SARAH TRYPHENA PHILLIPS LECTURE

The Pendulum and the Pit: Splendours and Miseries of the New Presidency

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I

In Edgar Allan Poe's unforgettable horror story, the wretched prisoner is confined by steadily closing, red-hot steel walls between a murderous blade that swings like a pendulum ever closer to him, and the pit into which he risks falling if he escapes the pendulum. Students of the American presidency, it seems to me, have a similar image of the perils that threaten it.

On the one hand, it is widely believed, since the 1970s the pendulum of power has been swinging away from the President and towards the Congress. On the other, the presidency sometimes seems on the very brink of tumbling into the pit of total extinction, as it came close to doing when Lyndon Johnson felt constrained by his sheer unpopularity to abdicate his powers in 1968, in 1974, when Nixon was forced to resign, or in 1998, when Bill Clinton was impeached by the House of Representatives. Other recent presidents—even, some would argue, *all* recent presidents since John Kennedy—have either skirted disaster or found themselves doomed to near-impotence.

What I shall attempt to do in this lecture is to review in broad outline both how the presidency has developed over the past century, and in particular over the past third of a century, and also how perceptions of the office have changed. I have been able to observe the presidency from close

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up for not far short of four decades. I was a White House correspondent from 1962 until 1965, and observed such events as the Cuban missile crisis and the beginning of the Johnson Administration from the White House press room. Since then I have co-authored one book about a presidential campaign,[1] and authored another about the presidency,[2] as well as making three television series, one about the 1972 campaign, one about the presidency as an institution in its bicentennial year, and a television biography of President Reagan. As a consequence of these and other ventures I have had the opportunity to meet seven of the last eight presidents, and to talk at length, both in formal interviews and informally, with many senior members of presidential staff from Eisenhower's time to Clinton's. As a consequence of this prolonged exposure, I have to admit that I have modified some of the views I expressed in my 1980 book about the presidency, as I shall explain.

Among the questions I will try to answer are these. Is the power of the presidency being challenged by the swing of the pendulum back to the Congress? Or is it in danger of being pushed into the pit of impotence or even irrelevance? Does the United States suffer in any serious way from the imperfect modernisation of an eighteenth-century office? Or does the American government, in spite of all its frictions and frustrations, work as well as Americans want it to?

There is no doubt, it seems to me, that a pendulum has been at work, at least since Woodrow Wilson's time. As a doctoral student in 1885 Wilson wrote that 'the actual form of our present government is simply a scheme of congressional supremacy.'[3] Even before he became president himself, Wilson had changed his view. As early as 1900, explicitly noting the effect of the Spanish-American war, he said 'When foreign affairs play a prominent part in the politics and policy of a nation, the Executive must of necessity be its guide'.[4] By the time he arrived in the White House in 1913, Wilson had long come to see the presidency as the active element in the system. 'The President is at liberty', he wrote, 'both in law and in conscience, to be as big a man as he can.'[5] He had already seized the point that Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt had already grasped, that, unlike

[1] Lewis Chester, Godfrey Hodgson and Bruce Page, *An American Melodrama* (1969).
[2] Godfrey Hodgson, *All Things to All Men: The False Promise of the Modern American Presidency* (New York, 1980).
[3] Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government* (1885).
[4] Preface to fifteenth edition of *Congressional Government*.
[5] Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (1908).

his congressional and gubernatorial competitors, only the president is president of all of the people. As president he was as good as his word. The presidency was changed forever by his bold initiatives in domestic and especially in foreign affairs.

It is clear that over the course of the past hundred years or so the pendulum has continued its slow movement. Power did first accrue to the presidency (and not, it should be specified, to the executive branch of the federal government in general), and then, less dramatically but measurably, it did begin to ebb away up Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House in the direction of Capitol Hill.

The traditional view is that the relative aggrandisement of the presidency in the first two-thirds of the century was an inevitable consequence of American involvement in that narrative of war, the collapse of empires, revolution, economic dislocation, more war, more revolution, and finally Cold War that obliged successive presidents, from Theodore Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson, to take in hand the creation of a modern American national security state. In part, this view attributes the creation of the modern presidency essentially to foreign affairs and national security.

Like most such traditional views, that one embodies a good deal of truth. That is how they come to be first widely accepted and eventually traditional! The raising of great armies, the conduct of international diplomacy, the building and then the controlling of nuclear weapons, all certainly demanded swift and decisive executive action, and a gigantic machinery, military and civilian, to inform and carry out presidential decisions. That process reached its apex in the Truman administration, which largely reorganised American government with the National Security Act of 1947 and then with the internal strategy paper, NSC 68,[6] so as to make it fit for global conflict.

The turning point, in the same view, was the Vietnam War. It certainly drove the war's opponents in Congress to assert congressional power in a whole series of conflicts with the administrations of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, notably that which led to the War Powers Act of 1973.

[6] National Security Memorandum 68 was largely written by Paul Nitze, under the direction of Secretary of State Dean Acheson and with the help of the Defense Department. It was delivered to President Truman on 7 April 1950 and was discussed at the National Security Council meeting on 25 April. Intended to shock, it stated that the United States stood 'in . . . deepest peril' and called for a two- to threefold increase in defence expenditure to counter the communist threat.

Since then, with the single exception of a rather brief period of legislative co-operation between Congress and Ronald Reagan in the latter's first term, presidents have found it increasingly difficult to persuade Congress to adopt their legislative proposals. (The only comparable burst of legislative activity, and it was even more dramatic, came under Lyndon Johnson in 1964–5, before he became mired in the Vietnam War. It is tempting to draw the parallel, and to say that where Johnson was the beneficiary of the assassination of President Kennedy, Reagan, who survived an assassination attempt in March 1981, was the beneficiary of his own near-death.)

But the great international events of the twentieth century had their concomitants in domestic politics, too—most obviously in the Great Depression, but also more generally in the need for national leadership to cope with the requirements of an increasingly complex national economy. That account of the growth of presidential power in relation to the Congress has to be modified to the extent of acknowledging that domestic issues, as well as national security, contributed to the need for, and the acceptance of, an activist presidency in the first two-thirds of this century.

In an excellent recent review of the office's twentieth-century history, for example, Bert A. Rockman has written that 'there have been three factors in changing the old order to the benefit of presidency . . . (1) the rise of the US as an imperial power with global reach, in the first instance over the Americas. (2) appeal of progressivism and political reform; and (3) a new political philosophy about public authority and especially about the power of the federal government.'[7]

The most obvious example, and one that has dominated the historians' view of the presidency until quite recently, is the New Deal. Confronted by economic catastrophe, the conventional view goes, Franklin Roosevelt acted decisively both in the Hundred Days and thereafter, and by so doing not only 'saved capitalism', but also forever transformed the expectations with which Americans turned to the presidency in times of trouble. That view of the New Deal, too, has had to be revised by historians. For one thing, research and revisionism have smudged the edge of the sharp contrast between FDR and his ill-fated predecessor.[8] More

[7] Bert A. Rockman, article on 'The Presidency', in *Encyclopaedia of American Politics*.

[8] See, for example, Michael Lewis-Beck and Peverill Squire's article in *Journal of Politics* (Feb. 1991). In which they argued that there was less change between Hoover and FDR than is usually supposed. 'A great share of the supposed Hoover–Roosevelt differences rests on symbols rather than substance.'

generally, recent historians have tended to stress the continuities, rather than the sharp breaks, between successive presidencies. Herbert Hoover, it turns out, was not only perfectly willing to intervene in the economic crisis; he did so quite effectively. If his responses to the crisis, such as the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, were not immediately effective, well, no more were FDR's.

Even more important, each of the first three presidents of the twentieth century accepted the need for presidential leadership in response to the economic and social crisis posed by the transformation of American capitalism in the Age of the Trusts. Theodore Roosevelt is generally accepted as the progenitor of the strong twentieth-century presidency, though here, too, there are those who point out that his predecessor William McKinley, generally lampooned as an arch-reactionary, took a fairly high view of the prerogatives of his office, not least in foreign policy.[9] 'McKinley's hold over Congress, his knowledge of public relations, and his use of the commander-in-chief's prerogatives were remarkably modern. In some ways his administration, with its foreign wars and national self-assertiveness may have had more profound consequences for America than Roosevelt's ebullient but short-lived crusades.'

Those two examples, an activist Hoover and a modernist McKinley, suggest just how substantially recent historians have modified the accepted model of how the modern presidency evolved. For a long time, that model saw FDR as the creator of the modern presidency, taking over and pushing vigorously ahead the tentative beginnings made by Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. In the last years of the Eisenhower Administration, a number of historians and political scientists looked back to the example of FDR and both defined the presidency in terms of its potential for leadership in the American system, and by implication called for assertion of that potential by Eisenhower's successor, whether he would turn out to be Adlai Stevenson or John Kennedy.[10] (Few of them allowed themselves to imagine for a moment that the true successor to FDR was his admirer, Lyndon Johnson, or that it would be he who completed and indeed surpassed FDR's agenda.) More perceptive was the comment by the political scientist Aaron Wildavsky that FDR owed

[9] Michael P. Riccards, *The Ferocious Engine of Democracy: A History of the American Presidency* (Lanham, MD), vol. I, pp. 363–4.

[10] See, for example, Sidney Hyman, *The American Presidency* (1954); Clinton Rossiter, *The American Presidency* (1956); E. S. Corwin and Louis Koenig, *The Presidency Today* (1956); Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (1960).

his ability to create a new, more powerful presidency to his use of four tools that connected the office to the political system: the Congress, the party, the executive bureaucracy, and the media.[11]

In a book published in 1980[12] I tried to work out the ebbing of presidential authority in terms of the corrosion of these four connecting rods. There was no doubt that such a process had been taking place.

The Congress resisted presidential leadership. Party meant less and less, whether as a means of recruiting popular support for presidential initiatives, or as a source of information and legitimacy from the voters. The bureaucracy, and the cabinet secretaries, had been increasingly marginalized. Cabinet secretaries, as H. R. Haldeman memorably put it, showed a strong tendency to 'go off and marry the natives' and to create new careers for themselves inside the Washington Beltway as lawyers or consultants. On the average, they remained in office for a remarkably short time, almost as if cabinet office was a qualification for well-remunerated work in the private sector, rather than as a major opportunity for public service. The bureaucracies of the departments coalesced with the relevant congressional committees and their staff, and with the Washington representatives of the interests they were supposed to regulate, into what became known as 'iron triangles'.

The departments were in any case more and more institutionally subordinate to the White House staff. Between the departments and the president there had grown up by the 1970s, if not earlier, an inner ring of White House assistants who were determined to make the regular civil servants toe the line both of presidential policy and presidential politics. Thus the Pentagon and the State Department dealt with successive presidents increasingly through the National Security staff. The Treasury and Commerce (except under individual strong Treasury Secretaries such as James Baker under Reagan and Robert Rubin under Clinton) lost power to the Council of Economic Advisers, to the Special Trade Representative and even to the chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank, and so on. By the Nixon Administration, the ascendancy of the White House staff over the cabinet departments was clearly established. The ritual humiliation of Nixon's Secretary of State, William Rogers, by his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, signalled the triumph of the White House over the departments, though close study of specific policy debates sometimes

[11] Aaron Wildavsky, 'The Past and Future Presidency', *The Public Interest* (no. 41, Fall, 1975).
[12] Godfrey Hodgson, *All Things to All Men* (New York, 1980).

reveals that able civil servants, taking advantage of the short terms of presidential staff, sometimes managed to prevail more than might be supposed against the grain of the times.

As for the influence of the media, it is probably at once greater, and less amenable to presidential influence than it was in those faraway days when President Roosevelt could soothe the nation, and attack opponents, with a 'fireside chat' on radio; or manipulate a couple of dozen Washington reporters with an informal press conference round his Oval office desk. The technological marvels and sheer marketing power of modern media have given presidents who know how to use them unprecedented opportunities to put their view across to the American public, both by straightforward argument, and by the manipulation of symbolic representation. An example is the careful choice, and both Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton devoted an immense amount of thought to this, of locations that conveyed more or less subliminal messages to the electorate. One example was Ronald Reagan speaking from the Pointe du Hoc, where the Rangers had scaled the cliffs at Utah beach fifty years earlier; I well remember the careful detail in which Reagan's aide Michael Deaver spelled out the reasons for the choice of this particular presidential photo-opportunity. Another would be Clinton bringing together Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn, thus giving the impression that he deserved the major credit for brokering a peace process that had in fact been put together by the Norwegians months before. But if the media, skilfully manipulated, can confer immense advantages on an incumbent president, the media collectively are also the greatest source of danger. Not only can a media feeding frenzy inflate a presidential scandal to the point where it can threaten a president's mere political survival, as it did with Watergate, with the Iran-Contra affair in Reagan's second term, or with the Monica Lewinsky affair. Even more dangerous for a president than actual persecution by the media, though this may be hard for presidents under a hail of media aggression to believe, is media indifference, as Lyndon Johnson found when he tried to convert the nation to his policy on Vietnam, and discovered that the more often he went on television, the more resounding was the national yawn. I will return to the changing relationship between the White House and the media, for I believe it is at the heart of the prospect for the presidency as an institution.

II

Over the past third of a century, it is clear that presidential authority, or presidential persuasiveness, have declined on Capitol Hill. Although President Clinton has presided over a period of almost unexampled prosperity, and has been fairly successful in his major foreign policy ventures, from the North American Free Trade Area by way of trade policy to his interventions in the Balkans, he is now so almost completely without resources on Capitol Hill that he has attempted no major domestic policy initiative since the failure of his ill-conceived and poorly managed health care reform project of 1993–4.[13]

A number of explanations suggest themselves. An obvious one is the increasing frequency of what is called 'divided government'. Whereas in the first half of the twentieth century presidents usually enjoyed the support of a majority in the Congress, since 1946 that has become the exception. In the early twentieth century there were only three examples of split control, confronted by William Howard Taft in 1911, by Wilson in 1919, and by Herbert Hoover in 1931.[14] Since 1946, there have been fourteen examples of divided government. Truman was faced with hostile majorities in the Congress for two years, Eisenhower for six, Nixon for six. Gerald Ford had to operate in the constraining circumstances of divided government for the last two years of his term, which perhaps explains why he set a record for the frequency of presidential vetoes. George Bush senior confronted Democratic majorities in congress for the whole of his single term, and Reagan for no fewer than six of his eight years in the White House. In fact from 1946 to 1994 the federal government was split between a presidential administration of one party and congressional majorities of the other party for more than half the time. In the middle third of the century the party ascription of the Congress concealed a 'conservative majority' fastened together from predominantly conservative Republicans and southern Democrats who might share a residual economic liberalism and strong support for internationalist policies with presidents such as Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, and Johnson, but were resolutely conservative on everything that touched on race and its numerous implications for their region. Since the watershed election of

[13] See Haynes Johnson and David S. Broder, *The System: The American Way of Politics at the Breaking Point* (1996).

[14] Figures from Charles O. Jones, *The Presidency in a Divided System* (Washington DC, 1994).

Richard Nixon in 1968, the bloc of two dozen conservative Southern Democrats in the Senate and almost 100 Southern conservatives in the House has melted away. But divided government has become virtually the norm. Only in the brief period between the Democrats' recapture of the White House in the 1992 presidential election, and the Republican victory in 1994, has there been a president of the same party as that which controlled the Congress.

Divided government, it has been argued,[15] has not led to stasis. Presidents and Congress have learned to work together, sharing powers in a divided government in a manner that may surprise Europeans, as well as those Americans who regarded presidential and party leadership as the norm, but that has worked well enough. The point is disputable. At the very least, it has not been easy for presidents to take the lead in promoting major legislative programmes; and it is significant that President Clinton, who as a centrist Democrat might in other circumstances have been expected to have sought an active legislative role, has restricted himself on the whole, since the defeat of his health care reform package, to small, symbolic legislative ventures, of which his proposal for school uniforms has come to be seen as the classic, minimalist example.

The point I am making is not that the federal government 'doesn't work', though in truth it has not demonstrated a particularly impressive ability to attempt ambitious reforms. There have been other reasons for that, not least that the American electorate has demonstrated a notable reluctance to encourage its government to undertake grand schemes on its behalf. What I am saying, and I believe it is incontestable, is that, in part because divided government has been the norm for a generation, presidents have, with certain exceptions, largely lost the capability for bold action.

An additional cause of presidential frustration, I believe, is the widening gap between the reality of relations between the two ends of Pennsylvania Avenue and an exaggerated model of how things ought to work. This model has a lot to do with the obsession of many presidential scholars with the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt. The foundations of modern presidential scholarship were largely laid by men who had worked in or studied the White House during the Roosevelt or Truman administrations. They bequeathed a normative image of presidential leadership, in which the president, like a 'magnificent

[15] For example by Charles O. Jones, op. cit.

lion',[16] in a phrase of Clinton Rossiter's that seems strangely inappropriate to Gerald Ford, George Bush, or Bill Clinton, leads Congress towards the passage of a bold, activist legislative programme.

There is another reason for this. Power in Washington is now divided, not just between a chief executive and a legislature probably controlled by a different party than the one the chief executive belongs to, but within Congress itself, where it is now fragmented to a remarkable degree. A generation ago, beginning, for the sake of a chronological benchmark, with Kennedy, the presidency had virtually escaped from close association with party. Rather, presidential candidates, like the charismatic chieftains of bands of Weberian *condottieri*, set forth to capture the White House, and owed little or nothing to the Democratic or Republican party on their way.

Essentially, from 1960 and certainly from 1968 on,[17] presidents were installed by campaigns of television advertising, informed by increasingly professionalised research and analysis. Those advertising campaigns now cost tens, even hundreds of millions of dollars. A decisive phase is the very earliest one, when the candidate persuades wealthy backers to risk their money in order to give him 'name recognition' in the all-important national polls.

In the 1970s, most congressional campaigns were by comparison quiet and relatively inexpensive affairs. Over the past 20 years, however, beginning with statewide races in the big states with several media markets, people have come to campaign for the Senate, and even in many states for the House of Representatives, in essentially the same way as the big boys campaign for the White House. Party allegiance counts for less and less, and candidates hope for, and get, less and less help from the political parties as such. Those campaigns not only cost enormous sums of money. They are to a very considerable extent about money. That is not to say that votes are bought and sold. Politics in the United States, and indeed in Britain, were probably a good deal more venal 150 years ago than they are now. It is just that the Senate and the House are full of men, and some

[16] 'The President is not a Gulliver immobilized by ten thousand tiny cords, nor even a Prometheus bound to a rock of frustration. He is rather a kind of magnificent lion who can roam widely and do great deeds so long as he does not try to break loose from his broad reservation', Rossiter, op. cit., pp. 72–3.

[17] See L. Chester, G. Hodgson, B. Page, *An American Melodrama* (New York, 1969); Joe McGinnis, *The Selling of the President* (1969); Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency* (New York, 1996).

women, who got there by raising money and by knowing how to spend it. They owe nothing, or next to nothing, to their party, and their allegiance to it is little more than nominal. It is not unusual, especially in the South, for candidates to omit to mention their party allegiance on their billboards and other campaign advertising. They owe everything, or almost everything, to those who have raised the money for their last campaign. The fund-raisers pay for access, and by and large they get it. The politicians negotiate their own funding, with little mediation or help from party leadership or campaign committees. So a president who has got into the White House on his own, by mounting a clever, successful campaign, finds himself negotiating, not with half a dozen holders of party leadership positions in the Senate and the House, not even—as Eisenhower or Johnson did—with a couple of dozen powerful committee chairmen, but with hundreds of independent, and insecure, potentates.

This fragmentation of power on Capitol Hill has had many consequences. One of them, certainly, has been to make it even harder in normal times for a president to put together a majority in favour of any particular policy initiative. Whether presidential weakness in this instance translates into congressional strength is of course another matter. Individual congressmen, even the most powerful, like Speakers Carl Albert, Newt Gingrich, Jim Wright, and Tom Foley, and the once legendarily dominant chairman of the Ways and Means committee, Wilbur Mills and his crafty successor, Daniel Rostenkowski, are vulnerable to scandal and to political insurrections either in Washington or in their districts.

As a consequence congressmen 'run scared' more than they used to. Although incumbency remains a great advantage, and it is rare for an incumbent congressman to be defeated, most members of the House behave as though their seats were constantly at risk. Probably the influence of special interests of many kinds, economic and ideological, combined with the spiralling cost of re-election campaigns that consist largely of television advertising, have combined to make congressmen feel vulnerable, whether or not they really are.

If individual congressmen are ever more and more isolated from one another, in other words, more preoccupied with fund-raising and more conscious of their own political mortality, Congress as a whole has clearly accumulated power at the expense of the presidency.

This can be measured in several ways. Presidents are no longer so imperially supreme in the formulation of foreign policy as they were. Presidents can expect more and more difficulty in winning confirmation for their nominees. Presidents no longer present Congress with a legislative

agenda which they remotely expect Congress to pass as offered. And—a point that is hard to quantify but surely of great significance—presidents no longer expect or receive the respect, bordering on reverence, their office used to expect. This is not to say that the presidency has become an insignificant part of the American political system. As Aaron Wildavsky wrote a quarter of a century ago,[18] 'Does anyone imagine fewer groups will be interested in influencing a President's position in their own behalf or that his actions will matter less to people in the future?' The question, Wildavsky wrote then, 'answers itself'. But we might also note that he added, 'the weakening of the presidency is about as likely as the withering away of the state'. Since he wrote that sentence, not only has the Marxist state *par excellence* withered away, but the state in every western democracy has also become weaker in resources and less ambitious in its projects.

Finally, both presidents and the Congress have arguably been losing power to State governors[19] and even to State legislators.[20]

Presidents, even presidents whose reputation or popularity have been seriously damaged, still enjoy formidable political and institutional resources, as well as an aura and a traditionally sanctified authority that may have been diminished, but has not been destroyed. This is specially true in international affairs.

Who can doubt that in any time of grave national doubt or difficulty, Americans would turn to the presidency, rather than to the Congress, as the first source of help and encouragement? But who can doubt that, until they feel that the nation is in a grave emergency, the presidency will mean far less to them than it did to the beleaguered voters of Franklin Roosevelt's, or Harry Truman's, or Richard Nixon's times?

It has been repeated to the brink of narcosis that the president is both head of state and head of government, the equivalent of both monarch and political leader. My impression is that the office's inspirational or unifying role has scarcely been affected by the changes I have summarised. It is the political role that has been diminished.

Let me describe how I think the office actually works in that political dimension by using a metaphor that at least has the merit of topicality. Presidents have been called many things, from monarchs or prime

[18] Wildavsky, op. cit.
[19] Interview with Steven Hess, Brookings Institution, August 1999.
[20] See, for example, David Broder, *Washington Post*, 26 August 1999.

ministers to 'mighty lions', roaming the political savannah. To my mind, they more closely resemble day traders in the political market. Every president, it seems to me, comes into office equipped both with his membership of the exchange, which is the legitimacy of his office, and also with a portfolio of political assets. It might be argued, I suppose, that this political capital is constituted by a president's 'mandate'. But that is to give it, in my opinion, far too high-minded as well as too specific a content. Sometimes, perhaps, a president does enter office with a clear mandate to deal with a pressing national emergency. Such was the Korean war for Eisenhower in 1953, the civil rights crisis for Johnson in 1964 or the ending of the Vietnam war, or at least of American involvement in it, for Nixon in 1969. More often, the president brings to office a grab-bag of promises he has made to voters, voter aspirations he would like to meet, debts political and financial, and interests both economic and ethical he does not dare offend.

He does bring with him assets, most of all the huge asset that he has been elected, hopefully by a convincing margin, by an electorate drawn from 'all the people'. He is likely to start his term with his popularity higher than it ever was during the campaign, and to enjoy at least a brief honeymoon period as far as attacks in the media and on Capitol Hill are concerned.

He cannot, however, like a Victorian duke, sit back and live off his capital, or even on the interest on the interest on his capital. To survive, which is to avoid humiliation by achieving at least a respectable part of his political ambitions, to fulfil at least some of the promises he made in his campaign and (in his first term) to win re-election, he must go out into the marketplace and venture his capital every day. He must act, and react, in foreign and domestic policy. He must propose reforms that are demanded by significant proportions both of the electorate and of the smaller, more immediate world of the interests represented in Washington. He must choose, secure the confirmation of, and successfully defend, the members of administration as they, too, encounter the buffetings of the day in such a way as to convince Washington that he knows how to reward his friends, and to punish his enemies.

Ronald Reagan, not a spectacularly popular president in terms of poll numbers,[21] possessed the magical gift of persuading his opponents that he might be more popular than they were with their own constituents. John Kennedy had the slightly different but equally useful ability to suggest

[21] Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, p. 142.

that he was operating on a higher, more dignified level than other politicians, even though few have ever been more pragmatic and on occasion more cynical that he was.

This trading, you will say, is a vague concept, impossible to measure, let alone to prove. Not entirely. There is a kind of Dow Jones or Footsie by which we can keep track of the price of the president's political stock, though admittedly at one remove from his trading activities, which necessarily take place at least partly in secret. The president makes speeches, he appears on television, he orders his staff to prepare draft legislation. But he also works in private, in person and on the telephone. He schmoozes, he threatens, he bribes and he rewards. Descriptions of the different techniques adopted by presidents are well known. Several biographers have unforgettably recorded the 'Johnson treatment'. When LBJ wanted you to do something for him, such as go to work for him, or give him a vote on a close bill, he would crowd you physically, patting, pummelling, and gripping you. Johnson himself insisted that the 'intellectuals' saw as rape what was really carefully prepared 'seduction'. And his biographer, Doris Kearns Goodwin made the point that he was 'one of those rare American men who felt free to express intimacy with another man'.[22] 'He could flatter men with sentiments of love', she wrote, 'and touch their bodies with gestures of affection.' Clinton, another big man physically, and another southerner, goes to work on those he seeks to persuade in a similarly physical way, reinforced by a temper that can make him scream with anger and wave his arms, shaking fists and pointing fingers, though without quite persuading anyone that he would be capable of physical violence.

To some extent, the footfall of a president's trading can be followed by insiders in Washington. They hear whom the president sees, whom he calls. They learn on the grapevine about the genteel bribe or *quid pro quo*, the outrageous threat he is said to have made to a congressman, the equally outrageous flattery with which he won round another. But the insiders are by definition few, and by nature discreet. It is the Washington 'press corps', large and indiscreet, which acts as a transmission belt, or rather as a bullhorn, repeating, collating, exaggerating, and summarising what is known of the president's political trading, and disseminating it to the country. Then finally the pollsters and the whole tribe of consultants, analysts, and focus group voyeurs puts numbers to an estimate which asks

[22] Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, pp. 130–1.

formally what the president's 'approval rating' is, but which in practice, as one student of the presidency put it, asks merely, 'How's he doing?'[23]

This metaphor, I believe, describes the reality of presidential power, or presidential influence, or the lack of both, more accurately than most of what has been written and supported with mathematical proof, by political scientists. Presidential power, as Richard Neustadt famously put it, is the power to persuade,[24] and the numbers record the success or failure of his efforts at persuasion.

At least two caveats should be made, however. The first is that while the trading model does, I truly believe, describe the essence of how modern presidents have seen their job, it is a trading culture without bankruptcy, or rather one, like American business, with the equivalent of Chapter 11, the kindly provision that allows an unsuccessful businessman protection from the more unpleasant consequences of his insolvency. A president, that is, can go broke, or close to it, without necessarily being punished for it by immediate loss of office. What a president does risk if his popularity falls to below 30 per cent, as happened to Truman and even to Bush, is a loss of credibility, or metaphorically of 'traction', that makes it even harder for him to persuade people to do what he wants them to do.

The second caveat is more serious. It has to do with the point I have just mentioned. In that part of the president's duties that comes from his monarchical, as opposed to his political or administrative functions, or if you prefer it from his role as the symbolic leader of the American nation as a whole, a president is hardly affected, one way or the other, by his success or failure in the Washington marketplace. It is true that after the Ervin committee hearings Richard Nixon gradually lost his credibility as an international statesman, and so created an opportunity that Henry Kissinger seized with rare skill. But Bill Clinton came close to impeachment without ever totally forfeiting his credibility as an international leader, and indeed without losing his high standing in the public approval numbers. In moments of peril and high drama, it appears, Americans see not the man but the office.

At all other times, they are happy to see their chief executive paddling and scuffling, doing his best to keep his political head above water, and his political trading account free from a margin call.

[23] Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, p. 118.

[24] Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power*, p. 32, 'Truman is quite right when he declares that presidential power is the power to persuade'.

III

What is clear from the above account of how a president actually functions from day to day is the absolutely primary role in this process played by the news media, and in particular by the Washington news media. It is time now to juxtapose that role with the trends presently at work in the media and the directions in which the news industry is headed. For a generation after World War II, the Washington press corps formed an integral and on the whole a respectful element in the presidential system. Although the number of accredited White House correspondents steadily marched upward, from under 1,000 in President Truman's time to over 3,000 today,[25] in reality the president's performance was evaluated in the 1960s and 1970s by fewer than a dozen elite news organisations. There were the news magazines, especially *Time* and *Newsweek*, though their authority has diminished. There were, and still are, the national desk of the *Washington Post*, and the Washington bureau of the *New York Times*: these remain the most potent arbiters of Washington reputations. There were the news divisions of the three national networks, or rather in the 1960s and 1970s realistically two-and-a-half, as ABC did not give political news the same emphasis that it received from CBS and NBC. The charmed circle of those who were able to add or subtract points to or from the president's performance was rounded out by a mere handful of syndicated columnists, some of them associated with news organisations already named, like James 'Scotty' Reston of the *New York Times* or Walter Lippman of *Newsweek* or Joseph Kraft of the *Washington Post*, others associated with 'provincial' papers like Marquis W. Childs of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* or the occasional, exceptional conservative like Roscoe Drummond.

This gentle backwater of thirty years ago is unrecognisable today. In many ways the Washington press corps of the 1960s was a tame group of people where the presidency was concerned. Many of its members had won entrance to it by covering a presidential campaign, usually favourably. Others felt themselves to be almost a part of the presidential team. In the 1970s, in large part because of the arrogance and aggression of the Nixon administration, that changed. Nixon, Kissinger, and other members of the Nixon team punished reporters. They tried, successfully, to get Stuart Loory, the respected bureau chief of

[25] Stephen Hess, *The Washington Reporters*, (1981).

the *Los Angeles Times*, removed from his job. They placed other journalists on 'enemies' lists'. The result was predictable. When it became clear, as a result of the *Washington Post's* reporting and some assistance from CBS and others, that Nixon and his whole administration were vulnerable, the result was sustained journalistic assault with no holds barred.

It was not just Watergate, however. Both the structure and the personnel of the media industry, and specifically of the Washington press corps, were changing from the 1970s on. A new generation of reporters, better educated and on the whole from more confident, metropolitan backgrounds, was even less respectful of authority, presidential or any other, than its predecessor. (It was one of the old school, Edward T. Folliard of the *Washington Post*, who had covered the White House since the 1920s, who used to growl at me, 'The only way to talk to a public official is *down*!') Beginning with the early 1970s, when the *Washington Post* first reported on President Kennedy's extra-marital affairs, and accelerating after the Chappaquiddick incident in 1969, and after Senator Gary Hart, as a presidential candidate, was foolish enough to dare the press corps to catch him out in an affair they knew he was having, the reporters gradually established that no public man or woman could have a private life.

It was not just that reporting moved into the bedroom. Veterans of the Vietnam anti-war movement, and there were many working as journalists in Washington by the late 1970s, did not share the instinctive respect for American institutions of those who had fought in, or covered, World War II.

The structure was changing, too. By the 1970s and even more by the 1980s, the big metropolitan newspapers were far richer than they had been in the 1950s. The Big Three television networks, which had once shared more than 90 per cent of the audience for broadcast news, found their market share falling below 60 per cent as new competitors flooded into the field: Ted Turner's Cable News Network, Rupert Murdoch's Fox, MSNBC, and half a dozen others. Cable news was less and less interested in the details of legislation or diplomacy, more and more interested in lifestyles, shopping, health, new products, the internet and, yes, the one big story of the day, which was just as likely to be Monica Lewinsky as to be health care reform, the budget, or tax reform. The Washington news media became more and more competitive: after two Capitol policemen were shot in 1997 several dozen TV news vans were on the scene within minutes.[26]

[26] Personal observation.

The Lewinsky affair, in particular, put traditional reporting and editing standards under too much pressure. A recent book[27] by two highly regarded media critics, Bill Kovach of Harvard University's Nieman Program and Tom Rosenstiel, showed how news organisations virtually panicked when confronted by the new-style reporting by Matt Drudge on the internet. Drudge described himself as a gossip, but he put unchecked stories on the web so fast that big news organisations had to either follow with unchecked stories or risk looking irrelevant. Too often, they followed suit. *Brill's Content*, a new, highly critical media journal, remorselessly uncovered the compromises and shortcomings of once careful editorial teams operating in an environment faster and rougher than anything they had been used to.[28]

It was, however, this new media environment in which the presidents of the late twentieth century had to operate, and in which their successors in the twenty-first century will have to fight to keep their heads above water.

The new media, of course, do not operate in a vacuum. They work with the assumptions and values of the new politics, in a new American commonwealth in which politics, the state, government and therefore the presidency are in several important respects less respected and certainly less valued.

Twenty years ago, when I published a book about the presidency, I concluded that the institution was too disconnected from the other elements of the government, and especially from the Congress. Today the concern must be about how government as a whole, including the presidency, is connected to civil society as a whole. The modern presidency came into existence to lead the United States in a world of threats to national security abroad, and to national prosperity at home. Rightly or wrongly, ten years after the end of the Cold War, Americans are proud to have the strength to intervene to impose their values abroad when they choose to. They do not feel, however, that their security is seriously threatened. And they do not believe that government has much to do with their present impressive affluence. Even the sight of a president on trial before the Senate on charges relating to gross immorality and possible perjury left the public largely indifferent. Government is simply not as interesting as it was. And even the most glamorous and theatrical element

[27] Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *Warp Speed*, (New York, 1999).
[28] *Brill's Content*, July 1999.

of government, the White House and its occupant, are less exciting than they were.

The result, of course, is highly ironic. Forty years ago, scholars used to recite the president's multiple roles: as national symbol, chief executive, party leader, commander-in-chief, legislator supreme, head of the Free World.[29] One by one, those roles seem less desirable. Bill Clinton as party leader? As legislator? As animator of administration, energiser of government? Not really. Twenty years ago, we could ask, and I was among those who did so, whether an institution shaped by eighteenth-century minimalism and the Founding Fathers' suspicion of executive power was adequate to the challenges of the late twentieth and the twenty-first centuries.

As long as Americans feel neither threatened from abroad nor challenged at home, a minimalist president who presides as the symbol of American peace and prosperity, confiding in them from time to time about his dog, his golf scores and his holiday reading, will meet their requirements. Only when the wind rises, and the waves begin to slap against the hull, and the spray lands on the deck, will we know whether the new style of media president, elected by the media, evaluated by the media, and legitimated essentially by the media's good opinion, will be equal to the tasks that will surely have to be performed.

[29] Clinton Rossiter went so far as to list no fewer than eleven titles for the president, including World Leader, an unelected post, and 'voice of the people', traditionally a synonym for the Voice of God. Rossiter, *The American Presidency*, 1956, pp. 16–42.