

# TRB

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## VIEWS AND PERSPECTIVES ON THE PRESIDENCY

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The veteran Washington correspondent of the *Christian Science Monitor* writing under the pseudonym TRB about our last eight Presidents.

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**RICHARD L. STROUT**

Richard L. Strout

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( VIEWS AND PERSPECTIVES ON THE PRESIDENCY )

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## Introduction

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More than a half century ago a young and eager newspaperman arrived in Washington. At about this time Bruce Bliven, then editor of *The New Republic*, was taking one of his weekly subway rides from his office in Manhattan (where *TNR* was then published) to Brooklyn to deliver copy to the printer. Bliven had in his pocket a new political column from Frank R. Kent, a Washington correspondent of the *Baltimore Sun*. The column was to be anonymous and Bliven had puzzled over how to sign it. As he rode the lurching train and pondered his problem, his eyes fell on a placard bearing the subway name—BRT, for Brooklyn Rapid Transit. Bliven reversed the initials and signed the new column TRB. It has been a fixture in *The New Republic* ever since. Today it is one of the most widely read and respected columns of opinion in America, and is reprinted in sixty newspapers.

Frank Kent was a fighting liberal in those days. After all, he fought Prohibition and he regularly attacked Calvin Coolidge. He was a slashing writer who believed that nearly all government was bad and all bureaucrats were miserable sinners. When Franklin Roosevelt reached Washington, Kent, in the *Sun*, became one of the New Deal's most acid critics, as might be expected of a good friend of Henry Mencken.

Other writers also were called in to contribute the TRB column. Kenneth Crawford, later a columnist for *Newsweek*, was one of the notable contributors in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Then, in 1943, the young man who had left New England for Washington about the time Bliven launched the column tried his hand. It has been his ever since, except for times off for vacation, for travel, and for covering the Normandy invasion.

Every editor knows that the enthusiasm and imagination of youth make a newspaper or magazine sparkle. Richard L. Strout, who writes TRB every week on long sheets of white paper, is that youthful person. His long legs propel him about Washington every day with a speed that many of his colleagues find exhausting. Few can match his ability to digest masses of government documents and to see through every false argument. If Dick Strout has one outstanding characteristic it is his youthfulness. His enthusiasm for life and for the drama of Washington politics is as alive as it was the day he came to the city the first time. Not long ago, in the issue of February 25 [1978], he wrote one of his sprightliest columns on, of all things, the statistics he, and he alone, dug out of the President's economic report.

"There's nothing more agreeable on a winter evening than to curl up before a good fire with the tables of statistics of the president's Annual Economic Report," the column began. "Let the gale howl. Let the snow fall. I have here Table B-28." That beginning might have sent many of his readers out into the snow for a breath of fresh air. But, knowing TRB, the majority must have kept on reading. There followed a dramatic and entertaining interpretation of those figures in human terms. Dick Strout did not see the dull statistics. He saw the human beings, the farmers, the workers, the blacks, the women, whose biographies were encompassed in those figures. He found sex, humor, sadness, and hope in what he read. Did any other reporter find so much and report it with such style?

One day early in the Nixon administration, John Ehrlichman invited Strout to his office to ask for advice. Ehrlichman is a Christian Scientist who had come to appreciate Strout's factual reporting in the *Christian Science Monitor*. Strout has been working for the *Monitor* since 1921 and has been a member of its Washington bureau since 1923. He is a reporter on the *Monitor*, a commentator in *The New Republic*. Perhaps Ehrlichman did not know of the second Strout. He asked his gangling visitor with the somber eyes and bushy eyebrows what he thought the Nixon administration should make its first goal. Why, to build the kind of social democracy and equality that one finds, for example, in Sweden, Strout replied, confidently. Needless to say, the interview was short, and it was the only time the Nixon administration sought Strout's advice.

Later, when he was covering Watergate, other reporters asked Strout how it compared with Teapot Dome, his first big Washington

story. During both investigations, Strout wrote, many readers charged that the press was "carrying things too far." Many voters, he said, "shrugged and said both parties were alike and it was all just politics." But there was a crucial difference between the two scandals, he said in one TRB column. Watergate was "more disturbing and dangerous" than Teapot Dome because it was "a special kind of corruption without greed. No sex, no dollars. Just power. It doesn't strike at oil leases, it strikes at democracy." Unlike some who have seen the same sort of argument or event time and again, Strout is never blasé about the story he is covering. He sees the drama every time and reports it in a way that makes it come alive to the reader.

Long before Johnson and Nixon, Strout expressed concern about the growth of presidential power. As he once said, "there's a feeling that once you sleep in Lincoln's bed, you become deified. It's a dangerous thing." He is convinced that the presidential system is structurally muscle-bound, and he has long believed that the parliamentary system is both more effective and more responsive to the people's needs. No amount of argument has swayed him from that conviction, nor has he been persuaded that it is idle to think the United States will move from the presidential to the parliamentary system.

Another campaign of his that failed was against the televising of presidential news conferences. In 1954, when parts of the Eisenhower conference first were opened for television, Strout wrote an unusual signed article for *The New Republic*, arguing that verbatim recording of a press conference "turns what has been an extremely handy, carefully evolved, semiofficial, and unique contrivance into a theatrical performance. The press conference becomes a show. Its informal, easygoing nature is changed into a self-conscious half-hour broadcast." He argued that the informal mood that helped make it possible to pry out information would be lost "if each reporter knows that his boss, the world, and his wife will listen to what he is about to say." Now there are as many prima donnas in the press as in the United States Senate. But to argue against television's intrusion was to try to turn back the tide.

Nevertheless, Strout was right about what television would do to press conferences and to the press. Some of FDR's press conferences lasted five or ten minutes, some forty-five minutes or an hour, depending upon the questions and the news developments of the week. Now a presidential conference must fit into television's rigid schedule and

appearances often are more important than substance. On television, a president's every word is guarded; informality and give-and-take are held to a minimum, as Strout feared. Even in the Senate debate has degenerated because a senator would rather use his oratorical skills to obtain a half minute on television than to explore an issue in floor debate. "The communicating medium is television, not the ornate Senate chamber," Strout has written.

Where some writers make a complex subject more complex and even dull, Strout with his marvelous light touch and clarity engages the reader's attention. The reader quickly senses Strout's sturdy principles. His convictions have never led him to color a news story. But these convictions are strongly expressed in TRB. Today there is no more respected writer in Washington, none with more warm friends. His views have never been more pertinent or more up-to-date than now.

CARROLL KILPATRICK  
Former White House  
Correspondent for the  
*Washington Post*

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**TRB**



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THE ROOSEVELT YEARS  
[ 1943-1945 ]

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## *Strout's First Column*

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MARCH 8, 1943      I wonder how well the country understands the pessimism that broods over Washington these days? This is not merely the pathological gloom of the chronic reformer soured by the world's ills, but the considered view of the would-be optimist who hopes against hope that something worthwhile will be won from the present war, but who remembers the last one.

That Congress is now in a state of blind revolt anybody can see. When these notes appear the Seventy-eighth Congress will have been sitting two months. What is its record? Acrimony, rebellion, and, above all, disorganization. It is striking out fiercely at the president, labor, and "bureaucrats" (a "bureaucrat" is anybody you dislike), but in doing so it is not offering a constructive program of its own but is injuring the war effort. Mischief-makers like Burt Wheeler, who have kept quiet since Pearl Harbor, are making themselves leaders of the fight to prevent the army from drafting those fathers of families who are not in essential occupations. The farm bloc is so bent on keeping the hired man down on the farm that it, too, threatens to interfere with the army's plans, while it is always quite willing, of course, to upset inflation controls. Just how far these twin revolts will go is anybody's guess, but they mean, if successful, that Congress has intervened in a vital point of war strategy and taken control away from the commander in chief and the military experts.

Even more dangerous is the possibility that one of these "midterm deadlocks" is developing, which might well last until the next presidential election. Nobody has ever quite figured out how to meet this dread situation, unique to the American form of government under our constitutional separation of powers and rigid two-year elections.