

“Punctuating this sentence with a semicolon,” she observes concerning “It’s not a comet, it’s a meteor,” “would be like using a C-clamp to hold a sandwich together.” *Thanks much* and *thank you much* are “jocular formations—not quite in the same ball park as *Who’d of thunk?* but perhaps lurking outside the gates, at a nearby souvenir stand.”

Wallraff is so helpful and stimulating that I am shocked by her occasional lapses. We read about a sentence with “958 possible parses,” though *parse* as a noun is impossible even once. She writes “referring back to an antecedent,” as if an antecedent could follow. She reluctantly accepts “I could care less” as “by now an informal idiom,” where S&W stand firm: “The error destroys the meaning of the sentence and is careless indeed.” I do, however, forgive her much for defending the use of *gravitas* with: “Aren’t you glad that it’s not only people with rings in their bellybuttons and skateboards under their toes who are giving us words?”

The Elements of Style covers much less ground than *Word Court*, but it is also less peccant. It is a bit overfond of the word *forcible* (as Ms. W. is of *punctilios*), and a trifle schoolmasterly in tone. But it is not without a sense of humor as it dispenses its tough love. Still, concision comes at a price: Under *comprise* we do not get the abominable *comprised of*. Under the dubious *due to*, there is no mention

of the respectable *owing to*. Under the much misused *enormity*, there is no guidepost to the nonpejorative *enormousness*. But how priceless is the ironic remark such as “Youths . . . renovate the language with a wild vigor as they would a basement apartment.”

Along with the somewhat laconic do’s and don’ts, we get an invaluable chapter on style, on how to write not just correctly but also well. It includes such gems as “To achieve style, begin by affecting none,” and “Think of the tragedies that are rooted in ambiguity, and be clear! When you say something, make sure you have said it. The chances of your having said it are only fair.” Wallraff has no such chapter, but she does have a useful bibliography of good books about language. Although she omits Jacques Barzun’s *Simple and Direct* (1985), as well as Eric Partridge’s many excellent and entertaining works, she is right to praise H. W. Fowler’s splendid *Modern English Usage* (1930), and to have serious doubts about its latest updater, the “not lovable” Robert Burchfield.

So get both *Word Court* and *Elements of Style*, and throw in Bryan A. Garner’s indispensable *Dictionary of Modern American English* (1998). With these in hand, you will be ready to ramble in the language wars.

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What Makes a Great President?

PRESIDENTIAL GREATNESS.

By Marc Landy and Sidney M. Milkis. Univ. of Kansas Press. 278 pp. \$34.95

THE PRESIDENTIAL DIFFERENCE: Leadership Style from FDR to Clinton.

By Fred I. Greenstein. Free Press. 282 pp. \$25

POWER AND THE PRESIDENCY.

Edited by Robert A. Wilson. PublicAffairs. 162 pp. \$20

by Godfrey Hodgson

Another four years have gone by, and once again the publishers’ lists are overflowing with books about presidents

and the presidency. Many of the authors wear spectacles warmly tinted with national pride, sometimes qualified by a

sense of historical decline. Where, they ask, are the giants of yesteryear, the Washingtons and Jeffersons, the Jacksons and Lincolns?

A good example, full of shrewd obiter dicta, is *Presidential Greatness*. According to political scientists Marc Landy, of Boston College, and Sidney M. Milkis, of the University of Virginia, the test of greatness in the presidency is the ability to “engage the nation in a struggle for its constitutional soul.” By this test, the last great president was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and “all his successors have stood in his shadow.” The only epigoni who come even close, in the authors’ judgment—Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan—both fall well short.

Greatness is an elusive concept. For historians, it is hard to dissociate from Carlyle’s discredited “great man theory of history,” which came perilously close to suggesting that the reasonable, constrained, and persuasive leaders of democracies were inferior to egotists and conquerors such as Napoleon and Frederick the Great. For some presidential scholars, greatness seems to represent admittance to the canon of the American political religion, with its trinity of Washington, the hypostasis of the old revelation; Jefferson, the spirit; and Lincoln, the martyred son. If the discussion of presidential greatness is truly about canonization or even apotheosis, no wonder the living Reagan and the dead but unsaintly Johnson cannot yet be admitted.

What is also striking, at least to a non-American student, is the exceptionalist character of such discussions. Not only does the very concept of presidential greatness automatically exclude all those

who are not American presidents, and therefore all non-Americans; it also relates specifically to the development and vicissitudes of the American Constitution. The discussion of who is a great president forecloses consideration of great leaders in other parts of American government and other political traditions. However erudite and graceful such debates may be, they strike me as a little too much like party games, or those futile arguments about whether the baseball

players of Babe Ruth’s generation were better than the contemporaries of Sammy Sosa and Mark McGwire.

A more precise and verifiable criterion than greatness is leadership. In *The Presidential Difference*, Fred I. Greenstein, professor of politics at Princeton University and author of *The Hidden-Hand Presidency* (1982), uses it to make a far sharper comparison of all the presidents since FDR.

Greenstein evaluates those 11 men (and he is surely right that the presidency will not forever remain a masculine bastion) in terms of six characteristics: effectiveness as a communicator, organizational capacity, political skill, vision, cognitive skill (or what we might call intelligence), and what he calls “emotional intelligence.”

Greenstein’s work promises to stand alongside Richard E. Neustadt’s *Presidential Power* (1960) and James David Barber’s even more schematic *Presidential Character* (1972) as a benchmark for measuring presidential performance. His list of precise qualities is far more useful than the somewhat baroque abstraction “greatness,” which trails clouds of glory, not to mention angels with trumpets. Greenstein recognizes



A 1944 campaign poster

that those who are unusually gifted in one way can be unusually vulnerable in others. His conclusion, which may have been predictable from his preconceptions, is that the most important single trait is so-called emotional intelligence, which others might call “common sense” or even “sanity.”

Following Richard Nixon’s cabinet officer Elliot Richardson, he raises, at the end of his perceptive analysis, one of the most difficult matters that historians and biographers confront: the possible connections between a subject’s strengths and his weaknesses. Take away Nixon’s emotional flaws, Richardson suggested, and you would also strip away the insecurity that gave the man his creative energy. This issue goes to the heart of human character, and Greenstein sidesteps it in a way that is reminiscent of William James’s “religion of healthy mindedness.” “Great political ability does sometimes derive from troubled emotions,” he says with something like a sniff, but that fact does not justify putting the emotionally troubled in charge of a nuclear arsenal. True, no doubt, but how do we make sure that those who reach the presidency pass the healthy-mindedness test?

And what of the office itself? Forty years ago, scholars such as Neustadt, Edwin S. Corwin, Louis Koenig, and Clinton Rossiter believed that the power of the presidency had increased, was increasing, and ought to increase. Now, by contrast, the consensus seems to be that the power of the office has diminished; in particular, the president has lost power in relation to the Congress, partly as a consequence of divided government. There is also a feeling that the presidency is locked into the permanent campaign, requiring presidents to spend too much time raising funds.

This new appraisal stems in part from a shift in the political marketplace. Every modern president is a trader, entering office with a stock of political capital. If he were to sit back and attempt to live

on the income from it, he would soon starve. So he must venture into the political market and trade. He proposes legislation, handles crises, applies leadership where required, and tries to avoid damaging associations. His record is observed and evaluated by Washington insiders and, in turn, transmitted to the wider public by the media. At the same time, polls recycle public opinion back to Washington, increasing or decreasing the president’s political capital.

During the Cold War, the president’s capital was greatly enhanced by his near-monopoly over issues of life and death. Is there going to be a war? Will we win? Will I survive? Since the fall of the Soviet Union, rightly or wrongly the nation’s security no longer seems threatened, and a near-monopoly over these issues has lost value in the political market. The president’s institutional competitors in the Congress have greater influence over the issues that now bulk large in the public mind: prosperity, equality, and, perhaps most of all, quality of life—health, education, the environment. While people expect as much as ever from presidents, the unfortunate presidents have less and less influence over the dominant issues.

Yet who is president still matters as much as ever. In *Power and the Presidency*, a collection of lectures given at Dartmouth College by a stellar cast of presidential biographers, it is Harry Truman’s biographer, David McCullough, who makes the point best. He quotes the prayer John Adams sent to his wife, Abigail, after spending his first night in the White House, a prayer Franklin Roosevelt had carved into the mantelpiece of the State Dining Room: “May none but honest and wise men ever rule under this roof.” And, before too long, honest and wise women.

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