

THE PRESIDENCY

Power & Paradox



By JAMES MACGREGOR BURNS

A FEW YEARS AGO some grade-school children in the Chicago area were polled on their attitudes toward political authority. Two figures, it developed, first appeared on their political horizon—the local policeman and the President of the United States. The children saw their President as something of a superman. To almost all the children he appeared as either a good person or the “best in the world.” Even the youngest seemed to know a good deal about him.

That was in Eisenhower's time. We have just concluded a year in which the obsession with the President's personality, health, and state of mind has reached new heights. We used to think that the obsessive interest in John Kennedy, his family, and his friends was due to Kennedy's youthfulness, glamour, wife, and other special attributes. But the absorption with Lyndon Johnson is just as great. The press has followed his every movement, mood, and motive in endless detail.

So we know a great deal about Presidents. But how much do we know about the Presidency? Most studies of the office are really accounts of Presidents in office, the men around them, their decisions and crises. While we have been focusing on personality, the office itself has been changing drastically. Today it may have a far greater effect on its incumbents than we have recognized.

One by one the Presidency has absorbed the men and institutions that once were centers of separate and countervailing power. There was a time when Presidents had to cope with opposition—or at least foot-dragging—in their Cabinets, Vice Presidents, and party leaders. Today Cabinet members, Vice Presi-

dents, and national party chairmen are essentially assistants to the President. The process of “Presidential aggrandizement” has been accelerating. Not more than once or twice since the mid-1930s has the Supreme Court been a major deterrent to Presidential action. The Chief Executive has become virtually “President of the Cities” through his control of urban funds and policy, and hence has pulverized some of the barriers of federalism established by the Founding Fathers to limit national power. Thanks to Barry Goldwater's dragging scores of Republican Congressmen down to defeat in 1964, Congress has overcome its old deadlocks and has occasionally even moved ahead of the President on items of the Great Society. And a close study of two social power centers, the press and the intelligentsia, would reveal, I think, that they have been drawn—far more than they would admit—into the orbit of Presidential influence.

I AM not, of course, predicting eternal joyous harmony between President and Congress. Doubtless Mr. Johnson will lose some of his strongest congressional boosters in this year's elections, and the Democrats cannot hope for another Barry Goldwater to overwhelm in 1968. But in the long run Congress will be drawn increasingly into the orbit of executive power as a result of reapportionment, the erosion of one-party districts, party realignment, and the widening consensus over quantitative liberalism—over social welfare, federal regulation, and even Negro rights.

For years American conservatives have been jumping up and down and pointing to Presidential aggrandizement. In this the conservatives have been profoundly right. But where they have been profoundly wrong is in seeing Presidential power as a direct threat to individual liberty. Quite the opposite has happened. In the protection of civil liberties, in the broadening of civil rights, in the

pressure for social welfare legislation such as aid to education and to the poor that has done so much to expand individual liberty, the President has been the leader, the innovator, the cutting edge in the immense widening of social, economic, and individual liberty that has occurred in this nation during the last three decades. In this sense the power of the Presidency has been paradoxical.

That power may become more paradoxical, but for a different reason. As we increasingly achieve freedom and equality for the great number of Americans, Presidential government may exhaust the purpose for which it has been such an eminently suited means. The great machinery of government that has been shaped to distribute welfare and overcome poverty and broaden opportunity and protect liberty will become devoted to increasingly automatic tasks of dividing up shares in the welfare state. The old passions, the old compulsion of purpose, will be dissipated. Purpose will no longer be toughened in conflict; creativity will no longer rise from challenge and crisis. As the consensus widens—that is, as the ends of government become increasingly agreed upon between President and Congress, between the parties, between national and state and local governments—issues will revolve mainly around questions of technique. And the more humdrum these matters become, the more Presidents will turn to their ceremonial and symbolic roles to provide circuses for the people—the bread already being in abundance.

Many would reject any call today for high purposes and fighting issues. They prefer a polity that is not rent by great issues, scarred by savage conflict, absorbed in passionate controversy, or even distracted by political problems. The very realization of the historic goals of freedom and equality would, they believe, create a basis on which people could turn to the enduring problems of

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the richness and quality of life, and could forsake some of the old ideological quarrels.

Those who spurn ideology will contend, moreover, that progress flows not from the pursuit of central, synoptic visions or plans or purposes, but from the pursuit of a wide range of alternative policies, from flexible methods, from refusal to make ultimate commitments to any means or any end, from incremental and adjustable tactics that permit day-to-day reconciliations of differences. Such an approach, they hold, produces innovation, creativity, and excitement. It rejects the grand formulations of inter-related ends and means in favor of special angles of vision, the social dynamics of a loosely articulated, highly accessible, and open-ended polity. The incrementalists would proceed step by step, renouncing passion and commitment in favor of prudence and calculation.

Yet many who have lived through decades of traumatic and even bloody political conflict at home and abroad will wonder about a nation in which the great issues have dwindled to matters of technique. They will worry first about a people so bored by the relatively trivial political issues of the day that they have become largely absorbed in the minutiae of their private lives. They will worry that people may fall into adjustment, conformity, indiscriminating tolerance, and aimless, time-filling activities, and that this will lead to the acceptance of mediocrity and a compulsive togetherness rather than the pursuit of excellence and individuality.

THEY will be concerned about the governors as well as the governed. For a government agreed on the larger issues and proceeding by calculation and adjustment is likely to attract to its service the little foxes who in Archilochus's phrase know many little things—the operators, the careerists, the opportunists, the technicians, the fixers, the managers. Some of these men may be resourceful, flexible, and prudent. But they will be so absorbed in adjusting things and mediating among people that it will be difficult for them to separate issues of policy from questions of their own immediate self-enhancement. Certainly there would be little room for the Churchills who give up office in pursuit of broader principles, or even for the innovators who wish to create something more exalted than a better administrative mousetrap. Thus the governors, too, would lose their way, become lost in technique, become absorbed in private motives, and substitute the means for the ends.

For this is the corruption of consensus—the attempt to find universal agreement on so many issues that great public purposes are eroded by a torrent of tiny

problems solved by adjustment and adaptation. Ways and means are more and more rationally elaborated by mounting numbers of technicians for a society having less and less human purpose.

IN the Presidency this trend would mean the submergence of the nation's supreme political decision maker in an ever-widening tide of incremental adjustments. The President might still be a hero to most of his people, but his policy and program would not be heroic, only his image. He would still seem a potent figure to children—and grown-ups—but his actual influence over events would be dwindling. He would still be visible as he mediated among the technicians and occasionally coped with crises; but it would be the visibility of the tightrope walker whom the great public watches, entranced but uninvolved. The defeat of Presidential government would be inherent in its very success. Having taken over the Cabinet and the rest of the government, Presidential government would finally have taken over the President.

Can we exploit the immense potential of Presidential government for power and creativity and still escape creeping

consensus and enervation? Not, I think, by reimposing the old constitutional barriers against the President. The main hope of keeping the Presidency as an alert and daring agency of popular government lies in a vigorous and vibrant opposition. Such an opposition cannot be built on Capitol Hill, for Congress fragmentizes minority-party power just as it does the majority. It must be built anew. The Republicans have a fine opportunity to fashion party machinery—an annual conference or convention, for example, to keep its platform and leadership up to date—that could empower a clear, unified, and loyal "Shadow Presidency."

PRESIDENTIAL government is a superb instrument for realizing our national purpose as we redefine it over the years. But purpose in turn is steered not amid agreement, adjustment, conformity, but in crisis and conflict; it was out of crisis and conflict that Roosevelt, Nehru, Lenin, Churchill, and the other great leaders of the century emerged. A great society needs not consensus but creative leadership and creative opposition—hence it needs the sting of challenge in a society rich in diversity, in a politics rich with dissent.



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Dilemmas and Agonies for All

IN ONE RESPECT, at least, the participants and many of the nonparticipants involved in Vietnam stand on the same ground. All of them are bedeviled by dilemmas and agonies; none of them has an unclouded choice or prospect. This may make life hard for all concerned but it may also represent a hope for peace in Vietnam.

Begin with the United States. The United States has been getting deeper into Vietnam because it wants to get out. That is, the United States feels its only chance of ending the war in Vietnam is by convincing the enemy it is prepared to fight the war on ever higher levels—levels too costly for the enemy to sustain. But these same levels may be even more costly for the United States than for the enemy. For the last thing in this world the United States wants is a toe-to-toe encounter with Communist China and its limitless reserves of manpower. And the United States knows that if it should attempt to bypass a land war by reaching for nuclear firepower, the result could be a larger fire than we or anyone else might be able to put out.

Just as the United States is trapped between the impossible and the intolerable, the government of South Vietnam has its own agonies and dilemmas. It is irrevocably and totally dependent on the United States. If the United States withdraws, the wall against the North, already permeable, would evaporate. But if the United States stays in Vietnam and succeeds in bringing about negotiations, the specific result is likely to be a test of self-determination, since the United

States has proclaimed from the start that its main objective in Vietnam is to give the people a chance to choose their own government and way of life, free of coercion or subversion. Self-determination, however, is a test which South Vietnam officials have sought to discourage on the grounds it may be premature. So South Vietnam would like the Americans to press for victory in a situation which the Americans have already declared permits no victory.

North Vietnam's cup of dilemmas is no less full. It cannot fight the war without outside aid. If it takes as much aid as it needs from the Russians, who live far away, the Chinese, who live next door, may decide to occupy the entire premises. And if the North Vietnamese get as much aid as they need from the Chinese, the Chinese will insist on controlling its use. If North Vietnam refuses to negotiate with the Americans, the result is likely to be a sharp step-up in the American military effort. But the alternative—negotiations—calls for a measure of independence and detachment from the Chinese that Hanoi may be reluctant to attempt, especially if no other big brothers are nearby.

AND the Russians, too, are literally saturated with dilemmas. Their basic interests in Vietnam are not too dissimilar from those of the United States. The one thing the Soviet Union would not like to see happen is the extension of Chinese influence or power anywhere in the world, especially in Asia. And the total or precipitate withdrawal of the United

States from Indochina would produce a significant increase in that probability. But the Soviet Union feels compelled to send military aid to North Vietnam because of the requirements of solidarity inside the Communist world.

Communist China is in a position to exploit the agonies and dilemmas of others in Vietnam, but it is far from enjoying a confident serenity itself. For despite everything they may say about their ability to survive an atomic war, the Chinese have had far more difficulty in raising the level of their industry and agriculture than they had anticipated. Even if China should survive a major war, it is highly doubtful that the present government or any government could survive post-atomic conditions, assuming the wreckage is not complete. And the more Peking goads Hanoi to carry on or step up the fight, the closer Peking itself gets to a confrontation in which the prospects will be as bleak for her as they are for anyone else.

The agonies and dilemmas spill over to the nations of Central Europe. The longer the war continues, the greater the danger that the hard-liners inside the Kremlin will return to power. If that should happen, there would be a tightening of controls over Central Europe, especially in Poland, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Those governments have a direct stake in an early end to the Vietnam war but ideological unity calls for their support of North Vietnam, which is not the surest way of ending the war.

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In a curious sense, there is hope in the very fact of agonies and dilemmas, for if there are enough of them and if they are severe enough, alternatives that were rejected out of hand in the past may seem less unattractive now. Peace begins with the awareness by all parties concerned that there is very little personal gain in a continuation of the present struggle. The one agency which so far has not been able to play a vital role, for a wide variety of reasons, may be increasingly relevant and useful. That agency, of course, is the United Nations. True, the U.N. cannot enforce a settlement; it may not even be able to command one. But the U.N. can at least help to provide the auspices under which a settlement might take shape, and it could help monitor the terms—if enough of the principals have enough of a desire to find a way out.

At the very least, the U.N. is now in a position to define an alternative to the present dead end. It will take adroitness to weave the U.N. into Vietnam. But at least the U.N. is less vulnerable to the agonies and dilemmas of the national sovereignties. Such was the original intention and hope.

—N.C.