The Diminished Presidency

"The Weakening White House" by Richard E. Neustadt, in *British Journal of Political Science* (Jan. 2001), Cambridge Univ. Press, Journals Fulfillment Dept., 110 Midland Ave., Port Chester, New York, N.Y. 10573–4930.

The American presidency may still be the most powerful office in the world, but it has been progressively weakened over the past three decades. So contends political scientist Neustadt, of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, expanding on a theme he first enunciated in *Presidential Power* (1960).

It's not just that the well-known presidential follies and scandals from Lyndon Johnson's day to Bill Clinton's have lessened public respect for the office, he says. Other debilitating forces also have been at work.

Both Congress and the Supreme Court have chipped away at the office's formal powers. "After Watergate," Neustadt says, "the Democratic Congress, with misplaced self-righteousness, combed the statute books to locate and repeal all discretionary powers vested in the president upon his declaration of a national emergency." Most of those powers dated from Woodrow Wilson's time in office. Gone, too, are "the reorganization powers, subject to legislative veto, won by FDR in 1939 and used for two generations thereafter." Today's presidents can no longer rearrange the bureaucratic structure "in the so-called 'executive branch'" without congressional approval. "Nor do they any longer have the freedom to 'impound'—thus saving—funds appropriated by Congress to departments." Congress also carved out for itself a much more active role in preparing the federal budget, and the Senate has inflated "senatorial courtesy" to allow a single senator secretly to block a presidential appointee's confirmation.

The Supreme Court has been no less active in hamstringing presidents, Neustadt says. The Court's 1997 ruling in the Paula Jones sexual harassment case "made the sitting president subject to civil suit for acts preceding his incumbency," with "consequences for the ordered conduct of White House business [that] need not be described."

Though the presidency's most consequential formal powers, such as command of the armed forces and the power to conduct foreign relations, have not been eliminated, Neustadt notes, congressional aggressiveness toward the presidency is no longer restrained by war or the threat of war.

The presidency is not the "bully pulpit" that it once was, says Neustadt. In a media world no longer ruled by three TV networks, the president has difficulty attracting a mass audience. Americans have too many alternatives. Yet at the same time, the man and the office are trivialized by constant media coverage. The radio "fireside chats" of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, by contrast, were effective precisely because he was spared such overexposure.

Finally, Neustadt says, recent presidents themselves have weakened the office by grossly enlarging the White House staff—nearly a hundred civilian aides for Clinton, compared with no more than a dozen for FDR even during World War II. Young, vigorous, and opinionated, the aides "compete for the president's eye and ear, bemusing him in the process"—and sometimes getting him into serious trouble. "You will recall," says Neustadt, "that Watergate began with a burglary [Richard] Nixon himself called 'dumb.'"

The Lost Philosophy

"On the Degeneration of Public Philosophy in America: Problems and Prospects" by George W. Carey, and "What Is the Public Philosophy?" by James W. Ceaser, in *Perspectives on Political Science* (Winter 2001), 1319 18th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036–1802.

Nearly a half-century ago, journalist and political thinker Walter Lippmann lamented the decline of "the public philosophy." Lippmann had in mind the ideas about human nature and the good society, based in natural law, that undergird America's liberal