RICHARD NEUSTADT

From Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents

From this often-read book comes the classic concept of presidential power as "the power to persuade." Richard Neustadt observed the essence of presidential power when working in the executive branch during Franklin Roosevelt's term as president. He stayed to serve under President Truman. It is said that President Kennedy brought Presidential Power with him to the White House, and Neustadt worked briefly for JFK. The first half of the excerpt, in which he shows how presidents' well-developed personal characteristics permit successful persuasive abilities, comes from the book's first edition. The excerpt's closing pages reflect Neustadt's later musings on the nation, on world affairs, and on the challenges presidents face.

In the early summer of 1952, before the heat of the campaign, President [Harry] Truman used to contemplate the problems of the general-become-President should [Dwight David] Eisenhower win the forthcoming election. "He'll sit here," Truman would remark (tapping his desk for emphasis), "and he'll say, 'Do this! Do that!' And nothing will happen. Poor Ike—it won't be a bit like the Army. He'll find it very frustrating."

Eisenhower evidently found it so. "In the face of the continuing dis­sidence and disunity, the President sometimes simply exploded with exasperation," wrote Robert Donovan in comment on the early months of Eisenhower's first term. "What was the use, he demanded to know, of his trying to lead the Republican Party...." And this reaction was not limited to early months alone, or to his party only. "The President still feels," an Eisenhower aide remarked to me in 1958, "that when he's decided something, that ought to be the end of it... and when it bounces back undone or done wrong, he tends to react with shocked surprise."

Truman knew whereof he spoke. With "resignation" in the place of "shocked surprise," the aide's description would have fitted Truman. The former senator may have been less shocked than the former general, but he was no less subjected to that painful and repetitive experience: "Do this, do that, and nothing will happen." Long before he came to talk of Eisenhower he had put his own experience in other words: "I sit here all day trying to persuade people to do the things they ought to have sense
enough to do without my persuading them. That's all the powers of the President amount to.

In these words of a President, spoken on the job, one finds the essence of the problem now before us: "powers" are no guarantee of power; clerkship is no guarantee of leadership. The President of the United States has an extraordinary range of formal powers, of authority in statute law and in the Constitution. Here is testimony that despite his "powers" he does not obtain results by giving orders—or not, at any rate, merely by giving orders. He also has extraordinary status, ex officio, according to the customs of our government and politics. Here is testimony that despite his status he does not get action without argument. Presidential power is the power to persuade. . . .

The limits on command suggest the structure of our government. The Constitutional Convention of 1787 is supposed to have created a government of "separated powers." It did nothing of the sort. Rather, it created a government of separated institutions sharing powers. I am part of the legislative process," Eisenhower often said in 1959 as a reminder of his veto. Congress, the dispenser of authority and funds, is no less part of the administrative process. Federalism adds another set of separated institutions. The Bill of Rights adds others. Many public purposes can only be achieved by voluntary acts of private institutions; the press, for one, in Douglas Cater's phrase, is a "fourth branch of government." And with the evening of alliances abroad, the separate institutions of a London, or a Bonn, share in the making of American public policy.

What the Constitution separates our political parties do not combine. The parties are themselves composed of separated organizations sharing public authority. The authority consists of nominating powers. Our national parties are confederations of state and local party institutions, with a headquarters that represents the White House, more or less, if the party has a President in office. These confederacies manage presidential nominations. All other public offices depend upon electorates confined within the states. All other nominations are controlled within the states. The President and congressmen who bear one party's label are divided by dependence upon different sets of voters. The differences are sharpest at the stage of nomination. The White House has too small a share in nominating congressmen, and Congress has too little weight in nominating presidents for party to erase their constitutional separation. Party links are stronger than is frequently supposed, but nominating processes assure the separation.

The separateness of institutions and the sharing of authority prescribe the terms on which a President persuades. When one man shares author-

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The power to persuade is the power to bargain. Status and authority yield bargaining advantages. But in a government of "separated institutions sharing powers," they yield them to all sides. With the array of vantage points at his disposal, a President may be far more persuasive than his logic or his charm could make him. But outcomes are not guaranteed by his advantages. There remain the counter pressures those whom he would influence can bring to bear on him from vantage points at their disposal. Command has limited utility; persuasion becomes give-and-take. It is well that the White House holds the vantage points it does. In such a business any President may need them all—and more. ...

When a President confronts divergent policy advisers, disputing experts, conflicting data, and uncertain outlooks, yet must choose, there plainly are some other things he can do for himself besides consulting his own power stakes. But there is a proviso—provided he has done that first and keeps clear in his mind how much his prospects may depend on his authority, how much on reputation, how much on public standing. In the world Reagan inhabited where reputation and prestige are far more intertwined than they had been in Truman's time, or even LBJ's, this proviso is no easy test of presidential expertise. It calls for a good ear and a fine eye. ...

But when a President turns to others, regardless of the mode, he is dependent on their knowledge, judgment, and good will. If he turns essentially to one, alone, he puts a heavy burden on that other's knowledge. If he chooses not to read or hear details, he puts an even greater burden on the other's judgment. If he consents, besides to secrecy from everyone whose task in life is to protect his flanks, he courts deep trouble. Good will should not be stretched beyond endurance. In a system characterized by separated institutions sharing powers, where presidential interests will diverge in some degree from those of almost everybody else, that suggests not stretching very far. ...

Personally, I prefer Presidents ... more skeptical than trustful, more curious than committed, more nearly Roosevelts than Reagans. I think the former energize our governmental system better and bring out its defects less than do the latter. Reagan's years did not persuade me otherwise, in spite of his appeal on other scores. Every scandal in his wake, for instance, must owe something to the narrow range of his convictions and the breadth of his incuriosity, along with all that trust. A President cannot abolish bad behavior, but he sets a tone, and if he is alert to possibilities he can set traps, and with them limits. Reagan's tone, apparently, was heard by all too many as "enrich yourselves," while those few traps deregulation spared appear to have been sprung and left unblunted for the most part. But this book has not been written to expound my personal preferences. Rather it endeavors to expose the problem for a President of either sort who seeks to buttress prospects for his future influence while making present choices—"looking toward tomorrow from today," as I wrote at the start. For me that remains a crucial enterprise. It is not, of course, the only thing a President should put his mind to, but it is the subject to which I have put my own throughout this book. It remains crucial, in my view, not simply for the purposes of Presidents, but also for the products of the system, whether effective policy, or flawed or none. Thus it becomes crucial for us all.

We now stand on the threshold of a time in which those separated institutions, Congress and the President, share powers fully and uncontrollably across the board of policy, both foreign and domestic. From the 1940s through the 1960s—"midcentury" in this book's terms—Congress, having been embarrassed at Pearl Harbor by the isolationism it displayed beforehand, gave successive Presidents more scope in defense budgeting and in the conduct of diplomacy toward Europe and Japan than was the norm between the two world wars. Once the Cold War had gotten under way, and then been largely militarized after Korea, that scope widened. With the onset of the missile age it deepened. Should nuclear war impose, the President became the system's final arbiter. Thus I characterized JFK against the background of the Cuban missile crisis. But by 1975 the denouement of Watergate and that of Vietnam, eight months apart, had put a period to what remained of congressional reticence left over from Pearl Harbor. And the closing of the Cold War, now in sight though by no means achieved, promises an end to nuclear danger as between the Soviet Union and the United States. Threats of nuclear attack could well remain, from Third World dictators or terrorists, but not destruction of the Northern Hemisphere. So in the realm of military preparations—even, indeed, covert actions—the congressional role waxes as the Cold War wanes, returning toward normality as understood in Franklin Roosevelt's first two terms. In a multipolar world, crisscrossed by transnational relations, with economic and environmental issues paramount, and issues of security reshaped on regional lines, our Presidents will less and less have reason to seek solace in foreign relations from the piled-up frustrations of home affairs. Their foreign frustrations will be piled high too.

Since FDR, in wartime, every President including Bush has found the role of superpower sovereign beguiling: personal responsibility at once
direct and high, issues at once gripping and arcane, opposite numbers
frequently intriguing and well-mannered, acclaim by foreign audiences
echoing well at home, foreign travel relatively glamorous, compared with
home, interest groups less clamorous, excepting special cases, authority
always stronger, Congress often tamer. But the distinctions lessen—com­
pare Bush's time with Nixon's to say nothing of Eisenhower's—and we
should expect that they will lessen further. Telecommunications, trade, aid,
banking and stock markets combined with AIDS and birth control and
hunger, topped off by toxic waste and global warming—these are not the
stuff of which the Congress of Vienna* was made, much less the sum­
mits of yore. Moreover, Europeans ten years hence, as well as Japanese,
may not resemble much the relatively acquiescent "middle powers" we
grew used to in the 1960s and 1970s. Cooperating with them may come
to seem to President no easier than cooperating with Congress. Our
friends abroad will see it quite the other way around. How are they to
cooperate with our peculiar mix of separated institutions sharing powers?
Their are ordered governments, ours a rat race. Complaints of us by oth­
eres in these terms are nothing new. They have been rife throughout this
century. But by the next, some of the chief complainants may have fewer
needs of us, while ours of them grow relatively greater, that at any other
time since World War II. In that case foreign policy could cease to be a
source of pleasure for a President. By the same token, he or she would
have to do abroad as on the Hill and in Peoria: Check carefully the pos­
sible effects of present choices on prospective reputation and prestige—
thinking of other governments and publics quite as hard as those at home.
It is not just our accustomed NATO and Pacific allies who may force the
pace here, but the Soviet Union, if it holds together, and potentially great
powers—China, India, perhaps Brazil—as well as our neighbors, north
and south.

From the multicentered, interdependent world now coming into be­
ing, environmentally endangered as it is, Presidents may look back on the
Cold War as an era of stability, authority, and glamour. They may yearn for
the simplicity they see in retrospect, and also for the solace. Too bad. The
job of being President is tougher when incumbents have to struggle for
effective influence in foreign and domestic spheres at once, with their

*After the 1814 defeat of the French leader Napoleon by Russia, Prussia, Austria, and Russia,
these great powers met in Vienna, Austria, to ensure that the future of Europe would be
peaceful. At the Congress of Vienna, they created a "balance of power" system so that no
single European nation could dominate the continent.—Eos.

command of nuclear forces losing immediate relevance, and the American
economy short of its former clout. There are, however, compensations,
one in particular. If we outlive the Cold War,* the personal responsibility
attached to nuclear weapons should become less burdensome for Presi­
dents themselves, while contemplation of their mere humanity becomes
less haunting for the rest of us. To me that seems a fair exchange.

*The Cold War refers to the hostility that existed between the United States and the Soviet
Union from the end of World War II until recent times. The Cold War involved many
forms of hostility: democracy versus communism, American NATO allies versus the Soviet
Union’s Warsaw Pact military partners; the threat of nuclear war; economic competition; the
division of Third World nations into pro-U.S. and pro-Soviet camps. With the demise of
Communism in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Cold War
era has ended.—Eos.