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Reassessing the "Imperial Presidency"

LOUIS W. KOENIG

Among the innumerable books published about the American presidency in the nearly two centuries of the office’s existence, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.’s Imperial Presidency holds a unique place. Published in 1973, the book’s title remains part of the American political lexicon. Mention presidency in a word association test administered to any number of politicians, civil servants, academics, and others tolerably informed about the office, and the likelihood is that the word imperial will figure prominently in the results. Adding to the book’s impact are Schlesinger’s previous writings and service in a presidential administration, a record in sharp contrast to the theme of his book. His earlier works were laudatory chronicles of the presidencies of Jackson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Kennedy, which, with his service in the latter’s presidency, were encouraging to other writers, especially in the 1960s, in building their cases for an activist presidency. The Imperial Presidency is a 180-degree turnaround from this previous record.

Writing in 1973, when the unpopularity of the Vietnam war was reaching a crescendo and Richard Nixon’s abuses of power were surfacing and straining the credence of shocked citizens, Schlesinger’s contention that presidential power had attained a state of extreme aggrandizement seemed justified and aptly timed. In an extended analysis, he argued that Watergate and the Vietnam war were not isolated aberrations but the long-building climaxes of rampant presidential power that had been set in the direction of abuse soon after the office commenced its operations in 1789.

The rock on which the imperial presidency rests is the phenomenon of presidential wars, launched simply by the chief executive’s fiat. Innumerable small-scale hostilities were initiated in the nineteenth century; more elaborate conflicts were waged by Tyler, Polk, and above all Lincoln in the Civil War. In the twentieth century such wars were conducted on the scale of the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. The spreading use of executive agreements and ever broaden-

ing executive privilege were other ingredients that made foreign policy the principal arena of the imperial presidency. Particularly since World War II, according to Schlesinger, "the image of the President acting by himself in foreign affairs, imposing his own sense of reality and necessity on a waiting government and people became the new orthodoxy." In domestic affairs, the rise of social programs, such as the New Deal and the Great Society, and the expansion of a national economy dominated by interstate business and amenable to control through national regulation, enlarged the imperial presidency's domain.

Certainly after the compounded troubles of Watergate and the Vietnam war, one should not be surprised that the presidency underwent sweeping indictment and searching reexamination. Criticism, a common experience of the presidency, is fed by the nation's historic suspicion of executive power and the fear of its susceptibility to abuse, rooted in popular perceptions of George III. The American Revolution was fought against executive power. After the presidency was established, criticism often took on an antimonarchical cast. President Washington, with his taste for fine living and receptivity to deference, was sometimes accused of acting like a king. When Martin Van Buren enhanced the White House grounds by planting trees and improving the landscaping, he was assailed for aping the monarchs of Europe by creating an orangery in the rear of his palace where he might enjoy majestic seclusion.

But throughout its lengthy history the presidency's incumbents have been virtually unanimous in their heartfelt testimony of its inadequacies, which perceives the office as anything but imperial. John Adams exclaimed, after pitching endlessly on the presidency's rough waters: "No! The real fault is, that the president has not influence enough, and is not independent enough." Thomas Jefferson spoke of the office as a "splendid misery," and James A. Garfield, in a brief tenure, for which he sacrificed his life, exclaimed, "My God, what is there in this place that a man should ever want to get in it?" Herbert Hoover, after battling the economic depression with prodigious labor and experiencing unremitting failure, could understandably declare, with nonimperial fervor, "This office is a compound hell."  

Scholars and Observers

Scholars and observers who analysed the presidency in the nineteenth and for most of the twentieth centuries were impressed not that it was exercising too much power, as the imperial thesis contends, but suffered from serious deficiencies of power. In 1885, political scientist Woodrow Wilson argued that Congress was "the dominant, nay, the irresistible, power of the federal system."

1 Ibid., p. 206.
terval between Lincoln and Cleveland, he found the presidency weak and helpless, its power steadily disintegrating.

That acute observer of American society and politics, Alexis de Tocqueville, compared the president's power with the power of the constitutional kings of France. Tocqueville's findings do not support Schlesinger's contention that at this juncture the presidency was already well embarked on the imperial road. Tocqueville thought that the president was highly limited by functioning in a federal system of government, by his modest tenure of four years compared with the monarch's life tenure, and by his responsibility for his actions in contrast to the inviolability of the person of the king declared by French law.  

Another distinguished foreign commentator, James Bryce, assessing the presidency near the close of the nineteenth century, while conceding the immense dignity of the president's position and his unrivalled platform "from which to impress his ideas (if he has any) upon the people," felt that a tyrannical president was "hard to imagine." The president, Bryce noted, has no standing army and cannot create one, and Congress can checkmate him by stopping supplies. A more serious problem, Bryce argued, was the lack of great men in the presidency: "The only thing remarkable about them is that being so commonplace they should have climbed so high."  

Most twentieth-century commentators have been tolerant of the presidency's power. After leaving the office William Howard Taft, mindful that his former mentor, Theodore Roosevelt, had made extravagant claims of power in his memorable stewardship theory in contrast to his own conservative theory, nonetheless viewed the office's state and future confidently. Taft saw little danger of a tyrannical president who lacked popular support. At least one house of Congress, Taft concluded serenely, would block him. And if the people should support him, Taft also felt, their "good sense" would prevail, if a wayward president exploited their approval.  

In 1942 Thomas K. Finletter of the law faculty of the University of Pennsylvania, a special assistant to the secretary of state and a future secretary of the air force, expressed a widely felt sense that the presidency was lacking in power and effectiveness as it approached public problems after World War II. To Finletter, the office's long history displayed not an imperial presidency but a "government of fits and starts," which had become "no longer good enough for our purposes"—the grand-scale adjustment of the nation and the international community, moving from an era of war to an era of peace and reconstruction. Finletter was troubled by the ease with which Congress can thwart a president,  

even a strong president, who offers creative initiatives for public problems. Only if the two branches worked together harmoniously and constructively, Finletter argued, could government become sufficiently effective, and he offered thoughtful proposals for restructuring relations between Congress and the presidency toward that end. Similarly, Sidney Hyman, writing in 1956, concluded that the presidency alone of the governmental system is structurally organized to be at the center of affairs. The role of Congress is to investigate and criticize, and if the sword of power that the president holds "seems more dangerous, it is simply because our position in the world has become dangerously great. It will not become less so if the Congress allows its individual members to shatter that sword." Other commentators in this era were equally serene and accepting of presidential power. In his widely read work, The American Presidency, Harold J. Laski, a British political scientist, contended that the warnings of abuse following the tenure of a strong president were "baseless," and their chief consequence was that they often led to the selection of a successor "who has half-abdicated from the control of policy."

In another classic study bearing the same title, Clinton Rossiter wavered off efforts to reduce the president's powers as "ill-considered and ill-starred." In a world of unrest and aggression, in a country over which industrialism has swept in great waves, in a world where active diplomacy is the minimum price of survival, "it is not alone power but a vacuum of power that men must fear." Urging that the presidency remain unamended and untouched, he concluded that "the strong Presidency is the product of events that cannot be undone and of forces that continue to roll."

Although popular presidents like Jackson and the Roosevelts were objects of venomous attack, the office they occupied remained relatively unscathed until its encounter with the Vietnam war and Watergate in the presidencies of Johnson and Nixon. A precursor of Schlesinger's study was George Reedy's influential Twilight of the Presidency, published in 1970. A long-time aide of President Johnson, Reedy depicted the president as isolated from reality, living in a euphoric dream of the matchless goodness of his works, shielded by his enormous power and a human wall of sycophants who served as his staff. Other influential voices of the 1970s, stirred by the Vietnam war and Watergate, recommended drastic surgery for the ills of the office. A former senator and presidential candidate, Eugene McCarthy, called for the depersonalization and decentralization of the presidency. Barbara Tuchman, contending that the office had become too complex and extended, a place where an impetuous man might run amok and cause horrendous damage, proposed a six-member executive with

a rotating chairman, in the fashion of the Swiss presidency. Political scientist and journalist Max Lerner urged that the president be fettered with a council of state, with half of its members from Congress and the other half drawn from outside of Congress. Schlesinger, it should be noted, opposed any shearing away of presidential power. Rather, to set things aright, institutions with which the presidency deals, such as Congress and the bureaucracy of the executive branch, must be shaken out of their torpor and invigorated to do the job of checking the president, the job they had always been expected to do.

Assessing Congress

Schlesinger depicts Congress as largely compliant, supine, and only occasionally assertive against the president. This perception runs counter to the widely prevailing view of political scientists and historians in their writing on the presidency. If anything, Congress, often spoken of as the most powerful legislative body in history, has been a highly consequential presence. After the dazzling first hundred days of the New Deal, that most imperial of presidents, Franklin Roosevelt, as early as 1934—after only a year in office and seemingly favored with staunch public and congressional support—suffered defeat on three important issues. The Senate rejected the St. Lawrence Seaway Treaty and refused to empower the president to embargo the shipment of arms to countries at war. The American Legion and the Government Employees' Union pushed his solidly Democratic Congress into overriding his veto of increases in veterans' pensions and a restored cut in the federal payrolls. Congress thenceforth seldom allowed Roosevelt to forget its presence as a powerful vetoing body.

Even that spectacular Exhibit A of Schlesinger's imperial presidents, Richard Nixon, who stretched to the farthest limits claims of executive privilege, impoundments of appropriations, and indulgence in sheer indictable acts, suffered many congressional rebuffs. As the Nixon years illustrate, the claim of imperial power does not necessarily constitute actual power. Time and again Congress prevailed over Nixon. It ended his once secret war in Cambodia by cutting off funds. His claims of almost limitless powers to impound funds, keep secrets, and abolish programs were rejected by Congress and the courts. His modest program proposals were rebuffed by Congress more frequently than those of any other modern president. Eventually, Nixon's clear impending doom in the impeachment process drove him from the presidency. The imperial thesis underrates Congress and distorts history by portraying it as largely an institution of ineffectuality and slender impact.

In the American system, as Edward S. Corwin put it, the president proposes and Congress disposes. No presidential policy of importance can long endure without funds, and only Congress under the Constitution can provide appropriations. While in many ways the Vietnam war was conducted by the president, it was also a congressional war, supported annually and deliberately by
that body's appropriations. At any moment that it chose, Congress could have ended the war by withholding appropriations, but it did not so choose.

In foreign affairs, the Elysian Fields of the imperial presidency, the role of Congress has been far greater than Schlesinger allows. From the beginning of independence to the close of the Civil War, Congress was largely the dominant force, with expansionist legislators often winning out as the United States absorbed great stretches of the North American mainland. In 1812, the expansionist "war hawks" of the House of Representatives, eyeing Canada to the north and the Floridas to the south, compelled a reluctant President Madison to make war on England. Again, expansionists in the House pressed President James Monroe, at the risk of war with Spain, to recognize the new Latin American republics emerging from the disintegrating Spanish empire. And again, the expansionists, unable to muster the two-thirds vote in the Senate required to approve a treaty, annexed Texas in 1845 via a joint resolution, making war with Mexico a certainty.

From the post-Civil War years until the close of the nineteenth century, Congress's influence was stronger in foreign affairs than the president's, and its tenor was decidedly "imperial." Expansionists in Congress, their eyes trained acquisitively on Cuba, agitated for war with Spain. But a nonimperial president, Grover Cleveland, said that if Congress declared war, it must not be assumed that he would wage it. Congress was more successful in annexing Hawaii in 1895, and it subsequently induced a peace-minded president, William McKinley, to follow its guideposts down the road to war with Spain over Cuba. In a joint resolution, in whose drafting McKinley took no part, the president was called on to affirm the right of Cubans to freedom and independence. The resolution was in effect a declaration of war since it directed the president to employ the armed forces to eject Spain from Cuba.

Not until Theodore Roosevelt's adventurism in foreign affairs did the presidency fit the imperial model neatly. Roosevelt "took Panama," intervened freely in the affairs of Latin American countries, and sided with and encouraged France and Japan in their foreign policy ventures. Except when his policies required legislation for their implementation Roosevelt thrived in high-handed independence from Congress.

Not so two other allegedly stellar contributors to the imperial model in the first half of the twentieth century, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt. Acting according to his own well-developed ideas of popular leadership and intent on converting the national government from a negative system of checks and balances into a positive, effective mechanism, Wilson worked elaborately and often in the manner of a British prime minister, which he admired, to elicit Congress's approval and support. A masterful political leader, he scored impressive successes with his New Freedom program of domestic reforms and with foreign policy measures. But after an initial "honeymoon" year of success, congressional opposition grew, as Wilson had anticipated it would. Henry Cabot
Lodge, Albert Fall, and other senators demanded armed intervention in Mexico. A Senate filibuster blocked a bill granting the president authority to arm merchant vessels, driving a thoroughly frustrated Wilson into his memorable outburst against "a little group of willful men." American entry into war dispelled the interbranch conflict temporarily, but it resumed when Congress sought to force a war cabinet on the president and raked the War Department with acrimonious attack, while voters spurned Wilson's appeal for a Democratic Congress in 1918. The pendulum of power swung more decisively to Congress when it defeated the Versailles treaty and the president's ardently advocated membership of the United States in the League of Nations.

Franklin Roosevelt, a wizard of politics and the exercise of power, who guided the country through the Great Depression and World War II, was equally a prime candidate for top honors as an imperial president. To be sure, he provided dramatic moments when he seemed to fit the model—uprooting Americans from the West Coast in World War II, for example, and when Congress was overdue in renewing price control legislation, threatening to pass the law himself. Fortunately, Congress acquiesced. Roosevelt's more customary stance was a careful nurturing of congressional and public opinion to support the measures necessary for the crisis.

From one perspective, Roosevelt played the role of an imperial president to the hilt, particularly in the crucial interval between the German conquest of France and the attack on Pearl Harbor (June 1940-December 1941). Britain then stood alone, with much of its military resources lost in the frantic escape at Dunkirk, and was threatened with invasion. With congressional and public opinion closely divided between intervention and isolation, Roosevelt acted with audacious initiative, to the point of committing warlike acts. Among other things, fifty "obsolete" but still serviceable destroyers were given Britain in exchange for leases of bases for American forces on British territories in the Western Hemisphere. When Germany occupied Denmark, Roosevelt moved American forces into the Danish territories of Greenland and Iceland. To safeguard arms deliveries to Britain, he provided naval convoys and ordered the shooting of Axis naval craft at sight. Several violent encounters ensued.

But while playing out his imperial role, Roosevelt in speeches and statements was diligently explaining to the public the nature of the peril lurking in the events of Europe, the necessity of alert citizen interest, and the certainty of severe sacrifices. By these attentions Roosevelt fashioned an essential, though imperfect, basis of support for his warlike initiatives.

Likewise, Roosevelt struggled in Congress to secure laws and appropriations to further his policies. The vehicle of continuous large-scale aid to Britain was the Lend Lease Act of 1941, in effect a thoroughly deliberated abandonment by Congress of its foreign policy of neutrality established in previous statutes. Roosevelt also had to secure extension of the Selective Service Act of 1940, which by dint of prodigious administration lobbying, squeezed through the
House of Representatives by a single vote. Life was not always imperial for the president.

**Cycles of the Presidency**

The thesis of the imperial presidency boldly undertakes to interpret all of presidential history and both perceives and explains the office as a force of steadily aggrandizing power. From other extensive writing on the presidency, however, one can extract or build on other theories that undertake to explain the presidency's lengthy historic experience. One theory, for example, represented in various writings about the office, is the cycle theory. It suggests that the impact and effectiveness of the presidency fluctuate. Unlike the imperial theory, which sees the presidency as sustaining a steady linear progression of power, a cyclical overview of the presidency suggests rises and falls in the office's fortunes.

Fluctuation and the cycle effect are produced by many forces. Much of the president's power over foreign and domestic affairs is shared with Congress, but the precise patterns of sharing are often tentative and unclear. Even after nearly two centuries of constitutional practice, they remain largely unpredictable. Power fluctuates because of shifts in public mood and opinion. In foreign affairs, the mood swings between high ideals and costly sacrifice, as during the two World Wars, to an opposite extreme of absorption in domestic affairs, characteristic of the nineteenth century, and even to moods of disillusionment and withdrawal prevailing in the era between the two World Wars and to some extent subsequent to the Vietnam war. Likewise, in domestic affairs, after breasting a flood of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs, the public seemed to crave less initiative and proved receptive to the Nixon-Ford-Carter retrenchment.

Other regulators built into the political system ensure that the president's power circumstances will fluctuate. The principle of separation of powers, employed by the Founding Fathers in constructing the Constitution, both produced the three branches of government and gave rise to a psychology of identity and self-assertion. Congress struggles to maintain its identity. For a time, especially during war, it may acquiesce to the president's initiatives, but sooner or later it will assert itself by contesting, amending, or rejecting what the president puts before it. Congress's identity is thereupon bolstered; unremitting sentiment erodes it. Likewise, the public mood, whose support the president must elicit if he is to accomplish objectives of any magnitude, is regulated by a limited span of attention. The presidential call for support to further a grand purpose cannot be made too often in a society devoted to private values and whose rewards fall most generously on private achievement.

Another potent variable is the personality of the incumbent, his conception of the presidency's powers, how and to what extent they should be used, and his political skill in using them. In writings on the presidency, classifications of the incumbents are offered on the basis of such factors.

Thomas Finletter, for example, concerned not that the presidency was imperial but that all too often the office hobbled an incumbent's capacity for accomplishment and produced results that failed to meet the needs of the times, noted what he called "the orthodox presidents." This type is characterized by a failure to use "the potential power which the direct election by the people gives him." Taft, for example, a strict constructionist of the Constitution, felt that the president could exercise no authority that was not traceable to some specific grant of power in the Constitution or to an act of Congress. His stance toward Congress was decidedly nonimperial; he made no attempt to lead Congress assertively, as did his predecessor Roosevelt and his successor Wilson. Although important legislation was enacted during his term, much of it was carried over from Roosevelt's tenure, and no amount of straining could detect in Taft's policymaking an imperial flair. Roosevelt, who had his own scheme of classifying presidents and spoke of a Buchanan-Taft school, contended that it was denoted by the attitude that "the President is the servant of Congress rather than of the people. . . . Most able lawyers who are past middle age take this view."14

A contrasting type, Finletter and Roosevelt agree, is the president who excels as a popular leader, exemplified by Washington, Jackson, Lincoln, Wilson, and the Roosevelts. This type flourishes in times of crisis and change — during war or economic depression or when political movements such as populism or progressivism attain their crest. He interprets his powers liberally, is a precedent-maker, and causes the legality of his actions to be challenged. Clearly he is the most eligible type for Schlesinger's imperial category, particularly when he resorts to war-making. But "imperial" is hardly apt to denote this type's other noteworthy contributions in promoting the general welfare through social and economic programs for the body of citizens and responding constructively to the tasks and opportunities of international leadership.

There is also a middle category of presidents suggested by the tenure of Grover Cleveland. Its characteristics mix those of the categories that flank it. At times the president personally is at the forefront; at other times his office. Now he acquiesces to Congress; later he leads or contests it. At one time he summons the nation to advance to some new horizon; at another he is stopped in his tracks or moving backward. As president, he is often defensive or negative, resorting to the veto, shunning issues, halting what predecessors and others have set in motion, and using executive power only to maintain an equilibrium. Eisenhower is a recent illustration of this type.

Whether a given president becomes “imperial” depends mainly on his situation, his times, and the events of his tenure. His chances for reaching that heady clime are slim if he comes into office after a long war and the nation is fed up with conflict. Woe betide Andrew Johnson, succeeding in office that highflier of presidential power, Abraham Lincoln. Eisenhower’s electoral success in 1952 was significantly predicated on his promise to end the war in Korea, a nonimperial act and a promise he kept. It was hardly likely that he would then involve the nation in another war, and he did not. He resisted the pressure of his military advisers to dispatch American forces to Vietnam. Similarly, after the termination of the long war in Indochina, Ford and Carter faced a situation in which initiating a further war of any scale was politically out of the question.

Situations, so far as the viability of a genuinely imperial presidency is concerned, vary by kind according to their potential. War, economic depression, and an encompassing political consensus supportive of a large-scale program of economic and social reform, such as Johnson’s Great Society, are situations inviting presidential ascendance, a fertile ground for Schlesinger’s imperial presidency. Less propitious are situations inviting a presidential administration whose effect is consolidation. Eisenhower’s presidency was of this genre, coming on the heels of the tempestuous years of Truman, with war in Korea, hobbling labor-management disputes, an ambitious but abortive Fair Deal program of domestic reforms, and scandals sparked by mink coats and deep freezes. The situation invited a presidency capable of providing equilibrium, defined as avoidance of the conflict and upheaval characterizing the Truman years.

Least promising for the thriving of the imperial presidency is a situation that puts the office in a state of clearly diminished fortunes. Warren Harding’s era of “normalcy” after World War I, like the Andrew Johnson administration after Lincoln, who had used the presidency to the hilt, provided fallow ground for the imperial seed.

The Presidency as Democracy-Serving

To single out a presidency and to label certain of its acts as imperial runs the danger that other acts, contributing to the common good, will be overlooked. Theodore Roosevelt’s Square Deal, Wilson’s New Freedom, and Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal are hardly to be dismissed as merely contributing to the imperial momentum. More memorably, they ameliorated human suffering, improved the lot of the general body of citizens, and responded to the essential needs of groups such as the elderly with social security pensions and blacks with enhanced political rights and economic opportunities. In one perspective, democracy requires benevolence, or a fraternal concern for the well-being of others, manifested in the social and economic programs of modern presidents.

Presidents have been a principal means of access to government and to responsive policymaking for left-out groups. Labor leaders enjoyed an access to Franklin Roosevelt unmatched in earlier presidencies, opening doors to his
championship of legislation that enhanced labor's legal rights to organize and engage in collective bargaining, and that enormously enlarged the ranks of organized labor. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation dealt slavery its most mortal blows, and in more recent times black rights received high priorities in the presidencies of Kennedy and Johnson. Both placed themselves at the head of the black civil rights movement and employed a variety of presidential resources to promote their purposes. In addition to proposing legislation and resorting to the courts, Kennedy, for example, made public appeals in radio and television addresses. He employed private persuasion with individuals and delegations of southern businessmen, theater owners, and newspaper editors, as well as intensive dialogue with civil rights leaders, to keep the explosive issues within tolerable bounds. Kennedy also employed government contracts, hiring and promotion policies in the civil service, and the expenditure of federal funds, among other things, to clear the way for civil rights advances. In one perspective these accumulated efforts might be seen as contributing cubits of growth to an imperial presidency, but their far weightier importance is their function of democratic benevolence, of providing access to society's benefits and opportunities for a vast group that had for so long been left out.

If democracy is considered from another basic perspective, civil liberties, their observance and support by presidents are underrated by tagging their tenure as imperial. Jefferson was the first popular president, but his leadership was committed to human liberty, to developing public understanding of that concept, and of strengthening its protection. Even in what appear to be the presidency's most imperial moments, such as Lincoln's assertion of power in the Civil War, a moment when the nation's survival was in greatest peril, democracy in its essentials was observed, an achievement that ought not to be lightly regarded. James G. Randall, after close study of Lincoln's presidency, concluded that "no undue advantage was taken of the emergency to force arbitrary rule upon the country or to promote personal ends." Political opposition, Randall noted, continued to air its opinions, and the voters could repudiate their president at the polls if they wanted to. Lincoln's power, however "imperial," remained contingent on popular support.15

The contention that there is an imperial presidency largely ignores the office's everyday political functioning in a democratic context. The case for the imperial presidency centers on its incumbents' claims of legal power to make war, keep secrets, impound funds, and the like but treads lightly on the president's standard political tasks of political brokerage and consensus-building. As broker, the president projects an image of the good society and the means of attaining it. He struggles to weave together legislative majorities to enact his vision and to obtain support from interest groups. As Richard Neustadt recounts the process

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in his study, *Presidential Power*, the president, contrary to the imperial thesis and its implications, has little power of command but has primarily the power to persuade, to influence groups and others in political life to perceive that it is in their interest to do what he asks. To help these respondents see the light, the president holds forth inducements from the store of benefits and advantages his office provides, and he bargains to evoke the desired behavior and metes out punishments and rewards. If he can awaken public opinion and evoke its support, he eases his tasks of persuading and bargaining. This picture of everyday presidential functioning, of one player with limited power among many players, is decidedly more democratic than imperial.

The Age of Television

According to one view, television has been a leading contributor to the rise of the imperial presidency. It has been a mighty force in reducing the strength and function of political parties that have historically mediated between the president and the voters, interpreting each to the other, and providing ties that hold the political structure together. Television presents presidents and other politicians directly to the voters. Certainly, John Kennedy enormously expanded his popularity and image by deftly using television to concentrate attention on his presidency. A president who dominates television can determine the way issues are shaped and focus national attention on what he wants to accomplish. Fred Friendly, a former television producer and now a professor of journalism, after considering television's potential for presidential leadership, exclaimed, "No mighty king, no ambitious emperor, no pope, no prophet ever dreamt of such an awesome pulpit, so potent a magic wand."

But television is by no means the sheer advantage for the presidency it is often hailed to be. If television has enhanced the president's position as the nation's supreme political symbol, it has also done much to establish him as the nation's favorite scapegoat. If things go wrong, a program is maladministered, the Vietnam war drags on, the Soviet Union launches a new thrust, or inflation soars, the president is the readiest object on which to hang blame. Even though his powers for dealing with these occurrences are limited and shared with Congress, the executive branch bureaucracy, interest groups, and private corporate leaders, he is a readily summoned scapegoat.

Following the Vietnam war and Watergate and the burrowing of the notion of an imperial presidency into the national consciousness, television has abounded with reporters who not only follow the journalistic preference for bad news over good news but also frequently moralize over the policies and performances of

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presidents and their administrations. Since presidential policies, like other public policies, seldom offer clear moral choices and since the implementation of presidential policies is easily snarled by the misadventures of the many human beings on whom their effectuation depends, the president is a ready target.

Television also restricts the president's capacity to lay complicated issues before the public, to explain his proposals of action, and to perform the educative tasks of leadership. Like others in the political system, the president must reckon with television's preference for questions that are not too complicated to treat in approximately one minute and fifteen seconds and its predilection for visual drama as a context for those questions. Presidents, too, must accommodate the imperatives of television and largely abstain from the full-length expositions of issues they were accustomed to rendering on radio but which are rarely viable on television. Like other citizens, the president must capsulize serious questions to be represented in that most prized domain, television's evening news.

Leadership for the 1980s

The notion of an imperial presidency both contributes to a weakening of today's presidency and misstates its true condition. The thesis reinforces the contemporary mood to disparage the presidency, to suspect the motives and statements of the incumbent, and to thrust serious restrictions on the office. In foreign affairs, for example, Congress increasingly limits the president's policy choices. According to a recent count, Congress has used its appropriations power to impose more than seventy "constraints" on the president, such as barring military assistance to Thailand unless authorized by Congress, barring foreign aid from being spent on abortions, and prohibiting direct financing of any assistance to Angola. President Carter subsequently complained that because of congressional restraints, the United States was unable to provide assistance to rebels in Angola fighting Cubans. In the War Powers Act of 1973, Congress made many presidential deployments of the armed forces subject to its veto, although precisely which of the president's actions fall within the resolution remains unclear.

The Senate is increasingly engaged in the negotiation of treaties to the point that at its insistence a treaty may be renegotiated. Often this assertiveness comes not at the advice stage but at the consent stage, adding to the president's difficulties. A vivid illustration of this phenomenon was provided in the final stages of the Panama Canal treaties, when Senate majority Leader Robert C. Byrd and Minority Leader Howard H. Baker journeyed to Panama and negotiated changes in the treaty with Panama's president.

Congress in its countermoves against a presumed imperial presidency has been anything but the supine body that Schlesinger describes. The mood engendered by the idea of the imperial presidency also affects citizen attitudes,
making the public continuously suspicious and disparaging. Any new president becomes eligible for deprecation if he does not quickly produce visible results through leadership initiatives. The apparatus of public opinion polls and interest groups that are better funded, more sophisticated, and more committed to particular issues are increasingly resulting in presidential policymaking by fits and starts. Progress on energy, inflation, unemployment, tax reform, and urban affairs, all have experienced advances and retreats in the Carter years but the cause cannot be explained merely in terms of the president himself and the talents of his aids but as reflecting the ever more deft thrusts of private interests, the disinclination of legislators to follow the president’s lead, and the decline of the party as a unifying force.

Ironically, while presidential leadership is being denigrated by cries of “imperial,” the demands on it, as the 1980s begin, are fast enlarging. Inflation, the energy shortage, the spread of nuclear weapons capability, and the constant presence of war are survival problems threatening not only American well-being but the well-being of all mankind. The complexity of these issues, the broad canvass of interests that they traverse, and their constant unwinding in new manifestations heighten the demands on leadership.

To make its way, future presidential leadership must summon a high order of creativity, political dexterity both at home and abroad, and resolute humanism in its orientation. It must experiment and educate; it must be fair-minded in the distribution of burdens and sensitive to avoiding unnecessary hardship. In the certain shifting of fortunes between good days and bad days in policymaking and implementation, the president, above all, must be capable of maintaining public confidence and trust. It will be easier if the clouds of suspicion generated by the notion of an imperial presidency can be dispelled.