

BOOKS

[Commander in Chief: How Truman, Johnson, and Bush Turned a Presidential Power into a Threat to America's Future, Geoffrey Perret, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 436 pages]

The Pleasure of the President

By Thomas E. Woods Jr.

I SUSPECT THAT the title of Geoffrey Perret's excellent new book was the work of his publisher. The reader will not find here an evaluation of the Constitution's commander-in-chief clause, followed by example after relentless example of its expansion or distortion, or even a conclusion that wraps up the story and ties the experiences of these three presidents together.

Yet this book is none the worse for all that. This is a chronicle of half a century of presidential supremacy, told primarily through the presidencies of Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, and George W. Bush, that reads more like a novel than a dissertation. And although Perret obviously considers Bush the worst of the lot, the history this book imparts suggests that we've been through it all before—the recklessness, the stupidity, the bull-in-a-china-shop foreign policy.

It is interesting to evaluate some of the earliest Cold War claims that emanated from Washington in light of the barrage of Pentagon and White House propaganda to which Americans have been subject since the Iraq War. Our recent experience is not such an anomaly after all. We now know that the extent of the Soviet threat around 1950 was far less severe than Americans were led to believe and that American officials trumped up the threat in order to secure the congressional appropriations they wanted. In a telegram of March 1, 1948, for example, U.S. ambassador to

the Soviet Union Walter Bedell Smith told Secretary of State George Marshall, "Full information and explanation to our own Congress of significance of recent Soviet moves in Czechoslovakia and Finland may result in speeding consideration and adoption of universal military training and building programs for Army, Navy, and particularly Air Force." "The next day," writes Perret, "a full-blown war scare was put together over lunch by Marshall and Secretary of Defense [James] Forrestal."

Meanwhile, the director of the CIA was reporting, "We do not believe that this event [consolidation of Soviet control over Czechoslovakia] reflects any sudden increase in Soviet capabilities, more aggressive intentions, or any change to current Soviet policy and tactics." Marshall ignored him.

Yet even Marshall himself, who seized upon the incident as evidence of aggressive Soviet intentions, privately conceded, "In the last three years Czechoslovakia has faithfully followed the Soviet policy. ... A communist regime would merely crystallize and confirm for the future previous Czech policy."

Gen. Lucius Clay, who oversaw the American zone of occupation in Germany and commanded U.S. forces in Europe, obligingly provided a telegram, whose contents he did not believe for a single moment, that in light of this event, war with the Soviet Union "may come with dramatic suddenness." The head of Army intelligence had asked Clay to issue such a statement in order to grease the skids for the reinstatement of the draft, which Congress was then resisting.

Commander in Chief does contain an excellent if brief discussion of presidential war powers and the framers' views on the subject. It also addresses the claim that even before Truman went to war over Korea in 1950, previous presidents had initiated military force countless times without congressional authorization and that Truman's behavior was therefore not all that unusual. In 1950, Dean Acheson and the State Department prepared a list containing scores of such alleged cases. "Nearly all were trifling

incidents in places from China to the Caribbean," Perret points out, "where Americans had got themselves into a jam and a corporal's guard of soldiers or marines got them out of it. Not one of them was, or even approached becoming, a major war. It was as spurious a document as Acheson ever concocted."

Perret goes on to say that the solution to Truman's dilemma—how could he justify sending so many Americans into a war so far away without congressional authorization?—was not going to be Acheson's list since "Congress and the press would never accept something so flimsy." Too bad Truman didn't live in the age of neoconservatism, in which shills for the state posing as intellectuals are all too happy to swallow something so flimsy, even waving these absurd "lists" triumphantly before all doubters of executive supremacy. (Max Boot actually tried to debunk the skeptical account of presidential war powers I included in my *Politically Incorrect Guide to American History* by citing Acheson's ridiculous and ahistorical claims against me.) He relied instead on a tendentious reading of Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution, which described the president as the commander in chief of the Armed Forces. For Truman, if not for the Framers, that clause covered a multitude of interventions.

With a title like *Commander in Chief: How Truman, Johnson, and Bush Turned a Presidential Power into a Threat to America's Future*, we might expect to read a little something about Truman's seizure of the steel mills, which he carried out during the Korean War in the name of the very "presidential power" that Perret's title warns us is a "threat to America's future." Yet not a word.

Equally surprising is something we do find: a chapter on Truman's support for Zionism and U.S. recognition of Israel, a sensitive issue Perret could have passed over in silence. Truman certainly employed executive vigor in recognizing the Jewish state immediately following its 1948 declaration of independence, despite the warnings of George Marshall and the State Department that premature

recognition—particularly when the boundaries of the two states envisioned in the United Nations' Palestine partition plan were still in flux amid the ongoing fighting between Arabs and Jews—could permanently alienate the Arab world, which had previously been friendly to the United States.

Perret describes some of the political pressures under which Truman acted, while conceding that the president's support for Zionism, when all was said and done, was genuine and sincere. For instance, House Judiciary Committee Chairman Emanuel Celler led a delegation of Jewish leaders to the White House for a meeting with Truman. He warned, "We have been talking to Tom Dewey. He is going to declare for a Jewish state and we are going to turn our money over and urge Jews to vote for him unless you beat him to it. And if you don't come out for a Jewish state we'll run you out of town." (Celler evidently misplaced his copy of the memo explaining that Jews, unlike the rest of the human race, never pressure politicians to enact policies on their behalf.)

Truman had high hopes for what the very existence of a Jewish state portended for the Middle East, Perret explains:

Zionists he had spoken to between his accession to the presidency and the creation of Israel convinced him that a Jewish state would represent liberal democracy in a poor and backward part of the world. Once it took root, that country would create sparks that jumped across frontiers, igniting a passion for change. The poor Arabs, downtrodden for a thousand years, would finally be free and prosperous. For the rest of his life Truman spoke proudly of his part in the foundation of Israel. You'll see, he liked to say, this is going to make the world a safer and happier place, spreading democracy from the Levant to the Gulf.

Space constraints prohibit lengthy treatments of any of the three presidents on whom Perret lavishes his attention,

but let it suffice to note that our author peppers his story with anecdotes. Johnson, for example, was not exactly out of character when he blurted, "I am the king!" after a moment's reflection in 1964 on the departure from the world scene of so many of the great statesmen of the age. LBJ's habit of pulling out his genitals in the presence of his critics as evidence of his greater manliness is well known, as is the incident when, in response to the nagging questions of journalists as to why American men were being sent to fight in Vietnam, LBJ finally showed them his penis and snapped, "This is why!" Less well known is the case of the member of the Secret Service who, standing next to the president, felt his leg getting wet. "You're pissing on my leg, Mr. President!" he exclaimed. "I know I am," LBJ replied. "That's my prerogative."

All three men claimed religious inspiration for their major decisions. Truman, explains Perret, had been convinced since 1920 that "God intended the United States to break with its isolationist past and assume the leading role in maintaining world peace. The League of Nations project had foundered to Truman's dismay, but with the end of the Second World War, he was certain that God's plan for America could finally be put into action." LBJ went much further, claiming that the Holy Ghost paid him visits: "He comes and speaks to me about two in the morning, when I have to give the word to the boys, and I get the word from God whether to bomb or not." For his part, George W. Bush once told a friend, "I believe God wants me to be president." "I'm driven with a mission from God," Bush later said to the Palestinian foreign minister. "He told me, 'George, go and fight those terrorists in Afghanistan.' And I did. And he told me, 'George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq.' And I did."

Oddly enough, Perret only rarely draws explicit comparisons among his three principal subjects, but we can surmise from his narrative what he thinks they have in common. They involved their countries in dubious foreign conflicts impetuously, they carefully sheltered themselves from unwelcome news

and analysis, and they risked the lives of Americans and foreigners alike in fits of pique, abandoning them to unwinnable wars out of fear of losing prestige or simply because they were too juvenile to admit a mistake. ("As a leader, you can never admit a mistake," Bush 43 once said.) In this kind of war, Perret argues, "the president, along with the country, is likely to abandon its ideals. It finds itself killing for the sake of killing, killing rather than admitting a mistake, killing for revenge, killing for anything but justice."

"These unwinnable wars," Perret concludes,

changed the presidency itself, by creating an over-mighty commander in chief, something the Founders thought they had precluded by ruling out a monarchy. As the character of the presidency changes, so does the character of the country. Large numbers of Americans now support torture, increasing restrictions on civil liberties, unprovoked attacks on other countries, and a president placing himself above the law by declaring, even as he signs a new law, that he will not be bound by that law's provisions.

Whether he realizes it or not, what Perret has produced here is not so much an analysis of the evolution of the commander-in-chief clause or an explicit, systematic look at presidential war powers and how they became so great. (What was Congress doing all this time in the face of growing presidential supremacy? We get very little sense here.) Instead, he has given us a superbly executed, compellingly written, and just plain interesting narrative of a half-century of presidential overreach. I yield to very few in my cynicism about American presidents, and yet even I found myself reacting in horror to the portraits that Geoffrey Perret paints of these three men—and the inability or unwillingness of any other major power center in American society or government to stand up and resist them. ■

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[*Eight Ways To Run the Country: A New and Revealing Look at Right and Left*, Brian Mitchell, Praeger Publishers, 161 pages]

Beyond Red and Blue

By Paul Gottfried

IT SEEMS HIGHLY UNLIKELY that a mass commercial press would have published Brian Mitchell's study. Unlike those books on political theory and administration that turn up in my college mail, this volume is gracefully written, and it abounds in learned illustration from both European and American history. It is also conceptually original. Mitchell's book does not reprise platitudes about how we Americans have become a sharing-caring polity, with favorable references showered on public administrators and enlightened judges. The author investigates the opposing compass points in American political life, and he believes that these oppositions derive from the cultures and dispositions that are found in our society. In his analysis, he spares us such boilerplate as Republican equals "conservative" and Democratic "liberal." He goes well beyond journalistic simplifications in order to locate deeper patterns of political association. Above all, he tries to explain why certain ideological groups are able to make alliances with other ones, while they necessarily shun those whom they consider irreconcilably opposed to their deepest interests.

The most common approach to drawing these distinctions is to focus on preferential values and concerns. Those whom Mitchell calls "communitarians," typified by Hillary Clinton and social thinkers Amitai Etzioni and Michael Lerner, stress a combination of expressive freedoms and economic-political collectivism. Such communitarians hold positions that would keep them from uniting on just about anything with "paleolibertarians," that is, socially

traditionalist defenders of the free market who are critics of the welfare state. By contrast, communitarians could parley with socially leftist libertarians, a group identified with *Reason* magazine, on such issues as gay rights and granting amnesty to illegal aliens. They could also get along up to a point with neoconservatives in favoring laws against discrimination and in pushing a liberal immigration policy. By the same token, Left and Right libertarians should be able to do business on their shared interests, such as deregulating markets, reducing taxes, and favoring the decriminalization of certain victimless crimes. What determines which groups are reasonably compatible and which are not, according to the usual academic approach, is whether they have significant overlapping interests or shared values. If their worlds of discourse or political appeals in no way intersect, the groups are not likely to co-operate or even to treat one other respectfully.

Mitchell does not reject this model completely, but he provides a somewhat different interpretation of partisan interests. He offers a diagram of the "eight ways" that define the current political scene, from the standpoint of distinctive ideological perspectives. At the top of his circle are "right-leaning libertarians" and at the bottom are "left-leaning statisticians." The categories on the left side of the

shows why certain political positions are open to successful alliances because of the powerful partners whom they can draw in from their flanks. The neoconservatives can deal with both the Religious Right and the collectivist Left, depending on which programs they are pursuing. By contrast, the paleolibertarians are in a bad bargaining position, wedged in between anti-modernist paleoconservatives and radically anti-statist individualists. Mitchell also develops a useful contrast between *arxé* and *kratos*, the first referring to authority that is not primarily coercive and the second to political power. (To his credit, Mitchell does not pretend that because of the generous franchise in the U.S., the shakedowns practiced by our government are somehow less pervasive than what goes on in less modern societies.) According to Mitchell, those groups that bear the "paleo" label cling to the now archaic belief in non-statist authority, whereas the closer one comes to the bottom of his circle, the more likely the partisan is to call for state coercion to deal with social issues.

A convert to Eastern Orthodoxy, Mitchell sometimes wears his religiosity on his sleeve. Certainly he does not aid his case by going after Protestants and the Protestant Reformation for "laying the axe to the root of the Church's archaic power, exalting the individual

THE NEOCONSERVATIVES CAN DEAL WITH BOTH THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT AND THE COLLECTIVIST LEFT.

circle are anti-collectivist, going from "individualist" (or left-libertarian) through "radical" down to "progressive" and finally, at the bottom of the circle, to "communitarians." On the right side, proceeding upward from the communitarians, one finds first the neoconservatives, then the theoconservatives, and finally, the group closest to the paleolibertarians at the top, the paleoconservatives.

Despite the highly schematic nature of his presentation, Mitchell does flesh out the bare bones. He persuasively

against the church hierarchy and promoting a passionate repudiation of personal authority and subjection." Aside from the inaccurate attribution to the pre-Reformation Church of a purely spiritual power, untainted by worldly coercion, there is another mistake implicit in Mitchell's judgment. American Protestants, as a French Catholic visitor, Alexis de Tocqueville, noticed in the 1830s, offered a striking illustration of local authority based on real communities, with little or no public administration.