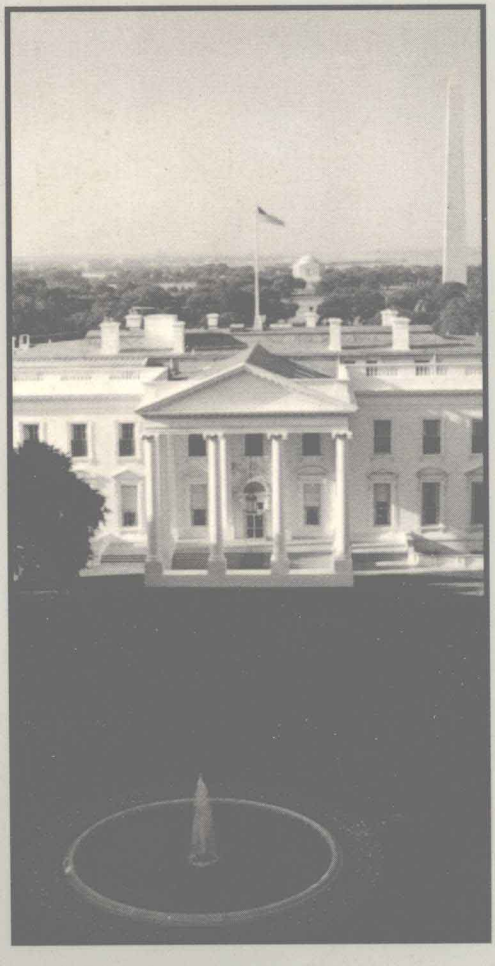
THE PRESIDENCY & THE POLITICAL SYSTEM



FIFTH EDITION

MICHAEL NELSON

The Presidency and the Political System

FIFTH EDITION

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To my beloved wife, Linda.

She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. . . .
Her children rise up and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her.

PROVERBS 31:26, 28

Preface

One of the things that makes political science so interesting is that its subject (pithily described by the political scientist Harold D. Lasswell as "who gets what, when, and how") refuses to stand still. In the field of international relations, multinational organizations rise and empires fall. In comparative politics, new institutions and practices develop in the world's nearly 200 countries with astonishing frequency. In political philosophy, novel understandings of age-old concerns such as justice, community, and rights are offered and debated in virtually every issue of every journal.

The American political system, with its focus on the presidency, is as much a moving target for its students and teachers as any other in the discipline. Consider just a few of the developments of the three years since this book's fourth edition was published: the Republicans' capture of Congress for the first time in nearly half a century, the steep decline and ascent in the political fortunes of President Bill Clinton, and Clinton's reelection as the first two-term Democratic president since Franklin D. Roosevelt. In addition, the recent and historically unusual pattern of divided government, in which the presidency is controlled by one political party and Congress by another, has both continued and been altered since the 1994 elections: a Democratic Congress and a Republican president, the rule for all but four years from 1968 to 1992, has been supplanted by a Republican Congress and a Democratic president.

All of these political developments and more, along with the new contributions to the flourishing scholarly literature on the presidency and the political system that they have inspired, are treated fully in this fifth edition. The chapters, all of which were written expressly for this book, have been updated by the authors, in many cases very extensively, since the fourth edition. A new chapter on second-term presidents has been added. The book's twenty chapters are organized into five parts: Approaches to the Presidency, Elements of Presidential Power, Presidential Selection, Presidents and Politics, and Presidents and Government.

Yet to note that the authors have taken recent developments into account is not to say that this is a "current events" book—far from it. The presidency is an

office with deep roots in history, shaped powerfully by decisions that were made at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, and by more than two centuries of change in the system since its founding. It also is shaped by the history and current functioning of the other myriad parts of the American political system, such as interest groups, the media, public opinion, the electoral process, the party system, Congress, the courts, and the bureaucracy. This broader understanding of the presidency underlies all of the analyses of more recent events that the authors present.

I do not agree with everything that every author has to say in this book; nor will any reader. But together the contributors constitute an all-star team of presidential scholars, and their chapters' intellectual substance is fully matched by their readability. Through four previous editions, this book has been widely assigned in courses and widely cited and reviewed in scholarly books and articles. Students may be assured of receiving the most comprehensive possible understanding of the presidency, and scholars will continue to find the essays valuable in conducting their research.

I am deeply grateful to those who have helped in the writing of this fifth edition, the authors first and foremost. Susan Sullivan and Jean Woy, formerly of Congressional Quarterly, and Erwin C. Hargrove of Vanderbilt University helped me to think through the themes and organization of the first edition, and Barbara de Boinville served as a capable and gracious editor. Joanne Daniels, Nola Healy Lynch, and Tracy White contributed mightily to the second edition, as did Nancy Lammers, Kristen Carpenter Stoever, and Ann O'Malley to the third. For their excellent work on this fifth edition, as well as on the fourth, I am grateful to Brenda Carter, Joanne Ainsworth, and Talia Greenberg.

Michael Nelson

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Contents

Part I Approaches to the Presidency

1 Evaluating the Presidency

Michael Nelson

First impressions are important in politics. Numerous studies of political socialization have found that long before children have any real knowledge of what the federal government actually does, they already think of the president in terms of almost limitless power and goodness. In this chapter, Michael Nelson uncovers powerful traces of these first impressions in the later impressions of politically aware adults. Presidential scholars, White House correspondents, average citizens, members of Congress, and civil servants working in the federal bureaucracy—each of these important constituencies may seem at first blush to hold attitudes that are detrimental to presidential power. Closer inspection, however, reveals that each group's surface judgments overlie more fundamental orientations toward politics that exalt presidential power.

The November 1, 1948, issue of *Life* magazine is a collector's item because of a picture on page 37 that is captioned, "The next president travels by ferry over the broad waters of San Francisco bay." (The picture is of Thomas E. Dewey.) Of greater significance, however, is an article that begins on page 65 called "Historians Rate U.S. Presidents." The article was written by Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., who had called on fifty-five of his fellow historians to grade each president as either "great," "near great," "average," "below average," or a "failure." When Schlesinger tallied up the results, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Andrew Jackson scored as great presidents, Ulysses S. Grant and Warren G. Harding were rated as failures, and the rest fell in between.

As interesting as the Schlesinger evaluations and their many imitators are, the important lessons to be learned from them may be more about the judges than their judgments, more about the presidency than about the presidents. What standards do scholars use to evaluate presidents? What image of the presidency do they measure the Lincolns and Hardings, the Reagans and

Clintons, against? What standards for evaluation do other important judges of the presidency use: journalists, citizens, members of Congress, bureaucrats?

Answering these questions can tell us a lot, not only about the presidency's evaluators, but also about the presidency itself.[1] Presidents, after all, want the "verdict of history" that scholars eventually render to be favorable. In the short run, they need to win the support of journalists, the mass public, and congressional and bureaucratic officeholders if they are to succeed. To do so, presidents must understand the standards of evaluation that these groups apply to them.

Scholars: Strength amid Confusion

Schlesinger followed his 1948 survey of historians with another in 1962. The results were strikingly similar: the same pair of "failures" and, with the single exception of Jackson, the same set of "greats." More important, so were the twin standards that historians in the late 1940s and early 1960s appeared to be measuring presidents against: strength and the desire to be strong. "Washington apart," Schlesinger wrote, "none of [the great presidents] waited for the office to seek the man; they pursued it with all their might and main." Once in office, their greatness was established because "every one of [them] left the Executive branch stronger and more influential than he found it." When dealing with Congress, they knew "when to reason and to browbeat, to bargain and stand firm, . . . and when all else failed, they appealed over the heads of the lawmakers to the people." Nor did the great presidents shy away from confrontations with the Supreme Court. They were, to be sure, inattentive to administration of the bureaucracy, but this freed them, according to Schlesinger, for the more important tasks of "moral leadership."[2] A 1968 survey by Gary Maranell not only confirmed Schlesinger's conclusion that "strength" and "activeness" were important criteria in the historians' model of the presidency but also found that "idealism" and "flexibility" were not.[3]

The historians' model was very much like that of the other group of scholars who write and talk about the presidency, political scientists.[4] Their view in the 1950s and 1960s was summed up nicely in the title of an article by Thomas Cronin: "Superman: Our Textbook President."[5] After reviewing dozens of American government textbooks written in those two decades, Cronin found that political scientists characterized the presidency as both omnipotent and benevolent. The idea that strength and goodness go hand in hand shone through, for example, in James MacGregor Burns's textbook assessment that "the stronger we make the Presidency, the more we strengthen democratic proce-

dures."[6] It also animated the most influential book on the presidency of this period, *Presidential Power*. "A president's success" in maximizing power, wrote its author, Richard Neustadt, "serves objectives far beyond his own and his party's. . . . Presidential influence contributes to the energy of the government and to the viability of public policy. . . . What is good for the country is good for the president, and *vice versa*."[7]

Underlying the political scientists' model was a quasi-religious awe of the presidency. Clinton Rossiter began his book *The American Presidency* by confessing his "feeling of veneration, if not exactly reverence, for the authority and dignity of the presidency." He described Lincoln as "the martyred Christ of democracy's passion play" and quoted favorably the "splendid judgment" of the English radical political leader John Bright in 1861 that

> there is nothing more worthy of reverence and obedience, and nothing more sacred, than the authority of the freely chosen magistrate of a great and free people; and if there be on earth and amongst men any right divine to govern, surely it rests with a ruler so chosen and so appointed.[8]

Herman Finer was equally reverent, although in a polytheistic way. Finer characterized the presidency not only as "the incarnation of the American people in a sacrament resembling that in which the wafer and the wine are seen to be the body and blood of Christ" but also as "belong[ing] rightfully to the offspring of a titan and Minerva husbanded by Mars."[9]

Thus, strength and the desire to be strong, power and virtue, omnipotence and benevolence—all were tied in with each other in what may be called (only half facetiously) the "Savior" model of the presidency. According to the model's underlying rationale, the president is the chief guardian of the national interest, not only in foreign policy (because no one else can speak and act for the nation), but also in domestic affairs because of the pluralistic structure of government and society. Members of Congress cater to wealthy and influential interests within their constituencies, it was argued, but the president can mobilize the unorganized and inarticulate and speak for national majorities against special interest groups.

Clearly, scholars' normative preference for presidential strength in the 1950s and 1960s had more to it than their value judgments about the proper distribution of power among the branches of government. It was rooted in their liberal policy preferences as well. Democratic historians outnumbered Republicans by two to one in the Schlesinger samples, for example. One of the reasons they found the strength of the presidents they labeled "great" so appealing