
THE POLITICAL PRESIDENCY

PRACTICE OF LEADERSHIP

FROM KENNEDY THROUGH REAGAN

BARBARA KELLERMAN

The Political Presidency

PRACTICE OF LEADERSHIP

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The Political Presidency

For
Kenneth Dana Greenwald
and
Thomas Dana Greenwald

“Who are these?”
“They are my sons.”

In political activity, then, men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; and there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behavior in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion.

Michael Oakeshott

Despite many attempts at analysis, from Machiavelli to the present day, political skill has remained among the more elusive aspects of power.

Robert Dahl

What are the qualities called for by so vast and intense a range of functions? Above all, I think [the president must have] the power to handle men, the ability almost intuitively to recognize the efficient human instrument for his purpose.

Harold Laski

Preface

The idea for this book grew out of what was widely perceived to be the failure of the Jimmy Carter presidency. When President Carter left office in January, 1981, *The New York Times* ran an article with the headline: “EXPERTS SEE ’76 VICTORY AS CARTER’S BIG ACHIEVEMENT.”¹ Some of our most respected academics and journalists had concluded that his “most memorable achievement was getting elected in the first place.”

Yet, when pushed to describe Jimmy Carter’s political shortcomings, everyone came up short. Although only 34 percent of the American people expressed actual approval of his performance in office (Ford had a 53 percent approval rating when he completed his term), we nevertheless continued to describe Carter as a man of “high moral principles,” “a religious person,” and one “sympathetic to the problems of the poor.” The experts from the *Times* concurred: the man was intelligent and worked hard; he emerged from his term in the White House with his image of decency and integrity intact; and that term was, after all, four years without war or significant social unrest. In other words, even professional president-watchers were hard-pressed to pinpoint precisely why or how Jimmy Carter’s administration had failed.

Instead, they resorted to rather vague generalizations about the times or the man. One said that it was just “one of those periods when presidents tend to disappear into the woodwork.” Another volunteered about the outgoing president that he had never had that “fire-in-the-belly quality that people want in a political leader.” And still another summed up the elusive quality of the Carter collapse by stating that “it was just one of those rare moments that historians will rack their brains to understand and explain.”

In fact, the reasons for Jimmy Carter’s political failure—and it was at

least that, a *political* failure—still elude us. Lyndon Johnson was pushed into retirement by the domestic unrest resulting from what was seen to be *his* unpopular war. Richard Nixon was forced to resign because he manifestly violated his constitutional oath. Gerald Ford, it can be argued, was never really seen as more than a temporary, “substitute” president. And, to be sure, it could be said of Jimmy Carter that had it not been for the Iranian hostage crisis or high inflation, or, for that matter, had it not been for brother Billy, he might well have won a second term.

But in Carter’s case the excuses for his overwhelming defeat seem lame. For on paper at least, he was and remained the boy scout president. With his moral virtues and his intellectual skills, he was “perhaps as admirable a human being as has ever held the job.”² He embodied everything Americans normally prize: capacity, commitment, responsibility. Indeed, these virtues remained unchallenged, even after four difficult years in the White House. No one was claiming in 1980 that Carter was stupid, lazy, or dishonest.

What, then, had gone wrong? How is it that Carter was (and still is) seen to be, in some ill-defined way, inadequate as president? What was it, in short, that Carter was not?

I argue in this book that Carter conspicuously lacked the quality that is perhaps most essential to an effective presidency: political skill.

Let me explain. First, when I speak of an effective presidency, or effective presidential leadership, I am speaking here in terms of functional criteria only. I am *not* asking if the leadership was, for example, courageous, wise, or moral, or if it led the country down the proper path. I am asking only if it was effective in the sense that the president was able to accomplish what he wanted to accomplish. In particular, this book explores the president’s realized and unrealized opportunities for directive leadership. It assumes that each president, on assuming office, has policy goals that are especially important to him, and toward which he wants to lead the rest of us. Thus, some key questions in evaluating an administration will be: Was the president able to get his way when he wanted to? If so, how did he do it? And if not, why not?

More specifically, my interest is in directive leadership under routine—or non-crisis—conditions.³ Although the proposition will not be tested here, I am hypothesizing that the processes and skills that characterize directive leadership during periods of, for example, wars, depressions, or imminent nuclear threat are probably different from those that characterize routine directive leadership. One might even speculate that in America crisis leadership is easier. A crisis is massive and visible; as a widely experienced trauma, it focuses almost everyone’s concern. There is consensus that some-

thing must be done and people are relieved, grateful even, that someone is taking responsibility for acting. More often than in less threatening circumstances, people are willing out of fear, anxiety, or enhanced social responsibility, to play the part of followers. (This is especially true when the threat is an external one.)

But under more ordinary conditions—conditions in which problems abound but no single problem is so great that it threatens the welfare of the entire community—there is, typically, no consensus on what constitutes a problem, on how to define those problems that manifestly exist, or even on which of the many pressing issues should take priority. Only rarely is there broad agreement on what problems ought to be addressed, in which order, or on what constitutes solutions. In short, most of the time American presidents must attempt to lead in situations in which there is no clearly agreed-upon national—or even majority—agenda.

Second, I will not use the term “political skill” to describe what it takes to *become* president; this term will refer to one aspect of *being* president. Thus, the “followers” we are directly concerned with are not “The American People,” but those members of the political elite—Congress, for example—who will have to go along with, if not actively support, the president on each policy proposal. As a consequence, the term political skill refers to how well the president can lead or direct a relatively small and select group of people toward a particular goal.

Since directive presidential leadership is an interactive process heavily dependent on the informal use of sources of power, I believe that a president must have (1) the vision and motivation to define and articulate his agenda so as to broaden his base of support; and (2) some considerable ability to perform effectively in those interpersonal transactions necessary for bringing about his most important goals. He must engage in the persuading, bargaining, battling, compromising, co-opting, cooperating, committing, catering, and arm-twisting that is the essence of directive presidential leadership as it is defined in this book.

Other studies, notably Richard Neustadt’s classic *Presidential Power*,⁴ have explored how presidents can maximize their personal political power. Indeed, Neustadt’s work led to the formulation of several maxims that, at least implicitly, address the subject of interpersonal activity. For example: A president cannot be “above the battle, or above politics, or simply work from within the confines of his own ideas.” Or, “A sensitivity to the thoughts and feelings of others and an ability to create solutions that compromise contesting points of view are what distinguishes effective leadership from nonleadership.”⁵ This book, however, does not propose a grand strategy that presidents ought to employ. Instead, it takes a detailed look at

what it is they actually do. Specifically, which tactics have presidents used—or failed to use—to get their own way? How do they manage, on a day-to-day basis, to get others to go along even some of the time?

Because the problems and processes of presidential leadership are by no means unique to the presidential office, this book begins with a broad-based discussion of leadership and followership in America. Political leadership cannot be understood apart from history and culture, and presidential leadership is similar to other leadership roles in contemporary American society. Thus, the five chapters that constitute Part I of the book place presidential leadership squarely in the context of the American national character and political culture and join three themes to form a comprehensive theory of presidential leadership. These themes are: leadership in America as a reflection of the American national character; presidential leadership as one variant of leadership as social exchange; and, emerging from these, presidential leadership as a set of behaviors that must include personal politicking.

Part II of the book looks at the practice of presidential leadership. It consists of six case studies written in light of the theory put forth in Part I. Each of our most recent presidents is analyzed in terms of how, and how well, they participated in making their own political fortune with regard to a single policy item in which they were strongly interested. These chapters gather evidence to support the proposition that a major gap in the presidential literature is the lack of an explicit and comprehensive discussion of the critical tie between the president as effective leader and the president as effective politician.⁶

This book is not intended to be the definitive analysis of presidential leadership. Rather, it isolates and very carefully considers one key aspect of that leadership—the attempt to direct influential “followers” to new ground. But, along the way, it inevitably becomes something else as well: a contemporary exploration of the much abused Aristotelian idea that effective politics is high art.⁷

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B. K.

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I

A Theory of
Presidential Leadership

Leadership in America

I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical.

Thomas Jefferson

We wail a good deal about America's crisis of leadership, a lament that suggests a collective wish for leaders more powerful as well as more competent. Yet the course of our public life reveals a suspicion of those officials—elected or appointed—who exercise what is seen as too much political power. We undercut those who get “too big for their britches” and, more often than not, finally turn down and out officeholders who would be strong leaders—those who persist too much in defining America's goals and in pushing us hard to reach them.

The truth is that Americans have never inclined much to hero-worship, certainly not in politics. We are ambivalent about our political leaders and wary of forceful leadership in both theory and practice. Even George Washington was a controversial figure in his own lifetime—he became a demigod only in death.¹ Abraham Lincoln also had to await those who never saw him in the flesh; only in this century did we come to acknowledge his greatness.²

We seem to prefer making our heroes out of popular figures. For a long time Davy Crockett was the most important and best known candidate for national hero-worship.³ Now we give our admiration and adulation to the modern gods and goddesses of popular culture—rock stars, movie actors and actresses, and sports personalities. These acts of minor deification satisfy our wish to bestow greatness on someone other than ourselves, but not on those who may demand of us that we prove our devotion by following them politically. Of our political leaders, it may fairly be said that they engage us emotionally only rarely—for instance, in times of great national emergency, or when they are wounded or slain. Mostly, America has belied what is considered by some to be an innate need for authentic heroes and kings.⁴

It would be difficult to exaggerate the impact on our political life of this resistance to leadership, (this need to contain the authority of our leaders.)

It permeates our national traditions, customs, and ideals, and influences the character and form of our government. As much as anything else, our basic antiauthority and even antigovernment attitude defines our political culture.

The term political culture refers to those enduring and widespread ideas, habits, norms, symbols, and practices that are politically relevant, especially as they pertain to the legitimate use of power.⁵ The concept is related to what Erich Fromm calls "social character," the nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group that developed "as the result of the basic experiences and mode of life common to that group."⁶ Every nation's political culture, then, is a system peculiar unto itself that was shaped by national history and development and transmitted intergenerationally.* America's political culture with regard to leadership may be said to have three key characteristics: (1) *an antagonism toward governmental authority*; (2) *an ambivalence toward constituted leaders*; and (3) *an uncertainty about what constitutes effective and proper management in public life*.

In significant part, these characteristics grow out of our revolutionary heritage.⁷ The very fact of a revolutionary movement in America had a transforming effect on the whole "discipline and pattern" of the society. These changes gradually became an irresistible force, especially in the decade before Independence. Before 1760, Americans continued to assume that theirs was a hierarchical society in which it was natural for some to be rich and some poor, some honored and some obscure, some powerful and some weak. The assumption was that "authority would continue to exist without challenge." But, as historian Bernard Bailyn notes, "the revolution brought with it arguments and attitudes bred of arguments endlessly repeated, that undermined these premises of the *ancient regime*."⁸

There could be no clinging to the past during a decade in which defiance of the highest constituted powers "poured from the colonial presses and was hurled from half the pulpits of the land. The right, the need, the absolute obligation to *disobey legally constituted authority* had become the universal cry" (italics mine).⁹ Rather than obedience, it was now resistance that was a "doctrine according to godliness."¹⁰

The newfound distrust of authority was felt so fervently that it could scarcely be confined to politics. Religious dissent followed and spread quickly. In New England a scion of the church went so far as to deny "all human authority in matters of faith and worship."¹¹ By 1776, it was the order of the day to question, to doubt, to challenge, and to engage in overt acts of defiance, all of which were considered justifiable disobedience to authority in all sectors of the society.

*Anthropologists refer to this socialization as "enculturation."

Of course, the impact of the increasing revolutionary fervor still fell most heavily on political life. What was not at all clear, however, during the decades just before and after Independence, was whether all this heated talk of liberty, equality, and common consent could constitute the principles of a stable form of government. After all, "What reasonable social and political order could conceivably be built and maintained where authority was questioned before it was obeyed, where social differences were considered to be incidental rather than essential to community order, and where superiority, suspect in principle, was not allowed to concentrate in the hands of a few but was scattered broadly through the populace?"¹²

The answers to this question naturally varied. Some saw the revolution as "the triumph of ideas and attitudes incompatible with the stability of any standing order." Others determined that it "was only where there was this defiance, this refusal to truckle, this distrust of all authority, political or social, that institutions would express human aspirations, not crush them."¹³

The task of squaring the "basic nonconformism with the stability required by property, investment, and law"¹⁴ fell to the founding fathers. They assumed the responsibility of reconciling what seemed to be the irreconcilable strivings for both freedom and order. Not surprisingly, much of the debate centered on what was to be the highest office in the land: the presidency. The founding fathers' aversion to monarchy made the question of just how much authority would be granted the president one of the most contentious issues of the day. *The Federalist Papers*, that great collection of essays by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay in defense of the Constitution, strike at the heart of the matter. Hamilton, himself a proponent of a relatively powerful presidency ("Energy in the Executive is a leading character in the definition of good government"¹⁵), had the task of distinguishing between the president and the detested king of Great Britain. Note how even Hamilton felt obliged to point to constraints that would be placed on the holder of America's highest political office.

The President of the United States would be an office elected by the people for *four* years; the king of Great Britain is a perpetual and *hereditary* prince. The one would be amenable to personal punishment and disgrace; the person of the other is sacred and inviolable. The one would have a *qualified* negative upon the acts of the legislative body; the other has an *absolute* negative. The one would have a right to command the military and naval forces of the nation; the other, in addition to this right, possesses that of *declaring* war, and of *raising* and *regulating* fleets and armies by his own authority.¹⁶

From the beginning, Americans thought it necessary to make clear that the presidency was unlike any other office or role. Just as with every other