. Reporters are inclined to be kind. Congress is quiescent. There is not yet a record to defend. The President, for the only time, takes a broad-gauged look at existing policies. His popularity ratings in the polls will never again be as high.

An adviser to Presidents summed up the importance of an administration's early months:

Everything depends on what you do in program formulation during the first six or seven months. I have watched three presidencies and I am increasingly convinced of that. Time goes by so fast. During the first six months or so, the White House staff is not hated by the cabinet, there is a period of friendship and coöperation and excitement. There is some animal energy going for you in those first six to eight months, especially if people perceive things in the same light. If that exists and so long as that exists you can get a lot done. You only have a year at the most for new initiatives, a time when you can establish some programs as your own, in contrast to what has gone on before.

Then the administration has its first foreign crisis and its first domestic scandal. Weaknesses in personnel begin to appear. The novelty of new personalities wears off for the press. The President introduces his legislative program. The process known as "the coalition-of-minorities" takes hold. Every presidential action will alienate someone. The longer he is in office, the more actions he must take, and, collectively, the more sizable the body of those in opposition will be. Groups that would not attack him when his

popularity was high now become vocal. His poll ratings start to drop at a rate of some six percentage points a year.*

By the end of his first year the President should have learned two important lessons: first, that the unexpected is likely to happen; second, that his plans are unlikely to work out as he had hoped. The Soviet Union launches Sputnik. A U-2 is shot down. There is an uprising in Hungary, a riot in Watts, a demonstration at Berkeley, U.S. missiles that he thought had been removed from Turkey were not removed. The Chinese explode a nuclear device earlier than his intelligence forecasts had predicted. The President finds that much of his time is spent reacting to events over which he has no control or trying to correct the errors of others.

Presidents start to turn inward, some sooner than others, the rate depending on personality factors and the ratio of successes to failures. Reading the morning newspapers becomes less satisfying. They bring bad news. They never seem to get their stories straight. Editorials and columns note only the things that go wrong. The President holds fewer news conferences. He looks for ways to go over the heads of the press corps, such as televised speeches. He grants exclusive interviews to friendly reporters.

Do It Yourself

Some members of his Cabinet, he feels, have "gone native." They badger him on behalf of their departments' clients. Others he finds long-winded or not very bright. There are now longer intervals between Cabinet meetings. He tells his appointments secretary to make it difficult for certain department heads to get in to see him alone.

Time is running out on his first term. Things are not getting done, or are not done fast enough. He begins to feel that if he wants action he will have to initiate it himself—meaning through his own staff. The White House staff grows bigger, despite his early promises to reduce its size. Decisions that used to be made in the departments now need White House clearance. Bottlenecks develop as too many agencies are funneled through too few presidential assistants. Programs that the President wishes to give high priority are placed directly within the Executive Office.

The midterm congressional elections approach, and the President tries to restore his luster at the polls. He always fails.† His

* The only exception is Eisenhower, whose popularity *increased* by some two and one-half percentage points a year in his first term.

† The only modern President to have his party gain seats in both houses of Congress in a midterm election was Franklin Roosevelt in 1934.

party loses seats. The new Congress is less receptive to the President's wishes. This process was described by Lyndon Johnson late in his administration:

You've got to give it all you can that first year. Doesn't matter what kind of majority you come in with. You've got just one year when they treat you right, and before they start worrying about themselves. The third year, you lose votes. . . . The fourth year's all politics. You can't put anything through when half of the Congress is thinking how to beat you. So you've got one year. That's why I tried. Well, we gave it a hell of a lick, didn't we?

The President now devotes a larger part of his time to foreign policy, perhaps as much as two-thirds. This is true even if his pre-presidential interests had been mainly in the domestic area. He takes trips abroad, attends summit meetings, greets heads of state at the White House. Like Kennedy, he believes that "the big difference" between domestic and foreign policy "is that between a bill being defeated and the country [being] wiped out." But he also turns to foreign policy because it is the area in which he has the most authority to act and, until recently, the least public and congressional restraint on his actions. Moreover, history usually rewards the foreign-policy President, and the longer a President stays in office, the larger in his mind looms his "place in history."

The Third-Year Exodus

During the third year, the exodus from government begins. Many of those who were attracted to the glitter of a new administration find that they cannot spare any more time away from their "real" careers, especially if they come from the highly competitive corporate world; others find that their government experience has created nongovernment offers they cannot refuse; some realize they made a mistake in coming to Washington, or their families are urging them to return home. "Fatigue becomes a factor," Henry Kissinger noted in 1972. "I always thought my mind would develop in a high position." But he found that the "mind is always working so hard that you learn little. Instead, you tend to work with what you learned in previous years." The lure of a waning administration is not great and so the President often turns to careerists, promoting from within.

Personal alliances and rivalries by now have had full opportunity to develop within the administration. Remembering his experiences on the Truman staff, Clark Clifford recalled how "you

develop areas of resistance. You come up with an idea, and you could guarantee in advance those men in government who would take the opposite position, just because you favored something."

The President may have taken office with only the most limited notions of what he wanted to do, but by the second half of his term he has accumulated a long list of his positions, which must be promoted and defended and which will determine whether he is reelected or not. He now has strong feelings about what is in the national interest and what must be done—regardless of the popularity of his actions. He has come to see the national interest as uniquely his to uphold. When announcing the decision to send troops into Cambodia in the spring of 1970, President Nixon told the American people, "I would rather be a one-term President and do what I believe is right than to be a two-term President at the cost of seeing America become a second-rate power and to see this Nation accept the first defeat in its proud 190-year history." There may have been some posturing in his statement, yet his is a posture that is eventually assumed by all Presidents. The lines harden.

The Fourth Year

As the administration enters its fourth year, the President's attention snaps back to domestic considerations. The political quotient that enters into each presidential act becomes more determining. Appointments are made with an eye to mending fences in his party. Programmatic decisions of high risk may be deferred. "Wait until next year, Henry," Roosevelt told Treasury Secretary Morgenthau in May 1936, "I am going to be really radical." Some members of the administration join the campaign staff, others continue to perform their duties with an eye to the election payoff of actions taken. The President finds excuses to make "nonpolitical" speeches around the country. By summer he is nominated for a second term and begins active campaigning.

If the President is reelected, it is largely on the basis of the past—the state of the nation during his incumbency—rather than his promises for the future. What is unspoken is that his next four years will be less productive than the previous four years. There are some exceptions. Wilson in 1917 and Roosevelt in 1941 had opportunities to preside over "just" wars. Generally, however, at least since Jefferson, the second term is downhill.*

* See John Pierson, "Is a Second Term Always Downhill?" *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 1973. He claimed that Theodore Roosevelt's second term was "uphill" and that the second terms of Coolidge and Eisenhower were no worse than their first terms.

But first the newly reelected President will make an effort to recast his administration by bringing in new people or by giving new assignments, as Nixon did in 1973. He will take advantage of his renewed popularity by pushing his legislative program, as Johnson did in 1965. He will unveil pet schemes that he had previously kept to himself, as Roosevelt did in 1937. In the President's fifth and sixth years—as in his third—there is considerable maneuvering room to shape events. (Although deaths and a resignation have meant that some Presidents did not get their full allotment of years in office.)

A Losing Game

Then, as Harold Laski noted as far back as 1940, the two-term tradition (now the two-term limitation) “operates decisively to weaken his influence in the last two years on his reign. Few Presidents have had substantial results to show during that period.” The President's party again loses seats in the midterm election—a signal for potential presidential candidates to start increasing their visibility. One way to make news is to attack the incumbent. The attention of the press gradually shifts to these new men. Some of the President's executives resign to enter the embryonic campaigns. The personnel pattern of the first term repeats itself, only it is now even more difficult to recruit from outside government. The President will continue to hold the nation's attention if there is a serious international crisis; otherwise, he must try to manufacture interest through summit meetings, foreign travel (the more exotic the better), and by attaching himself to major events, such as space exploits, disaster relief. Foreign powers may prefer to stall various negotiations until a new President is installed. The last year of his administration is also an election year for the House of Representatives and a third of the Senate, with predictable consequences for the President's legislative program.

In the final July or August, the national conventions nominate two men to run for President. The President will campaign for the nominee of his party, but fairly casually; he does not see it as his battle.

After the new man is elected, there is no longer any vital force in the administration. On January 20, the President watches his successor being sworn in. He is now an instant elder statesman.

This account stresses the institutional forces that press in upon a President. But, of course, being President need not be a grim experience. Depending on his personality, a President may

have a very good time.

And being President need not be an unproductive experience. Each President does realize some of his legislative goals and prevents by veto the enactment of other laws that he feels are not in the nation's best interests. His authority in the conduct of war and peace is substantial. He uses his unique position to preach doctrines that have a better chance of entering the public consciousness than the competing ideas of other politicians. His power and influence may be limited, but they are also greater than those of any other individual.

Essentially a Caretaker

Still, the experience of being President was different from what he thought it would be or from what he learned in his civics textbooks. Four years or eight years seemed like a very long time from the outside, a very short time when he was in office. Never long enough to do any real planning—to think about where the country ought to be even in the next decade and to design programs to get from here to there. His time was largely consumed by crises and the demands of others, bargaining with congressmen, feuds, small symbolic acts, worrying about getting reelected, finding people for jobs and getting rid of them (usually by “kicking them upstairs”), approving budgets that he could only change around the edges. He never really “ran” the government as he had expected. Rather, the President found that he was essentially a caretaker: his job was to keep the social fabric intact; to keep the peace if possible; to defend the nation from aggressors; to maintain the nation's place in the world, even by force; to attempt to balance economic growth and stability; to deal with those concerns that were identified through the elective process, and at best to make some new initiatives that the history books would record as his.