

THE
POSTMODERN
PRESIDENT

THE WHITE HOUSE
MEETS THE WORLD

RICHARD ROSE



The Postmodern President

The White House Meets the World

Richard Rose

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God grant us the serenity to accept things we cannot change, courage to change things we can, and wisdom to know the difference.

—Reinhold Niebuhr

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Acknowledgments

This book has been a long time in the making. I began systematic research on Presidential politics at the height of Watergate in 1974, following two decades of examining comparative politics and public policy in Europe. The initial product was a study of White House relations with the agencies, *Managing Presidential Objectives*. It was followed by *What Is Governing? Purpose and Policy in Washington*. Differences in the way democratic leaders address common problems of directing government was the theme of *Presidents and Prime Ministers*, edited with Ezra Suleiman.

In 1983 Alexander Heard, heading a study of the American presidential selection process, asked me: What difference does it make that the American President is recruited in a very different way from the leaders of other democratic nations? The four-chapter monograph written in response to his question was the stimulus for this book. Along the way a variety of articles have been published about themes considered here. My wife and my wordprocessor can each bear witness that this is a freshly written book. In carrying forward this study, it was especially helpful to be the Visiting Hinkley Professor at Johns Hopkins University immediately after the breaking of the Iran-*contra* affair. Baltimore offers a unique perspective, being outside the Washington Beltway yet making it easy to go back and forth between the world inside the Beltway and everyday American life. Useful feedback was obtained in talks about the Presidency at Yale, Princeton, George Mason, and Johns Hopkins universities, and at the Brookings Institution. Chapter 2 draws on a paper written with Robert J. Thompson.

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Ms. Isobel Rogerson and Ms Anne Shaw looked after the office, and Rosemary Rose made the index. Drew Broadley of Bureau-Graphics contributed enormously to getting this book out.

**Dedicated to
Richard E. Neustadt
Scholar, Gentleman, Democrat**

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Introduction: Approaching the White House

What does concern me in common with thinking partisans of both parties is not just winning this election, but how it is won, how well we can take advantage of this great quadrennial opportunity to debate issues sensibly and soberly.

Even more important than winning the election is governing the nation. Let's talk sense to the American people. Let's tell them the truth, that there are no gains without pains, that we are now on the eve of great decisions, not easy decisions.

—Adlai Stevenson

The easiest way to see the world closing in on the White House is to turn on the TV set. Day after day we see evidence of the impact on American life of actions elsewhere: an arms-control statement in Moscow, the kidnapping of Americans in the Middle East, and prices and jobs going up or down in response to changes in the dollar's value in Tokyo or Frankfurt. Events on the other side of the earth cannot be ignored by the President when they have a great impact on our lives. Nor can foreigners ignore what happens in Washington.

The past quarter-century has been very eventful for America, perhaps too eventful. As the central institution of American government, the years have also been eventful for the Presidency. The White House has been shocked by events in places as distant as Vietnam and Iran. It has been undermined close at hand, as in Watergate. The civil rights movement questioned generations of discrimination in the South and in the nation's capital itself. Assassins have repeatedly tried to intervene in the history of the Presidency, sometimes with success. In spite of the stresses imposed by such events, the American Constitution has maintained legitimacy and celebrated its bicentennial, a rare event in a troubled world. By contrast, the Constitution of the French Fifth Republic only dates from 1958, that of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1949, and Japan from 1947.

If a President is judged by responsiveness to public opinion and effectiveness in policymaking, then Ronald Reagan's four immediate predecessors have fallen short on one or both counts. Three Presidents have left office because they could not respond satisfactorily to the public. Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford were rejected by the electorate, and Lyndon Johnson did not run

for reelection in 1968 because of domestic opposition to the Vietnam war. Richard Nixon won two elections, but suffered military defeats in Southeast Asia, inflation at home, and violations of the criminal law within the White House. John F. Kennedy was not in office long enough to leave a record that can be fully evaluated, but he was there long enough to learn that "the problems are much more difficult than I had imagined them to be" (quoted in Hirschfield, 1973: 134).

The postmodern President is not under pressure because American government has become weaker; the challenge arises because other countries have grown stronger. America is richer today than it was a quarter-century ago, and the armed forces are equipped with weapons that were then only visionary. But European countries and Japan have grown much richer, and oil-producing nations have grown rich by exploiting their natural resources. The vast populations of the Soviet Union and China have been mobilized into commanding military forces. Leaders of these countries see that America's President still stands tall. But foreign leaders can also stand tall. They want to advance their national aims, cooperating with the White House if appropriate or opposing the White House if necessary.

The Postmodern President

In two centuries, America has had three different Presidencies: a traditional President who had little to do; a modern President who had a lot to do at home and abroad; and a postmodern President who may have too much expected of him. As the world changes, our ideas must change, or we will become confused by applying the standards of one era to a different one. A modern President would not think of wearing a powdered wig, even though George Washington did so.

The traditional Presidency was designed two centuries ago to protect the American people against the abuses of an autocratic monarch and to guard against the emergence of an elected despot. For a century and a half, the White House was an office in a system of separated powers in which Congress and the Supreme Court each acted as a check on the Presidency and Congress was the leading branch. The traditional Presidency was not a driving force in government; with occasional exceptions, it was a dignified office of state.

The modern Presidency was created by Franklin D. Roosevelt's response to the depression of the 1930s. Although Roosevelt was not the first occupant of the Oval Office of the White House to believe in an active Presidency, he was the first to be an active leader in peacetime. To support his leadership, Roosevelt began the practice of appealing to the public for support through the new medium of radio broadcasting. Few Americans

ever saw or heard the voice of Abraham Lincoln or Woodrow Wilson, but FDR's fireside chats made his voice familiar to every voter. America's involvement in World War II made President Roosevelt an international leader too. President Harry Truman placed America's world role on a permanent basis, deciding to drop the atomic bomb on Japan, and after 1945, committing American troops to the defense of places as far apart as Berlin and Korea. Because other nations were then devastated by war or had never been industrial powers, the modern President's eminence was at first a solitary eminence.

The military and economic eminence of America after 1945 resulted in American *hegemony* in the international system, that is, the United States was the dominant nation influencing what happened around the globe (cf. Keohane, 1984; Gilpin, 1987). The mobilization of American arms to contain the Soviet Union had a great impact because of America's vast population, double that of Japan and four times that of Britain, France, or Germany. The impact was enhanced by the development of new and increasingly sophisticated weapons' systems. Whereas the Soviet Union is also a military superpower and Japan is also an economic superpower, only the United States has been both a military and economic superpower. American money stimulated the economies of Europe and Asia, and products such as IBM computers, Xerox machines, and Coca-Cola penetrated every corner of the earth. U. S. policies sought to secure mutual defense and worldwide economic growth: "For Americans it was the ideal outcome: one could do well by doing good" (Russett, 1985: 228).

The difference between the modern and the postmodern Presidency is that a postmodern President can no longer dominate the international system. President Carter and President Reagan have each appeared as helpless victims of forces abroad: oil-exporting nations, foreign armies, small bands of terrorists, and bankers and businessmen profiting from problems of the American economy. *Interdependence* characterizes an international system in which no nation is the hegemonic power. The President is the leader of a very influential nation, but other nations are influential too. In an interdependent world, what happens in the United States depends on what happens in other countries as well as what happens at home. For example, if America is to increase its exports, then other countries must increase their imports. The line between domestic and international politics is dissolving.

While the White House is accustomed to influencing foreign nations, the postmodern President must accept something less appealing: Other nations can now influence what the White House achieves. Whereas the Constitution made Congress and the Supreme Court the chief checks on the traditional and the modern President, the chief constraints on the postmodern President are found in other nations. The White House depends on the cooperation of the Kremlin to deter nuclear war and for agreement in arms-control negotiations. It makes a big difference to the White House whether the Soviet Union

pursues a policy of *glasnost* or aggression. The White House looks to the Japanese government to act to reduce the American trade deficit, and it looks to the German central bank, the Bundesbank, to boost demand in Europe for American exports. When the President looks to the Middle East, he must wonder what next will disrupt White House hopes for stability in a region where instability is endemic.

Although America remains a world power, it is no longer the dominant power that it once was. The White House has not lost Britain or Germany or Japan, for these independent countries never belonged to the United States. Each remains an ally, but the terms of the relationship have changed. American support for other nations' development has met with such success that countries dependent on the United States shortly after World War II are now major players in the international system. As the United States becomes more integrated in the international system, it becomes more like other nations. America is no longer isolated geographically, as in the days of the traditional Presidency, or isolated by the preeminence of its power, as in the era of the modern Presidency.

In an interdependent world a President cannot always do what he wants, because policies cannot always be stamped *Made in America*.^{*} A ruler with unchallenged authority could assume that to govern is to choose. A postmodern President must start from the assumption: *To govern is to cooperate*. A President has always needed to cooperate with Congress in order to succeed in a constitutional system that separates powers. What is novel is that a postmodern President must cooperate with foreign governments to achieve major economic and national security goals. Cooperation requires a mutuality of interests between nations. If this is lacking, then a postmodern President can face stalemate abroad, just as he can face stalemate in Congress. As Reinhold Niebuhr notes, the President requires strength to change those things that American government can change and a stoic sense to accept what he cannot change. Above all, a President needs the wisdom to tell the difference between what can be changed and what must be accepted.

If a postmodern President does not adapt to changes in the international system, then he is doomed to fail at home as well as abroad. The rise of other nations to economic and military power presents greater challenges to the postmodern President, and lessens the capacity of America to influence international outcomes. Whereas a modern President had international influence consistent with his responsibilities, a postmodern President does not. Hence political commentators have shifted from worrying about the Imperial Presidency, deemed too powerful for the nation's good, to worrying about an imperiled Presidency, too weak for the nation's good.

^{*}Presidents are referred to as he, since every President has been a male, while countries as diverse as Britain, India, Israel, and Norway have had women as national leaders. To refer to Presidents by the phrase "he or she" would convey a misleading impression of gender equality.

The leading contemporary scholar of the Presidency, Richard E. Neustadt (1980: xi, 241), has asked: "Is the Presidency possible?" His answer is not encouraging: "Weakness is what I see." The standard for presidential success that Neustadt (1980: 210) offers is challenging but not impossible: A "minimally effective" President should match the achievements of President Truman; he adds that there is "nothing high-and-mighty about that." If Truman's achievement is taken as the standard for the Presidency, three-quarters of the country's leaders fall below this mark, in the judgment of historians (figure 13.3). It is particularly worrisome that historians do not rate any occupant of the White House as having reached this standard since Truman left office in 1953.

It is right to worry about the capacity of the President, for the man in the White House is not an ordinary officeholder. The President is unique in his claim to political authority; he alone is elected by the nation as a whole. Lincoln's idea of government by the people is simply not practical. When America has a population of 240 million people, big decisions about the economy and foreign policy cannot be taken in a New England-style town meeting. Nor can 535 congressmen give clear and coherent direction to government, individually or collectively. The job of a congressman is to represent his or her district in Washington. The job of the President is to represent the whole of the nation in an uncertain and sometimes hostile world.

The concern of this book is not with looking backward into history, but with history read forward. To look back longingly to a world in which the President stood as a colossus is to default on our obligations to the future. We are much closer to the twenty-first century than we are to the days of George Washington, Franklin D. Roosevelt, or John F. Kennedy. By the middle of the next century it will be easy to assess the successes and failures of the person inaugurated as Ronald Reagan's successor on 20 January 1989. Reading history forward is a challenge to understand under what conditions and to what extent a postmodern President can succeed in an international system in which he is not the only leader who counts, because America is not the only nation that counts.

An Overview

The success of the postmodern President depends on cooperation with leaders of other nations. This does not mean that a President can ignore public opinion or congressional opinion. It emphasizes that what the public and Congress think of the President depends, at least in part, on what the Japanese Ministry of Finance, the Kremlin, and diverse political forces in the Middle East think of the President. Any one of them can make the White

House look bad by imposing economic burdens or military setbacks on the United States. In an interdependent world, the President cannot avoid dealing with leaders in other nations; the question is whether the President plays his cards well or badly.

The biggest problem of the postmodern President is: *What it takes to become President has nothing to do with what it takes to be President.* A postmodern President must focus on complex economic, diplomatic, and military problems in the international system. But anyone who wants to be elected to the White House today must start campaigning years before a Presidential election is held. Instead of focusing on international problems, attention must be directed to parochial concerns of the counties of Iowa, where the first primary caucus is held, and of voters in New Hampshire, where a critical primary ballot is held. To win nomination for the Presidency requires great campaign skill and endurance. But it says nothing about the candidate's capacity to deal with the problems of an interdependent world in which the dollar is suspect, and friends and foes are not so easy to identify as once was the case.

An even more troubling prospect must be faced: *What it takes to become President actually makes it more difficult to be a successful postmodern President.* The demands of the campaign trail are such that in 1988 the Democratic party had difficulty in attracting respected Democratic leaders to enter the race. A contemporary presidential candidate is expected to demonstrate to voters that he cares about their views, and to the media that he has a chance of winning the nomination. Success in doing this is no proof that a candidate understands anything about the dollar in a volatile international economy, or about the troublespots that threaten national security. Years of campaigning have a high opportunity cost. A politician who dedicates his time to pressing the flesh on the campaign trail has little or no time to think about what he would do if he won the White House.

Personal character is important in determining who is nominated and elected President; compare the troubles of Gary Hart's candidacy or Senator Edward Kennedy's decision not to make the race for the nomination, with the ability of Ronald Reagan to smile through many problems. But the choice of President should not be reduced to a personality contest. Attempts have been made to apply insights from clinical psychology and personality theory to predict whether or not a President will be successful, but it is very difficult to relate differences in the personalities of Presidents with their performance in office (cf. Barber, 1972; Buchanan, 1987; Tulis, 1981). For example, by any conventional psychological standard, Abraham Lincoln was an oddball, but Lincoln was nonetheless a great President. To erect a superhuman standard for judging Presidents is to doom every White House occupant to failure. Since the typical President is likely to achieve some successes and some failures, his ups and downs are difficult to explain as the simple reflection of personality, which is a constant.

The immediate problem of a President is not what to do in his private life, but what to do about public issues that press on the Oval Office from the day he arrives. Jimmy Carter entered office with the simple belief that policy choices were between doing what was right or wrong, but found that presidential politics is about reconciling competing definitions of what is good. Lyndon Johnson entered office with a down-to-earth view that presidential ends justified any political means. The fundamental issue is not the personality of the President, but how he performs in office.

This book starts from the assumption that the Presidency can be understood only in terms of politics *and* government. Most studies of the Presidency concentrate on a single aspect of the Oval Office, such as the President's appeal to the electorate, his relations with Congress, the use of the media, or problems of managing White House staff. These concerns are means to the end of public policy. Although a President can never stop thinking about politics, neither can a President ignore the fiscal limits of the American economy or the impact of other nations on the success of a President's foreign policy.

The postmodern Presidency can be understood only by examining both the politics and the policy concerns of the White House. A public policy approach judges a President's success by what he does, as well as by how he deals with public opinion and with Washington. To succeed, a President must be effective as well as responsive. Responsiveness to the electorate is necessary if the authority of a President is to rest on the consent of the governed, a fundamental requirement of democracy. A President must be judged by the actual impact of his policies as well as by what he would like to do. Effectiveness is necessary if a nation's leader is to do more than declare good intentions. When push comes to shove, the test of a President is whether he acts effectively. The oath that the President takes to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States" commits him to be effective in upholding the fundamentals of sovereignty: national independence in a troubled world, and the prerequisites of a sound economy (Rose, 1976a). Whereas a traditional President could be effective by doing little at home or abroad, a postmodern President can be effective only by acting in the international system.

Chapters of the Book

The first part of this study describes what the postmodern Presidency is, the imperatives for action in the White House, the standards for assessing the performance of Presidents, and how the Presidency differs from other forms of democratic government. In the second part, the tangible and intangible resources of the Presidency are analyzed. On close inspection, some of these resources turn out to be limitations. The third section considers the way in which economic problems and national security issues are dealt with in Washington and in an international system that America can no longer

dominate. The concluding section evaluates how the American people judge a President, and how other countries view the Oval Office as the world closes in on the White House.

While the evolution from the traditional to the modern Presidency took a century, the shift from the modern to the postmodern Presidency has occurred within two decades. The transition to a world in which the President must bargain with leaders of other nations has occurred so abruptly that some presidential candidates have yet to notice it. Yet even the briefest consideration of America's position in the world economy makes it clear that the days are gone when President Kennedy could pledge that America would pay any price to lead the world. Chapter 1 describes the evolution of the Presidency from its traditional foundations and what this means when America is not the only elephant in the system. A President now cooperates and competes with other elephants to succeed in the Oval Office.

A postmodern President must respond to three different imperatives. To exercise influence within a system of separated powers, a President must go Washington, that is, learn how to bargain with congressmen, bureaucrats, and interest-group representatives who can make or break his policy initiatives. Going public is a second imperative; after an arduous campaign for election the President must continue campaigning for popular support for himself and his policies. Going international is the third imperative, involving bargaining with foreigners on whose cooperation the President depends for success in foreign and economic policy. Chapter 2 considers how the President may deal with each imperative on its own or simultaneously try to take charge of public opinion in Washington and the international system.

Because the President is a political figure, assessments vary about the proper role for the President; one school of thought favors an expansive role and another a more limited role. There is controversy about the direction in which a President leads: Those who approve of Ronald Reagan's policies are likely to disapprove of Lyndon Johnson's policies, and vice versa. Chapter 3 shows how an active President is praised as a leader if his policies are approved, but attacked as an overmighty Imperial President if his policies are disliked. A President who defines his role narrowly is praised as an exemplar of stoic virtue, if this fits with the political outlook of the evaluator, or criticized as imperiled if the President is thought to be too inactive. Assessments of a postmodern President need to consider how other nations respond to the President's efforts to take charge in the international system, influencing whether a President appears as a world leader, vulnerable, isolated, or a global failure.

Although the Presidency is regarded as normal in America, it is not the normal form of democratic government. Most democratic nations have a parliamentary system. The differences between the American system and the parliamentary system are set out in chapter 4. The American Constitution makes the Presidency one of three separate powers in Washington. By