Presidential Power and Responsibility

From 1932 to 2004, the powers and responsibilities of the presidency expanded together with the size and scope of the federal government. In 1932 the federal government spent less than $5 billion, including only about $700 million on the military. About 100 employees worked in the White House. In 2004 the federal government spent more than $2 trillion, the military budget hit $400 billion, and 1,800 people worked in the White House. Yet even as the federal bureaucracy has exploded, the modern president has become a celebrity figure, prized for his ability to inspire and lead the American people. Presidential success, moreover, has not always followed from presidential power. To the contrary, modern presidents have often fallen victim to the overreach that accompanies the arrogance of power.

The presidency from 1932 to 2004 can be partitioned into two distinct eras. From 1932 to 1980, presidents took the lead in establishing the modern liberal state. From 1980 to 2004, conservative presidents put their distinctive stamp on government in the United States.
The Origins of the Liberal State
In 1928 Herbert Hoover became the third consecutive Republican to win a landslide election to the presidency. But after 1929, Hoover battled the baleful consequences of a worldwide depression that resisted every remedy he tried. During the Hoover years, the Democratic opposition established the precedent of the permanent political campaign, with no pause between elections or deference to the presidency. Patrick Hurley, Hoover’s secretary of war and political advisor, lamented that “our political opponents tell the story [and] we are on the defensive.” Henceforth, every American president would be compelled to engage in a perpetual campaign.

Liberal Democrat Franklin Roosevelt’s smashing victory over Hoover in 1932 profoundly changed both the presidency and the nation. During the new administration’s first 100 days, conservatives watched in dismay as Roosevelt seized command of the legislative agenda more decisively than any prior president. He steered through Congress 15 major bills that addressed the banking crisis; got lawmakers to repeal Prohibition; created substantial relief and public works programs; and established recovery programs for agriculture and industry. Roosevelt became the first president to sell his policies to the public through fireside chats on the radio and free-wheeling, twice-weekly press conferences. He had the ability both to inspire Americans with soaring rhetoric and to make ordinary folk believe that he, their patrician leader, truly understood and could help solve their problems.

After Roosevelt won a second decisive victory in 1936, he completed a political realignment that established the Democrats as the nation’s majority party, sustained by a coalition of African Americans, Catholics, Jews, union members, and southern white Protestants. Scholars have aptly noted that FDR’s reforms were incremental, modestly funded, and designed to rescue the capitalist economy. Nonetheless, Roosevelt’s New Deal was a transforming moment in American life. It challenged old structures of power, threw up new ones, and created new social roles and opportunities for millions of Americans who worked for government, labored in offices and factories, or farmed for a living. It advanced American pluralism by offering jobs and power to Catholics and Jews, union members, and southern white farmers for a living. It advanced American pluralism. It challenged old structures of power, thriving in offices and factories, or farmed for a living. It advanced American pluralism. It challenged old structures of power, thriving in offices and factories, or farmed for a living. It advanced American pluralism. It challenged old structures of power, thriving in offices and factories, or farmed for a living.

The Cold War Presidency
During an unprecedented third term, Roosevelt led the nation into a world war that ended America’s isolation from political entanglements abroad. The president assumed broad emergency powers during the war, and new federal agencies like the War Production Board foreshadowed the creation of America’s military-industrial complex. It was not Franklin Roosevelt, however, but his successor, Harry S. Truman, who brought World War II to a successful conclusion. After FDR’s death in April 1945, Truman became the first vice president to assume the presidency in the midst of a major war. Truman was shocked, nervous, and unprepared for the presidency. He told reporters, “I felt like the moon, the stars, and all the planets had fallen on me.” Truman, however, had a very personalized view of history that idealized great men overcoming impossible odds. He acted decisively to use the atomic bomb to end World War II and led the nation into the cold war and the Korean War.

Like his celebrated predecessor, Truman expanded the powers of the presidency. He steered through Congress legislation that created the Central Intelligence Agency, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Department of Defense, and a National Security Council within the Executive Office of the President. He began the first program for screening the loyalty of federal employees. He entered the Korean War without a declaration of war or even token approval from Congress. Under Truman, America developed a military structure to sustain its global strategic and economic responsibilities and an “invisible government” that wielded global power with little scrutiny from Congress or the public. As libertarian Lawrence Dennis said in 1947, whether Republicans or Democrats held the presidency, America’s “holy war on communist sin all over the world commits America to a permanent war emergency.” Hereafter, “the executive has unlimited discretion to wage undeclared war anywhere, anything he considers our national security requires a blow to be struck for good again sin.”

Amid the burdens of a stalemated war in Korea, a series of administration scandals, and challenges to his anti-Communist credentials by Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin and other Republicans, Truman declined to seek a third term. In 1952, Democrats nominated Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson. Among Republicans, war hero Dwight David Eisenhower competed for the Republican nomination against Senator Robert Taft of Ohio. In Eisenhower’s view, a Taft presidency would threaten national security because the senator still clung to isolationist ideas that would undo the collective security measures that contained communism and deterred World War III.

In the last national convention to resolve a deadlock between candidates, Eisenhower won the nomination and eventually the presidency only after the convention voted to seat his Texas delegation, rather than a competing delegation pledged to Taft.

Although mocked as a president who loved golf and loathed governing, Eisenhower carefully directed the policies and decisions of his administration, often
keeping his influence hidden rather than overt. More than any prior president, Eisenhower relied on a chief of staff—Sherman Adams—as a gatekeeper and on the work of executive agencies such as the National Security Council. He also made extensive use of executive privilege to shield staff members from congressional oversight. Politically, Eisenhower promised to steer a middle course that weaved “between conflicting arguments advanced by extremists on both sides of almost every economic, political, and international problem that arises.” He worked to balance the federal budget and control inflation. He believed in protecting the private economy from government meddling but also refused to roll back liberal reforms. He ratified Truman’s approach to collective security and sought to contain communism without trampling civil liberties at home.

Eisenhower achieved considerable personal popularity, but his middle-way approach failed to break the Democrats’ hold on the loyalty of voters and the control of Congress. In 1960 Democrat John F. Kennedy won election as America’s first Catholic president. Kennedy’s campaign, with its creative use of television, polling, image making, and a personal organization that was independent of the regular party machinery, also pointed to the future of American politics.

The Expansion and Crisis of the Liberal State

Kennedy was the first president since Franklin Roosevelt to inspire Americans with his rhetoric. Unlike later presidents, he spoke idealistically of shared sacrifice and the need for ordinary Americans to contribute to the common good, as envisioned in his most memorable line: “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” Kennedy steered the nation through the Cuban Missile Crisis, negotiated the first arms control treaty with the Soviets, and began the process that led to the end of segregation in America. Kennedy also accelerated the arms race with the Soviet Union and expanded America’s commitment to far-flung areas of the world. However, Kennedy might not have led the United States to escalate the Vietnam War. Shortly before his assassination in late November 1963, he was working on a plan that contemplated withdrawing one thousand troops initially and extracting most American forces from Vietnam by 1965.

If Kennedy was cool and detached, his successor Lyndon Johnson was engaged and passionate. Johnson could talk endlessly about politics and had little interest in anything else. He also had a burning ambition to make his mark on the world and to help the less privileged. Johnson used his physical size to influence others and achieve his aims. It was not unusual for Johnson to stand inches away from another, bodies touching and eyes locked. The “Johnson treatment” was almost hypnotic. Yet he could just as easily alienate anyone who rebuffed him or refused his gifts.

After crushing conservative Republican Barry Goldwater in the presidential election of 1964, Johnson used his legislative skills to engineer a major expansion of the liberal state. Johnson imbedded the struggle for minority rights within the liberal agenda and, in another departure from the New Deal, he targeted needs—housing, health care, nutrition, and education—rather than groups such as the elderly or the unemployed.

But Johnson could not focus solely on domestic reform. Two days after his inauguration, Ambassador Maxwell Taylor cabled from Vietnam, “We are presently on a losing track and must risk a change. . . . The game needs to be opened up.” The pugnacious president would not display unmanly personal and national weakness, encourage Communist aggression, and damage America’s credibility by running from a fight. He began an air and ground war in Vietnam and ultimately dispatched some 550,000 American troops to the small Asian nation. Johnson promised the nation victory but privately told his cabinet that at best America could achieve a “stalemate” and force a negotiated settlement. Ultimately, the gap between inflated expectations and minimal achievements in Vietnam led to Johnson’s “credibility gap” with the American people. In 1967 a frustrated president pleaded with his generals to “search for imaginative ideas to put pressure to bring this war to a conclusion”—not just “more men or that we drop the Atom bomb.” Without military answers to the problems, on March 31, 1968, a dispirited Johnson told a national television audience that, rather than seeking reelection, he would work on bringing peace to Vietnam.

In 1962 Richard Nixon, after losing elections for the presidency and the governorship of California, said, “You won’t have Nixon to kick around anymore, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference.” Six years later, Nixon completed the most improbable comeback in American history by narrowly winning the presidential election of 1968. Yet, from the early days of his presidency, Nixon exhibited the fear and suspicion that ultimately doomed a presidency marked by such accomplishments as the passage of pathbreaking environmental laws, the opening of relations with mainland China, and the deescalation of the cold war. Nixon told his staff that they were engaged in a “deadly battle” with eastern businessmen and intellectuals. He said, “No one in Ivy league schools to be hired for a year—we need balance—trustworthy ones are the dumb ones.” Jews were especially “untrustworthy. . . . Look at the Justice Department. It’s full of Jews.” Few business leaders “stood up” for the administration “except Main Street biz.” Nixon brooded over his enemies in the press—“75 percent of those guys hate my guts”—and complained about needing to “keep some incompetent blacks” in the administration. “I have the greatest affection for them, but I know they ain’t gonna make it for 500 years.”
After engineering a landslide reelection in 1972, Nixon planned to bring the federal budget and bureaucracy to heel by refusing to spend funds appropriated by Congress and reorganizing government to expand presidential power. This power grab failed, however, as the Watergate scandal shattered Nixon's second term. Watergate involved far more than the botched break-in at Democratic Party headquarters in the Watergate complex in Washington, D.C., in June 1972. As moderate Republican senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts said, “Too many Republicans have defined that dread word ‘Watergate’ too narrowly. It is not just the stupid, unprofitable break-in attempt. . . . It is perjury. Obstruction of justice. The solicitation and acceptance of hundreds of thousands of dollars in illegal campaign contributions. It is a pattern of arrogance, illegality and lies which ought to shock the conscience of every Republican.”

After Nixon resigned in August 1974, Democrats swept the midterm elections and sought to curb what they saw as a runaway presidency. They limited the president's war-making powers, expanded congressional input on the budget, and placed new restrictions on the CIA and the FBI. Such measures largely failed to return the balance of governmental power to Congress. Nonetheless, President Gerald Ford, whom Nixon had appointed vice president under authority of the Twenty-Fifth Amendment to the Constitution after the resignation of Spiro Agnew in 1973, struggled to govern after pardoning Nixon for Watergate-related crimes. However, conservative Republicans began rebuilding in adversity. They formed the Heritage Foundation to generate ideas, the Eagle Forum to rally women, new business lobbies, and Christian Right groups to inspire evangelical Protestants.

**The Triumph of Conservatism**

Although Democrat Jimmy Carter defeated Ford in 1976, he failed to cure an economy suffering from “stagflation” (an improbable mix of high unemployment, slow growth, and high inflation). Under Carter’s watch America also suffered humiliation abroad when he failed to gain the release of hostages taken by Islamic militants in Iran. In 1980 conservative Republicans found an appealing candidate in Ronald Reagan, the former Hollywood actor and two-term governor of California. Reagan decisively defeated Carter in 1980, running on a forthright conservative platform. He promised to liberate Americans from the burdens of taxation and regulation, rebuild the nation's defenses, and fight communism with new vigor.

As president, Reagan delivered on most of his promises. He cut taxes, reduced regulation, and shifted government spending from domestic programs to the military. Like Roosevelt and Kennedy, Reagan emerged as a “Great Communicator,” able to inspire Americans with his words and style. During his first term, Reagan restored luster to a tarnished presidency and optimism to the nation. As journalist Bob Greene wrote, Reagan “manages to make you feel good about your country. . . . All those corny feelings that hid inside of you for so long are waved right out in public by Reagan for everyone to see—and even while you’re listing all the reasons that you shouldn’t fall for it, you’re glad you’re falling. If you’re a sucker for the act, that’s okay.”

Reagan cruised to easy reelection in 1984 after a troubled economy recovered during the election year. To borrow a metaphor from Isaiah Berlin, most modern American presidents are foxes who know a little about everything, poke their noses everywhere, and revel in detail. Reagan, however, was a hedgehog who knew a few things but knew them very well and left the management to others. Reagan’s detached style helped him weather the Iran-Contra scandal of 1986–87 that stemmed from the sale of arms to the terrorist state of Iran and the illegal diversion of the profits to the Contra fighters who were battling a left-wing government in Nicaragua. Although the “Reagan revolution” in domestic policy stalled during the second term, he achieved a major breakthrough in foreign policy, despite antagonizing his conservative supporters. Conventional thinkers on the right or left failed to understand how Reagan could weave together seemingly contradictory ideas. He was a warrior against evil and a man of peace who dreamed of banishing nuclear weapons from the Earth. He was a leader of principle and a pragmatist who understood better than his right-wing critics how the world had changed since 1980. In the teeth of conservative opposition, Reagan steered through the Senate a landmark treaty to eliminate nuclear missiles in Europe that he negotiated with reformist Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. In 1988 Reagan foreshadowed the end of the cold war when he said that the Soviet’s “evil empire” was from “another time, another era.”

It was Reagan’s successor, George H. W. Bush, who presided over the collapse of the Soviet Empire. Bush took office with no guarantees that communism would collapse without bloodshed. He seemed shy and awkward but not overmatched, at least in foreign affairs. His realistic, steady-hand diplomacy prodded events forward without provoking a Soviet backlash. Bush drew a contrast between himself and the flamboyant Reagan when he said that, although conservatives told him to “climb the Berlin Wall and make high-sounding pronouncements . . . [t]he administration . . . is not going to resort to such steps and is trying to conduct itself with restraint.” Not a single Soviet soldier fired a shot to preserve communism in Eastern Europe in 1989. The Soviet Union crumbled in 1991; the same year that Bush led a multinational coalition that liberated Kuwait from the Iraqi armies of Saddam Hussein.

In 1992, however, Bush’s success in foreign policy could not overcome a sluggish economy, his lack of vision in domestic policy, and the appeal of his Democratic challenger, Bill Clinton. Clinton positioned
himself as a “new kind of Democrat” armed, like Eisenhower, with a “third-way philosophy” that purported to transcend left and right.

However, the future of the Clinton administration turned on a battle over the president’s plan to guarantee health care coverage to all Americans. Representative Dick Armey of Texas privately told Republicans that the health care debate was “the Battle of the Bulge of big-government liberalism.” If the GOP could defeat Clinton’s health care plan, he said, “It will leave the President’s agenda weakened, his plan’s supporters demoralized, and the opposition emboldened. . . . Historians may mark it as the end of the Clinton ascendency and the start of the Republican renaissance.”

Armey proved to be a reliable prophet. Republicans won the health care battle and regained control of both houses of Congress in 1994 for the first time in 40 years. The elections established Republicans as the majority party in the South, polarized the parties along ideological lines, and forestalled any major new liberal initiatives by the Clinton administration. While Clinton won reelection in 1996 and survived impeachment by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, his party failed to regain control of Congress during his tenure or to win the presidential election of 2000.

The Implosion of Conservatism

Although president-elect George W. Bush lost the popular vote in 2000, his advisors rejected advice that Bush govern from the center. Dick Cheney, who was poised to become the most influential vice president in American history, said, “The suggestion that somehow, because this was a close election, we should fundamentally change our beliefs I just think is silly.” Even before the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Bush had moved domestic policy to the right and adopted a more aggressive, unilateralist approach to foreign affairs than his Democratic predecessor.

President Bush narrowly achieved reelection in 2004. However, his years in office revealed deep contradictions within his conservative movement. With the rebuilding of Iraq, a conservative administration that disdained social engineering assumed the most daunting such project in American history. Similarly, the president built a form of big government that contradicted conservatives’ rhetorical defense of limited government, states’ rights, fiscal responsibility, and individual freedom. Although conservatives had once rallied against the excessive presidential powers under Roosevelt, Truman, and Johnson, Bush greatly expanded executive prerogatives through unprecedented secrecy in government, expanding the domestic surveillance of Americans, exercising political control over the legal and scientific agencies of government, and aggressively using executive signing statements to reserve the option to override provisions of federal law. More forthrightly than any prior president, he asserted America’s right to wage preemptive war against potential enemies. President Bush’s terms in office exposed a paradox at the heart of the modern presidency. Although his tenure was a high watermark in presidential power, it also added to a deep-seated distrust of the presidency that had begun with Johnson’s deceptive war and continued through the Watergate and Iran-Contra scandals and the impeachment of President Clinton. The Bush era ended with the election of Democrat Barack Obama, America’s first African American president, who entered the presidency with a solidly Democratic U.S. House and Senate.
