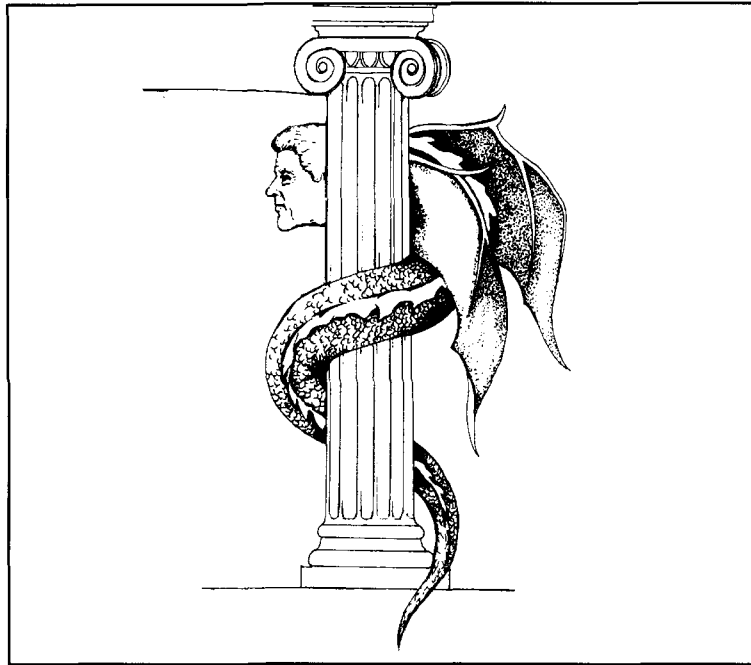


# Caesar's Column

by Samuel Francis



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If anything could make the modern presidency look good, it is the modern Congress. Intended by the Framers, through a misinterpretation of the British constitution, to offer a check to the executive branch, the federal legislature has in fact evolved into merely its partner and more often its lackey. The President now openly intervenes in congressional elections to ensure the return of those lawmakers most subservient to him, and as soon as congressmen take office, they begin to learn how to manipulate the administrative state within the executive branch to glue themselves to their seats. Because of the federal leviathan itself, the services a congressional office can today perform for its constituents (and often for nonconstituents) extends far beyond getting them passports and appointing their daughters to the military academies. Jobs in government, federal contracts and subsidies, welfare of all kinds, and expert guidance through the leviathan's tortuous web of wish-granting genies permit congressmen to build up bank accounts of political favors among voters within their districts and real bank accounts from political donations for future campaign expenses. It is probable that most of what modern legislators spend their time on today is practicing the arts of massaging, twisting, and squeezing the executive bureaucracy for their own personal political interests, and if the congressman himself does not do it, every office contains aides whose jobs consist of little but managing "constituent services," the exploitation of the executive branch for the benefit of voters. It is precisely because of the emergence of these arts that Newt Gingrich was able to say some years ago that there was less turnover in the membership of Congress than there was in that of the Soviet Politburo, and short of gross incompetence or personal scandal, there is no reason why any congressman who has learned how to pinch the udders of the executive cow properly should ever get kicked

off his stool.

In the modern American political system, then, the legislative branch no longer checks and balances the executive branch and in fact has become largely an extension of it. This in part explains why the "Republican Revolution" has been such a flop. After nearly four years of the "revolution," Mr. Gingrich and his minions of the Grand Old Party have spectacularly failed to abolish a single government agency, terminate a single government program, or reverse a single judicial decision. One of the great triumphs of the "revolution" was to enact a law requiring that Congress must be bound by the laws it imposes on other citizens, so that today congressional staffers must pay Social Security and their bosses must observe OSHA and affirmative action regulations. In passing the new law the Republicans entirely missed the point. The purpose of drumming the fact that congressional offices were not bound by many of the laws and programs they had passed was to get rid of the laws and programs, not to make sure that more people were burdened by them. By requiring their own offices to abide by OSHA rules and affirmative action regulations, the congressmen merely passed whatever burdens such rules impose on to the citizens and taxpayers for whom the congressmen are supposed to work.

The second great victory of the Republican Revolution was the adoption of the line-item veto, a favorite gewgaw of Beltway policy-wonks that supposedly allows the President to eliminate "pork barrel" from congressional legislation. Whether it will or not remains to be seen, but one certain result of the measure will be to enhance the power of the presidency over Congress even further, giving the chief executive in essence a license to blackmail dissident lawmakers by threatening to cut out measures necessary to their political survival. When the Republicans finally enacted the line-item veto, after decades of ballyhoo about it from the Beltway right, no one seemed to understand why President Clinton himself was so gleeful about

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obtaining the new power his supposed adversaries had just handed him.

But the failure of the "Republican Revolution" is due only in part to the apparently genetic mental inferiority of Republicans and results at least as much from the institutional subservience of Congress to the presidency and its bureaucracy. Nevertheless, if Congress has been absorbed within the digestive tract of the executive behemoth and has long ceased to perform the constitutional function it was designed to have, Congress itself is not entirely at fault, or at least not more so than other institutions, public or private, which have allowed the behemoth to escape the cage where republican political structures originally confined it. The truth is that the executive power, in the form of the presidency and the bureaucratic class it leads, has been the major force pushing the political revolution of the 20th century, the conversion of the Old Republic into the New Managerial Empire, and while both Congress and courts, states and private institutions, have allowed the revolution to take place, it was the executive branch and its occupants who initiated the revolution and drove it to its completion. In doing so they also completed the century's social and cultural revolution, of which the political aspect was only a part.

Indeed, throughout Western history, the expansion of executive power has commonly been associated with the destruction of an old ruling class and its order and the enthronement of new classes and orders, and the redistribution of power has almost always been billed as a process of progress or liberation. Sometimes progress and liberation actually ensued, at least as they are understood afterwards, but it is also a process by which one group gains power at the expense of other groups. Whether progress and liberation ever mean anything more than this is a separate question.

Thus, tyranny in ancient Greece was an enlargement of executive power that was commonly associated with the weakening (sometimes the obliteration) of aristocratic classes and the empowerment of the poor, and the same pattern is evident in the political struggles in Rome at the end of its republic. From the Gracchi to Caesar, the goal of the "popular party" was to get its hands on executive power—in the consulate, the tribunate, or the dictatorship—because only from that position was it possible to resist and overcome the oligarchical power of the Senate and its nobility. Julius Caesar's victory resulted in changes in the composition of the Senate that were supposed to create a new ruling class centered around him, but the appointments he made merely contributed to the hatred the nobility felt for him and to his eventual murder by its disgruntled partisans. His successors as emperor were usually more cautious in avoiding offenses to the old ruling class, or at least in exposing their bodies to their enemies, but it is no accident that the enlargement of executive power in their hands and the extinction of the Roman nobility took place in tandem. Much the same pattern occurred in Tudor England, with the rise of a middle class, composed of landed gentry and merchants, that wedded itself to the Tudor monarchy and its vast confiscation of land and wealth in the Reformation.

The reason for the repetition of this pattern in history, whereby an old ruling class is challenged by an emerging one which allies with and makes use of executive power as a spearhead of its revolution, ought to be clear. By its very nature, the old ruling class tends to monopolize offices and institutions, and emerging rivals are usually unable to gain enough influence within the old institutions and offices to achieve their ends.

The emerging class therefore invents new institutions and offices that it can control and use to challenge the old elite, and, especially when the situation requires conflict and coercion, executive institutions and the charismatic leadership of a single man are well suited to achieve these goals.

American history also exhibits this pattern, but it occurs mainly in this century and not, as many Old Right and Southern conservatives believe, in the Civil War. Indeed, a close look at Abraham Lincoln reveals not an American Caesar or an Illinois Bonaparte but a ill-prepared man who has a strong claim to being the most incompetent President in American history. Of the 15 Presidents who preceded Lincoln in the White House, all had served important apprenticeships as senators, governors, diplomats, secretaries of state, or generals. Lincoln brought no such experience to the office; he served in the militia during the Black Hawk War but saw no action; he served only one term as a congressman and four as a state legislator. Nominated as the candidate of a new splinter party that was widely regarded as eccentric if not extremist, he was elected to the White House as a fluke, because of the split within the Democratic Party, with less than 40 percent of the popular vote. A man of Lincoln's political stature and following becoming President in 1860 is comparable to someone like Ralph Nader being elected today, except that Mr. Nader displays far more political sophistication than the Sage of Springfield ever possessed.

By the time Lincoln was inaugurated in March 1861, seven Southern states had seceded and the Confederate government had been formed. Lincoln betrayed no indication of what he planned to do about this crisis of the Union, and it is likely that he lacked even the foggiest notion of what could be done or how to do it. He merely regurgitated the commonplaces of his misinformed view of the Constitution, appeared indifferent to Southern efforts to resolve the crisis, and ignored the advice of most of his own cabinet members to evacuate Fort Sumter. After having blundered into the most disastrous war of American history, Lincoln lacked both the military knowledge and the political skill to resolve it quickly, and his entire administration is a chapter of his own constitutional illiteracy and political ineptitude. As David Donald has written,

The President had remarkably little connection with the legislation passed during the Civil War. He proposed few specific laws to Congress. . . . He exerted little influence in securing the adoption of bills that were introduced. In some of the most significant legislation enacted during his administration Lincoln showed little interest. . . . Less than any other important American President did Lincoln use his veto power. . . . [He] was also ineffectual in controlling the executive departments of the government. . . . During his first months as President, Lincoln did not schedule regular Cabinet meetings at all. . . . Though some of the most important financial legislation in American history was adopted during the Civil War years, Lincoln had little interest in [these laws]. . . . Even in the conduct of foreign relations the President himself played a minor role.

It is true that Lincoln did expand the war powers of the presidency (his arguments for them show both logical and factual incomprehension of the Constitution), and it is true that he (or

rather the Northern military victory) “saved the Union”—though he never seemed to grasp that a union “saved” by military conquest and devastation of more than half of it is no longer a union but an empire.

Lincoln wounded the Old Republic, but he failed to kill it, as he failed in just about everything else that he touched. After him, the republic remained intact, though committed to a path of plutocracy and imperialism, and outside the mythography in which the enemies of the Old Republic invested the incomparable mediocrity of Father Abraham, the honor of the *coup de grace* belongs not to their patron saint but to those who made use of his myth in the following century.

To be sure, there was incremental enlargement of the presidency under the first Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, and Herbert Hoover, as Commerce Secretary and as President himself, did more for the office than most Republicans know or admit, but the chief architect of the modern presidency of the managerial state was Franklin Roosevelt, and it was under him that the wounded Old Republic was finally dispatched to glory and a new class and a new order inaugurated that remains intact today.

Roosevelt’s construction of the imperial presidency through his secret and criminal diplomacy is now generally well known, as is his bludgeoning the Supreme Court and his centralization of regulatory power in the executive branch. Yet his movement toward executive supremacy went well beyond whatever measures he claimed were necessary to deal with whatever “emergency” in the economy or around the planet he was able to discover or invent. In 1937, acting on the advice of the Brownlow Commission, Roosevelt sought to perpetuate his presidential power through legislation. As eventually enacted, the law did not create what he had wanted—essentially centralized control of all government agencies under the White House as well as a clearinghouse planning agency that would have given virtually total control of the federal state to the President and his aides—but it did establish the Executive Office of the President and six special assistants on which future aggrandizement could be built.

In fact, Roosevelt’s own Caesarist political style rendered institutional regularization of presidential power unnecessary. Not only did he ignore routine channels of administrative decision-making but he also was the first President to appeal directly to the mass population, a clear emulation of the European autocrats of the era. As his admiring historian William Leuchtenberg wrote of him, “Roosevelt dominated the front pages of the newspapers as no other President before or since has done.” He developed the presidential press conference as “a device the President manipulated, disarmingly and adroitly, to win support for his programs. It served too as a classroom to instruct the country in the new economics and new politics,” and he “was the first President to master the technique of reaching people directly over the radio.”

For the first time for many Americans, the federal government became an institution that was directly experienced. More than state and local governments, it came to be the government, an agency directly concerned with their welfare. It was the source of their relief payments; it taxed them directly for old age pensions; it even gave their children hot lunches in school.

Franklin Roosevelt personified the state as protector. It became commonplace to say that people felt toward

the President the kind of trust they would normally express for a warm and understanding father who comforted them in their grief or safeguarded them from harm.

This warm and toasty paternalism was paralleled, of course, by periodic denunciations of “economic royalists,” “special interests,” and other invective directed against his critics and political opponents and by thinly veiled insinuations of legal prosecution of those who persisted in opposition (with the plan to prosecute the *Chicago Tribune* for espionage after the outbreak of World War II, it became more than insinuation). The double role played by FDR—on the one hand, as protective father of the people; on the other, as the implacable foe of the oppressors—is an old one, played by all tyrants who seek the destruction of an old ruling class and the construction of a new one.

The new class, of course, was the emerging managerial elite, which sought in the presidency in particular and the federal leviathan in general an instrument that would fuse the economy and the state and allow for centralized economic, social, and political planning without the constraints of markets, localism, institutional cultural barriers, political opposition, or indeed national boundaries. The globalism of Roosevelt’s foreign policy corresponded closely to the global reach of the managerial corporations that soon allied with him against their smaller entrepreneurial competitors and to the global ambitions of the new professional warlords that soon emerged in the military, diplomatic, and intelligence agencies of the leviathan.

Cordell Hull’s personal crusade for free trade was an essential component of the revolution in the state that Roosevelt launched. Hull, the author of the income tax amendment, used his position as Secretary of State under Roosevelt to push a revolution in trade policy, rationalized mainly by his unexamined faith that free trade would bring world peace and that wars are caused by trade barriers, a species of utopianism that fit well with the globalism of the administration and the corporate interests allied with it. As economist John Culbertson writes, Hull’s “new program was not oriented to protecting the economic interests of the United States but to reforming the world—in a way that was more revolutionary, and more utopian, than Cordell Hull thought it to be.” By removing tariff-making from congressional hands and placing it in the secret, anonymous Committee on Trade Agreements largely under State Department control, Hull’s free trade dogmas helped transfer power over trade policy into the hands of the new emperor and the managerial class of what Alfred Eckes calls the “technicians,” “specialists,” and “academics” who composed the committee.

The presidential revolution in the federal government was completed by the construction of the apparatus for global management under the label of “national security,” and the National Security Act finalized the transformation. The consolidation of the Armed Forces under the Department of Defense, the establishment of the Central Intelligence Agency, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Policy Planning office in the State Department, and the National Security Council all completed the removal of the control of foreign and military policy from Congress and their transfer to the presidency. The creation of this apparatus by itself not only ensured that the global reach of the new managerial regime would be perpetuated but also that a large bureaucracy would acquire a vested interest in perpetu-

ating it. The apparatus required continuous feeding by "trained specialists" in the new science of "national security," and the G.I. Bill made certain that the personnel the apparatus demanded would be available and that universities themselves would be reconstructed to meet the needs of the new class.

For all the lachrymose quacking of the Watergate era about the "imperial presidency" and all the quick-response scholarship of the Beltway right in the 1980's about the "imperial Congress," the managerial monarchy that Roosevelt built remains with us. The reaction against it under Richard Nixon was merely a partisan ploy, and the coinage of the phrase "Imperial Presidency" by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., was no less a piece of political propaganda than everything else he has ever written. The Old Right, whether libertarian or traditionalist, was the real enemy of the imperial presidency from its origins, and it is a tribute to the shallowness of the post-Reagan conservatives that no sooner was their own candidate the ostensible captain of the presidential flagship, and they and their buddies were let in on a share of the swag, than they promptly forgot every word that John T. Flynn, Robert Taft, Willmoore Kendall, Frank Meyer, James Burnham, and Russell Kirk had ever written or said in resistance to the new monarchy. By its very nature, Caesar's column crushes those who resist it and simply swallows those who support it, and republican politics becomes merely a gladiatorial duel among those who seek to command

the state.

Because the managerial monarchy has emasculated serious congressional resistance, it is doubtful that Congress can accomplish much to dismantle or check the executive branch regardless of who runs either one. Tip O'Neill's law that all politics is local needs to be amended today, when all politics is really presidential. But of course the presidency, like the state itself, is merely an instrument for the perpetuation of the power of the elite that stands behind the state. As Burnham understood, Caesar "is a myth and symbol as well as a person and a fact." "Politically he is more creature than creator, and behind his back rise the serried ranks of the managerial bureaucracy." It is that bureaucracy and its allies in the managerial economy and dominant culture, and not the presidency or the state itself, that is the real enemy of Middle Americans and the fragmented Old Republican legacy they sustain, and it is against that enemy that their own political efforts need to be directed. To dismantle the imperial presidency and send Caesar's legions home to their farms would merely be to knock the weapon from the hands of the foe, but it would not necessarily mean the destruction of the foe himself. To accomplish that ultimate end, yet another new elite must displace the one that has used the presidency to put itself in power, and it is likely that any new elite that does so will forge its own spearhead of revolution from the same weapon of presidential power. c

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## A House Wren

*by Harold McCurdy*

Green, green, are all the trees, and a house wren trills,  
Trills, warbles, chortles, close to my front door;  
A little rustic birdbox invites him to build  
A nest there too, and prove what singing's for.

Grateful I am for green, and for the light  
Conversation of leaves, and for a wren  
The size of a man's thumb, rarely in sight,  
Who dares to haunt about the houses of men.

Brief brown appearances on hurrying wing  
Reveal an atom too small for such loud song,  
Rich, full, and passionate. So would I sing  
Were I as tensely strung, and brown, and strong.

I need him near my door to sing for me  
The wonder of existence better than I  
Who, after eighty-eight years of trying to be  
Useful and just, just manage to scrape by.