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The United States as a nation of paradoxes is a theme frequently used to explain the contradictions found throughout American life. In an earlier selection, Michael Kammen called Americans "people of paradox." Here, political scientists Thomas Cronin and Michael Genovese use the concept of paradox to explore the many images that citizens hold of their president. Each image they describe is accompanied by a contrary image. For example, Cronin and Genovese note, the president is supposed to be an average person just like us, while simultaneously being outstanding and extraordinary. With such paradoxical expectations of a president, is it any wonder that Americans judge the executive so harshly?

The mind searches for answers to the complexities of life. We often gravitate toward simple explanations for the world's mysteries. This is a natural way to try and make sense out of a world that seems to defy understanding. We are uncomfortable with contradictions so we reduce reality to understandable simplifications. And yet, contradictions and clashing expectations are part of life. "No aspect of society, no habit, custom, movement, development, is without cross-currents," says historian Barbara Tuchman. "Starving peasants in hovels live alongside prosperous landlords in featherbeds. Children are neglected and children are loved. In life we are confronted with paradoxes for which we seek meaning."

The same is true for the American presidency. We admire presidential power yet fear it. We yearn for the heroic, yet are also inherently suspicious of it. We demand dynamic leadership, yet grant only limited powers to the president. We want presidents to be dispassionate analysts and listeners, yet they must also be decisive. We are impressed with presidents who have great self-confidence, yet we dislike arrogance and respect those who express reasonable self-doubt.

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Today the informal and symbolic powers of the presidency account for as much as the formal, stated ones. Presidential powers expand and contract in response to varying situational and technological changes. The powers of the presidency are thus interpreted so differently that they sometimes seem to be those of different offices. In some ways the modern presidency has virtually unlimited authority for almost anything its occupant chooses to do with it. In other ways, a president seems hopelessly ensnared in a web of checks and balances.

Presidents and presidential candidates must constantly balance conflicting demands, cross pressures, and contradictions. It is characteristic of the American mind to hold contradictory ideas without bothering to resolve the conflicts between them. Perhaps some contradictions are best left unresolved, especially as ours is an imperfect world and our political system is a complicated one, held together by countless compromises. We may not be able to resolve many of these clashing expectations. Some of the inconsistencies in our judgments about presidents doubtless stem from the many ironies and paradoxes of the human condition. While difficult at the least we should develop a better understanding of what it is we ask of our presidents, thereby increasing our sensitivity to the limits and possibilities of what a president can achieve. This might free presidents to lead and administer more effectively in those critical times when the nation has no choice but to resort to them. Whether we like it or not, the vitality of our democracy depends in large measure upon the sensitive interaction of presidential leadership with an understanding public willing to listen and willing to provide support. Carefully planned innovation is nearly impossible without the kind of leadership a competent and fair-minded president can provide.

The following are some of the paradoxes of the presidency. Some are cases of confused expectations. Some are cases of wanting one kind of presidential behavior at one time, and another kind later. Still others stem from the contradiction inherent in the concept of democratic leadership, which on the surface at least, appears to set up "democratic" and "leadership" as warring concepts. Whatever the source, each has implications for presidential performance and for how Americans judge presidential success and failure ....

Paradox #1: Americans demand powerful, popular presidential leadership that solves the nation's problems. Yet we are inherently suspicious of strong centralized leadership and especially the abuse of power and therefore we place significant limits on the president's powers.

We admire power but fear it. We love to unload responsibilities on our leaders, yet we intensely dislike being bossed around. We expect impressive leadership from presidents, and we simultaneously impose constitutional, cultural, and political restrictions on them. These restrictions often prevent presidents from living up to our expectations ....

Presidents are supposed to follow the laws and respect the constitutional procedures that were designed to restrict their power, yet still they must be powerful and effective when action is needed. For example, we approve of presidential military initiatives and covert operations when they work out well, but we criticize presidents and insist they work more closely with Congress when the initiatives fail. We recognize the need for secrecy in certain government actions, but we resent being deceived and left in the dark—again, especially when things go wrong, as in Reagan's Iranian arms sale diversions to the Contras.

Although we sometimes do not approve of the way a president acts, we often approve of the end result. Ths is Lincoln is often criticized for acting outside the limits of the Constitution, but at the same time he is forgiven due to the obvious necessity for him to violate constitutional principles in order to preserve the Union. FDR was often flagrantly deceptive and manipulative not only of his political opponents but also of his staff and allies. FDR even relished pushing people around and toy ing with them. But leadership effectiveness in the end often comes down to whether a person acts in terms of the highest interests of the nation. Most historians conclude Lincoln and Roosevelt were responsible in the use of presidential power, to preserve the Union, to fight the depression and nazism. Historians also conclude that Nixon was wrong for acting beyond the law in pursuit of personal power ....

Paradox #2: We yearn for the democratic "common person" and also for the uncommon, charismatic, heroic, visionary performance. We want our presidents to be like us, but better than us. We like to think America is the land where the common sense of the common person reigns. Nourished on a diet of Frank Capra's "common-man-as-hero" movies, and the literary celebration of the average citizen by authors such as Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau, we prize the common touch. The plain-speaking Harry Truman, the up-from-the-log-cabin "man or woman of the people," is enticing. Few of us, however, settle for anything but the best; we want presidents to succeed and we hunger for brilliant, unerring, and semiregal performances from presidents. ....

It is said the American people crave to be governed by a president who is greater than anyone else yet not better than themselves. We are inconsistent; we want our president to be one of the folks yet also something special. If presidents get too special, however, they get criticized and pushed. If they try to be too folksy, people get bored. We cherish the myth....
mented that "It's very difficult for someone to serve in this office and meet the difficult issues in a proper and courageous way and still maintain a combination of interest-group approval that will provide a clear majority at election time."

To take the president out of politics is to assume, incorrectly, that a president will be generally right and the public generally wrong, that a president must be protected from the push and shove of political pressures. But what president has always been right? Over the years, public opinion has usually been as sober a guide as anything else on the political waterfront. And, lest we forget, having a president constrained and informed by public opinion is what democracy is all about.

The fallacy of antipolitics presidencies is that only one view of the national interest is tenable, and a president may pursue that view only by ignoring political conflict and pressure. Politics, properly conceived, is the art of accommodating the diversity and variety of public opinion to meet public goals. Politics is the task of building durable coalitions and majorities. It isn't always pretty. "The process isn't immaculate and cannot always be kid-gloved. A president and his men must reward loyalty and punish opposition; it is the only way."...

**Paradox #5.** We want a president who can unify us, yet the job requires taking firm stands, making unpopular or controversial decisions that necessarily upset and divide us.

Closely related to paradox #4, paradox #5 holds that we ask the president to be a national unifier and a harmonizer while at the same time the job requires priority setting and advocacy leadership. The tasks are near opposites.

Our nation is one of the few in the world that calls on its chief executive to serve as its symbolic, ceremonial head of state and as its political head of government. Elsewhere, these tasks are spread around. In some nations there is a monarch and a prime minister; in others there are three visible national leaders—a head of state, a premier, and a powerful party chief.

In the absence of an alternative office or institution, we demand that our president act as a unifying force in our lives. Perhaps it all began with George Washington, who so artfully performed this function. At least for a while he truly was above politics, a unique symbol of our new nation. He was a healer, a unifier, and an extraordinary man for several seasons.

Today we ask no less of our presidents than that they should do as Washington did, and more.

We have designed a presidential job description, however, that often forces our contemporary presidents to act as national dividers. President...
To win a presidential election takes ambition, money, luck, and masterful public relations strategies. It requires the formation of an electoral coalition. To govern a democracy requires much more. It requires the formation of a governing coalition, and the ability to compromise and bargain.

"People who win primaries may become good presidents—but it isn’t necessarily so," wrote columnist David Broder. "Organizing well is important in governing just as it is in winning primaries. But the Nixon years should teach us that good advance men do not necessarily make trustworthy White House aides. Establishing a government is a little more complicated than having the motorcade run on time."

Ambition (in heavy doses) and stiff-necked determination are essential for a presidential candidate, yet too much of either can be dangerous. A candidate must be bold and energetic, but in excess these characteristics can produce a cold, frenetic candidate. To win the presidency obviously requires a single-mindedness, yet our presidents must also have a sense of proportion; be well-rounded, have a sense of humor, be able to take a joke, and have hobbies and interests outside the realm of politics.

We often also want both a "fresh face," an outsider, as a presidential candidate and a seasoned, mature, experienced veteran who knows the corridors of power and the back alleyways of Washington. That’s why Colin Powell fascinated so many people. Frustration with past presidential performances leads us to turn to a "fresh new face" uncorrupted by Washington’s politics and its "buddy system" (Carter, Reagan, Clinton). But experience, especially in foreign affairs, has sometimes led to blunders by the outsiders. . . .

Paradox #9. The presidency is sometimes too strong, yet other times too weak.

Presidents are granted wide latitude in dealing with events abroad. At times, presidents can act unilaterally, without the express consent of Congress. While the constitutional grounds for such action may be dubious, the climate of expectations allows presidents to act decisively abroad. This being the case, the public comes to think the president can do the same at
home. But this is usually not the case. A clashing expectation is built into
the presidency when strength in some areas is matched with weakness in
other areas.

It often seems that our presidency is always too strong and always too
weak. Always too powerful given our worst fears of tyranny and our ideals
of a "government by the people." Always too strong, as well, because it
now possesses the capacity to wage nuclear war (a capacity that doesn't
permit much in the way of checks and balances and deliberative, partici-
patory government). But always too weak when we remember nuclear
proliferation, the rising national debt, the budget deficit, lingering dis-


THE CONSTITUTIONAL framers would undoubtedly be dis-
turbed by the shift to the presidentially centered government that charac-
terizes the modern era. Their fear of monarchy led them to reject the
concept of executive popular leadership. Instead, they assumed that the
legislative branch would occupy the central policymaking role and would
be held more easily accountable through republican government.

Congress has failed, however, to adhere to the framers' intentions and
has abdicated its policymaking responsibility. The legislature, with support
from the Supreme Court, has been all too willing to promote the illusion
of presidential governance by providing the executive with new sources
of power, including a highly developed administrative apparatus, and by
delegating authority for policy implementation to the executive through
vague legislative statutes....

The president-centered government of the modern, plebiscitary era
draws much of its power and legitimacy from the popular support of the
government, support that is grounded in the development of the rhetorical
presidency and the exalted role of the presidency in the American politi-
cal culture. Theodore Lowi is surely on target when he identifies "the re-
focusing of mass expectations upon the presidency" as a key problem of
presidential governance since Franklin Delano Roosevelt and as a prob-
lem associated with the rise of the plebiscitary presidency.

CRAIG RIMMERMAN

From The Rise of the Plebiscitary Presidency

Scholars who examine American presidents look not only at individuals
who have held the position but also at trends that mark different interpreta-
tions of the office. Here, Professor Craig Rimmerman builds on Theodore
Lowi's concept of the "plebiscitary presidency," in which the president seeks
to govern through the direct support of the American people. Likewise, citi-
zens view the plebiscitary presidency as the focal point of government activ-
ity. Rimmerman believes this view to be vastly different from the Constitu-
tion's intent. He traces changes in the executive's power through several
phases, mentioning the contributions of prominent scholars to an under-
standing of the presidency. From President Roosevelt onward, Rimmerman
asks his readers to consider carefully the consequences of such an exalted and
unrealistic vision of presidential power.