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Fred I. Greenstein: Inventing the Job of President

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CHAPTER 1

The Presidential Difference in the Early Republic

The President is at liberty, both in law and conscience, to be as big a man as he can. His capacity will set the limit.

—Woodrow Wilson, 1908

From George Washington's decision to buy time for the new nation by signing the less-than-ideal Jay Treaty with Great Britain in 1795 to George W. Bush's order of a military intervention in Iraq in 2003, the matter of who happens to be president of the United States has sometimes had momentous consequences. The most telling illustration of the difference a White House occupant can make comes from the nuclear age. In October 1962, President John F. Kennedy learned that the Soviet Union had secretly installed ballistic missiles in Cuba that were capable of striking much of the United States. His advisors were split between those who favored using diplomacy to induce the Soviets to withdraw their missiles and those who called for an immediate air strike on the missile sites, an act that could have triggered a nuclear war. The buck stopped in the Oval Office. If Kennedy had not decided on a nonviolent option, the result might well have been catastrophic.

This book examines presidential leadership in a period when there was no danger that a presidential decision would end life on the planet, but when the actions of chief executives had a bearing on the fate of the American experiment in popular government. My specific focus is on the conduct of the presidency of the first seven chief executives—George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, John Quincy Adams, and Andrew Jackson. These men served in a time when the sketchy description of the presi-

dency in the Constitution gave chief executives imperfect guidance on their responsibilities, leading their conduct of the presidency to depend heavily on their personal inclinations.

My interest, it should be stressed, is in how the book's protagonists carried out their presidencies, not the full range of their actions. As we shall see, a number of the most important contributors to the nation's early development proved to be flawed chief executives. In this work, as in my previous book, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to George W. Bush*, I examine a sequence of presidents, evaluating each of them in terms of his strengths and weaknesses in public communication, organizational capacity, political skill, policy vision, cognitive style, and emotional intelligence.¹ The bearing of these qualities on presidential performance warrants elaboration.

Public Communication. Public communication is the outer face of presidential leadership. It has been claimed that the early presidents avoided communicating with the public, directing their messages mainly to Congress. Later inquiry demonstrates that, in fact, many of them did address the public, doing so by arranging for their policies to be publicized in government-subsidized newspapers.²

Organizational Capacity. Organizational capacity is the inner face of presidential leadership. A chief executive's organizational strengths and weaknesses are less visible than his ability as a public communicator, but a badly organized presidency is an invitation to failure. In the period since the 1930s, the president's organizational capacity has manifested itself in his management of the extensively staffed Executive Office of the President. The presidents considered here had little or no staff assistance. However, the cabinets of their time were the equivalent of a modern presidential staff. Then, as in all periods of American history, a president's ability to appoint able associates and forge them into an effective team was vital for his administration's performance.

Political Skill. Chief executives have often professed to be above politics. This was especially true in the nation's early years, when political parties were viewed as illegitimate, and it was held that the

chief executive should be a dispassionate arbiter of the other entities in the political system rather than a participant in the political fray.³ But in all periods of American history, presidents have faced problems that could only be addressed by the exercise of political leadership. Political skill can manifest itself in more than one manner. The distinction between tactical and strategic skill proves useful for what follows. Tactical skill manifests itself in such short-run maneuvers as bargaining and persuasion. Strategic skill relates to policy vision. It consists of advancing policies that are attainable and that accomplish their purposes.

Policy Vision. Even a politically gifted chief executive will be limited in what he (and at some point she) can accomplish if his skill is not harnessed to a policy vision. But a president who advances policies that are fated to fail may be less successful than one who lacks a sense of direction. Lyndon Johnson is an example of a political virtuoso whose insensitivity to the workability of policies led him to turn his skill to a counterproductive purpose—namely, an ill-advised military intervention in Vietnam.

Cognitive Style. Another determinant of a president's effectiveness is his ability to process the flood of advice and information directed to a chief executive, his overall intelligence, his ability to avoid becoming mired in details, and other aspects of his cognitive style. The president's cognitive strengths were particularly important in the early republic, when there was no formal presidential staff, and chief executives typically managed their own presidencies.

Emotional Intelligence. The most cognitively able president may come to grief if he lacks what has come to be known as *emotional intelligence*—the ability to control one's emotions and turn them to constructive uses.⁴ Examples of presidents whose defective emotional intelligence impaired their leadership include Woodrow Wilson, whose rigid refusal to compromise led to the defeat of the Versailles Treaty; Richard Nixon, whose suspiciousness and impulse to strike out at perceived enemies destroyed his presidency; and Bill Clinton, whose defective impulse control led him to the sexual dalliance that opened him up to impeachment.

Examining presidents in terms of these six qualities makes for a more comprehensive analysis than those of the two most influential works on presidential leadership—Richard E. Neustadt’s *Presidential Power* and James David Barber’s *The Presidential Character*.⁵ Neustadt stresses the need for presidential skill to overcome the obstacles to political effectiveness in the pluralistic American political system. But in his emphasis on the president’s political prowess, Neustadt is insufficiently attentive to the need for presidents to advance viable goals. The approach just reviewed assesses not only the president’s political skill but also his policy vision. Barber is preoccupied with the danger posed by an emotionally flawed president, but he is inattentive to the cognitive side of the presidential psyche. The present analysis considers both the president’s emotional makeup and his cognitive style. Finally, this book draws attention to two important aspects of the president’s job that neither Neustadt nor Barber addresses—the president’s strengths and weaknesses as a public communicator and as an organizer of the presidency.

The focus on the personal qualities of presidents here and in the writings of Neustadt and Barber is a near antithesis to the approach taken by Stephen Skowronek in his widely discussed *The Politics That Presidents Make*. Skowronek advances a cyclical interpretation of American history in which presidents of “reconstruction” (such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt) create a new political order; presidents of “articulation” (such as Lyndon Johnson) serve at the high point of that order; and presidents of “disjunction” (such as Jimmy Carter) complete the cycle by serving at a time when the older order is crumbling. In Skowronek’s formulation, a president’s location in this political cycle is more important than the qualities he brings to his job.⁶

Yet, the strengths and weaknesses of White House incumbents can be of the utmost importance. The Cuban Missile Crisis continues to be instructive. As the most definitive post-Cold War reconstruction of that event demonstrates, President Kennedy’s levelheaded insistence on avoiding the risk of a nuclear apocalypse was crucial for the peaceful resolution of the crisis.⁷ Two years before, Kennedy had narrowly defeated Richard M. Nixon for president. There is no way of being certain what Nixon would have done under comparable cir-

cumstances. However, when Nixon did reach the presidency, he took needlessly confrontational military actions in a number of episodes, particularly in connection with the withdrawal of American combat troops from Vietnam.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE EARLY REPUBLIC

The way in which a president's leadership qualities manifest themselves is affected by the political environment in which they come into play. I therefore set the stage with remarks on the context of the early presidency. The past, the novelist L. P. Hartley has written, "is a foreign country." In the case of the United States, the continuity of a single charter of government from the founding to the present might lead one to assume otherwise, but to do so would be a mistake. The Constitution itself has been altered by the twenty-seven amendments ratified between 1791 and 1992. Its impact has been transformed by countless changes in the values and norms that influence constitutional interpretation.

The earliest presidencies were affected by a constitutional stipulation that was eliminated by the Twelfth Amendment in 1804. Before then, each presidential elector cast two votes, and the front-runner became president and the runner-up vice president. This led to political anomalies in 1796 and 1800. In 1796, John Adams received the most votes and became president, and Thomas Jefferson ran second and became vice president. Since Adams was a Federalist and Jefferson a Republican, the electoral rules had placed political adversaries in the nation's highest executive positions. In 1800, Jefferson received the same number of votes as his ostensible running mate, Aaron Burr. It was left to the Federalist-controlled House of Representatives to resolve a tie between two Republicans, which it did in Jefferson's favor, but only after 36 ballots.⁸

The presidencies of the period before slavery was abolished by the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 were affected by the constitutional provision that representation in the House of Representatives be based not only on the number of free persons in a state, but also on three-fifths of the number of those in bondage. This gave the South

disproportionate influence in the Electoral College. Without southern overrepresentation, John Adams would have defeated Thomas Jefferson in 1800, and there almost certainly would have been fewer pre-Civil War southern presidents, speakers of the House of Representatives, and members of the Supreme Court.⁹

One of the most striking nonconstitutional aspects of early American politics is the virulence of political discourse. It is common to deplore the stridency of twentieth-century politics, but contemporary political rhetoric is bland by the standards of an era when political opposition was not accepted as legitimate, much less constructive. The notoriously intemperate John Randolph of Roanoke, Virginia, for example, called his Senate colleague Daniel Webster “a vile slanderer” and characterized another fellow senator as “the most contemptible and degraded of beings whom no man ought to touch, unless with a pair of tongs.”¹⁰

The harshness of early American politics was not confined to words. Violence and the threat of violence were not unknown. Examples include the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794, in which Pennsylvania frontiersmen took up arms to resist a federal excise tax on distilled spirits; the raising of an army by a Federalist Congress in the late 1790s, which was widely viewed as an effort to suppress Republican opposition to the Alien and Sedition Acts; and a 1798 brawl on the floor of the House of Representatives in which a Federalist Congressman assaulted a Republican with a hickory walking stick and the Republican defended himself with fire tongs. Moreover, the code of honor of the period made duels a continuing possibility, including the one that ended the life of a major political figure—Alexander Hamilton.¹¹

The rudimentary state of communication also had an effect on early American politics. For much of the period considered here, it took four to six days for a letter from New York to reach Boston, and a diplomatic exchange with a European nation could take as much as six months. As Leonard White observed, the pace of international communication made it necessary to conduct foreign relations “on the basis of conjecture or probability rather than solid fact.”¹² Canals, improved roads, steamboats, and railroads began to permit more rapid domestic communication in the second decade of the

nineteenth century, but communication with other nations remained time-consuming until the Atlantic Cable came into use in the 1860s.

The potential effect of slow international communication is illustrated by a pair of events bearing on the War of 1812. Two days before President Madison signed the declaration of war, the British government eliminated a major American grievance, but fighting was underway by the time the news reached the United States. The hostilities continued until December 1814, when American and British negotiators meeting in Belgium arrived at a peace agreement. But before word of the accord crossed the Atlantic, an American force under the command of Andrew Jackson won a dramatic victory in the Battle of New Orleans, a triumph that had the consequence of making him a popular hero.

THE POLITICAL DEMANDS OF THE EARLY REPUBLIC

The nation over which the early chief executives presided was by no means assured of survival. As the bitterness of its political rhetoric suggests, the new nation was sharply divided. The principal cleavage was between the Federalists, who favored a strong national government that fostered commerce, and the Republicans, who advocated a limited national government and identified with the nation's agrarian interests.

These divisions were sharpened and hardened by the French Revolution, which, as one historian has put it, "drew a red-hot plowshare" through the new nation.¹³ The Federalists were deeply suspicious of the changes in France, and the Republicans welcomed them. The French Revolution triggered a succession of wars between France and Britain, which continued from 1791 to 1815, with a brief pause during Jefferson's first term. Although the United States remained neutral in the wars of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, its presidents were faced with the interference with American shipping by the warring nations, each of which sought to prevent supplies from reaching the other. The early presidents also had to contend with the British practice of impressment—the boarding of American ships in order to seize alleged deserters from the Royal Navy and press them into British service.¹⁴

CHAPTER 1

The capacity of the early presidents to respond to such challenges was reduced by the prevailing view of their responsibilities. Modern presidents take it for granted that their job requires them to play a central part in the intrinsically controversial process of making public policy. As we have seen, the view in the nation's early years was that the president should be an arbiter of the other forces in the nation rather than a policy maker. This conception of the presidency has been most fully explored by Ralph Ketcham, who argues that the six presidents preceding Andrew Jackson took a common, politically neutral approach to their responsibilities. As we shall see, however, the leadership styles of these presidents were far from monolithic. All of them paid lip service to the ideal of transcending politics, but to varying degrees they also did what they deemed politically necessary to respond to the realities of a divided nation in a conflict-ridden world.¹⁵