

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

democratic institutions and shape the character of its citizens. The public philosophy seeks to restrain “our appetites and passions,” and Lippmann worried that its “formative beliefs” had come to be seen as a strictly private matter. Yet only on its premises, he maintained in *The Public Philosophy* (1955), can “intelligible and workable conceptions” be reached of such democratic goods as “popular election, majority rule, representative assemblies, [and] free speech.”

The public philosophy as Lippmann described it has since fallen into greater neglect, a victim of social change and widespread skepticism toward authority, argues Carey, a professor of government at Georgetown University. He sees no prospect of a revival in the near future. Even the chances of getting political scientists and high school

teachers to present a watered-down version—in the form of civic education in the principles of self-government and the responsibilities that go along with constitutional rights—seem very slim, he says. “If the leading textbooks be any guide, students of American government learn very little about the origins and development of our political institutions or the theory underlying them.”

In any event, writes Ceaser, a professor of government at the University of Virginia, the term *public philosophy* has lost much of its meaning. In the late 1960s and ’70s, leading political scientists appropriated Lippmann’s coinage, but stripped it of its normative aspect, turning it into a synonym for ideology. In their hands, “public philosophy” became “a core set of ideas embodied in long-term public opinion that influences

EXCERPT

The Real Road to Serfdom

In recent years, there has been a backlash against the national government. “Government is not the solution to our problem,” [Ronald] Reagan said in his first inaugural address. “Government is the problem.” Democratic presidents proclaim that the era of big government is over. . . .



“Government is the problem.”

*The attack on affirmative government had long been on the way. “The slogan of a ‘welfare state,’” said Herbert Hoover, “has emerged as a disguise for the totalitarian state by the route of spending.” In 1944, Friedrich Hayek’s *Road to Serfdom* endorsed the proposition that countries go totalitarian when governments acquire excessive power under the pretext of doing good for their citizens.*

The Hoover-Hayek thesis was, and is, historical nonsense. Impotent democratic government, and not unduly potent democratic government, has laid the foundation for totalitarianism. Fascist and communist regimes arose not because democratic government was too powerful but because it was too weak. Sixty years ago, Thurman W. Arnold scoffed at “the absurd idea that dictatorships are the result of a long series of small seizures of power on the part of the central government.” The exact opposite, he pointed out, was the case. “Every dictatorship which we now know,” he wrote, “flowed into power like air into a vacuum because the central government, in the face of a real difficulty, declined to exercise authority.”

Or, as FDR said, “History proves that dictatorships do not grow out of strong and successful governments, but out of weak and helpless ones.” The New Deal did not put the Republic on the road to serfdom; it liberated the serfs to become producers and consumers (and, as they prospered, to start voting Republican).

—Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in *The American Prospect* (Apr. 23, 2001)

public policy over a full era,” Ceaser says. And no longer was it just one set of ideas. Instead, writers often spoke of public philosophies, successive “sets of transforming ideas, whatever those ideas might happen to be.”

In the 1980s, Ceaser continues, the term was widened in scope, coming to refer generally to ideas that shape how people think about the political world. But by becoming “so large and all-embracing,” the concept “all but disappears,” he observes. In the 1990s, intellectuals such as Michael Sandel and Richard Rorty got into the act, seeking to design new public philosophies. Sandel views American history as a struggle between

two “public philosophies”: republicanism (or communitarianism) and liberalism. Rorty plumps for a postmodern public philosophy that will sustain a new Left.

Proposals for new public philosophies have multiplied, Ceaser says, in the absence of a clear idea of what a public philosophy is. Political scientists cannot create a public philosophy, in his view, but they could help thinkers striving to create one. By using their analytic powers “in a neutral or scientific way” to refine the general concept, he concludes, political scientists could make “the whole enterprise of public philosophy thinking” more realistic.

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

A Shameful Necessity?

“The Lesser Evil” by Richard K. Betts, in *The National Interest* (Summer 2001),
1112 16th St., N.W., Ste. 540, Washington, D.C. 20036.

During the Cold War, the United States was often wrongly accused of neo-imperialism. “Today, however, we are engaged in *real* neo-imperialism” in the Balkans, says Betts, director of the Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University. He calls for “a modified bug-out.”

When President Bill Clinton sent troops to Bosnia in 1995, he said they would be out within a year. Today, there are 5,700 U.S. troops in Bosnia and 5,400 in Kosovo.

Reluctant to face “an unpalatable choice between the much stronger efforts that cultivating political stability would require and a withdrawal that might reignite war,” the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the United Nations have “drifted toward open-ended occupation,” says Betts. But that has seemed the path of least resistance only because the costs thus far have been low, with no U.S. casualties. The odds that the costs will remain low indefinitely are poor, especially in the event of further economic decline, he says. Rumbings can already be heard—Croat rioters have disturbed the calm in Bosnia, for example.

“Contrary to the implicit logic of enthusiasts for limited intervention,” Betts says,

“there is no evidence that a liberal, tolerant, de-ethnicized political order is the natural default option once a peaceful truce is attained.” Re-establishing civic trust among the ethnic groups whose members have been killing one another in large numbers is no easy task. “To create secular liberalism in the Balkans amounts to remaking the societies—nation-building and state-building,” he says. Even if the United Nations, with Russia and China in the Security Council, did sanction an effort to impose Western-style democratic liberalism, neither the United States nor the European Union would be likely to undertake it, Betts says.

What about partition? “To make states both ethnically homogeneous and territorially defensible . . . would require revised borders and forced population transfers,” he observes. “This would contravene international law and Western moral sensibilities to a degree that makes it a fanciful option.”

That leaves, says Betts, the least bad option: Plan for an American withdrawal in, say, six months, and turn the policing of the Balkans over to the European Union, which has been groping for an independent “defense identity.” If the Europeans refuse, then the United States still should get out but also should arm “the weaker of