

Superman, Our Textbook President

by Thomas E. Cronin

Franklin D. Roosevelt personally rescued the nation from the depths of the great Depression. Roosevelt, together with Harry Truman, brought World War II to a proud conclusion. Courageous Truman personally committed us to resist communist aggression around the globe. General Eisenhower pledged that as president he would “go to Korea” and end that war—and he did. These are prevailing idealized images that most American students read and remember. For convenience, if not for simplicity, textbooks divide our past into the “Wilson years,” the “Hoover depression,” the “Roosevelt revolution,” the “Eisenhower period” and so forth.

Presidents are expected to perform as purposeful activists, who know what

they want to accomplish and relish the challenges of the office. The student learns that the presidency is “the great engine of democracy,” the “American people’s one authentic trumpet,” “the central instrument of democracy,” and “probably the most important governmental institution in the world.” With the New Deal presidency in mind the textbook portrait states that presidents must instruct the nation as national teacher and guide the nation as national preacher. Presidents should be decidedly in favor of expanding the federal government’s role in order to cope with increasing nationwide demands for social justice and a prosperous economy. The performances of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover, lumped together as largely similar, are rejected as antique. The Eisenhower record of retiring reluctance elicits more ambiguous appraisal; after brief tribute to him as a wonderful man and a superior military leader, he gets categorized as an amateur who lacked both a sense of direction and a progressive and

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positive conception of the presidential role. What is needed, most texts imply, is a man with foresight to anticipate the future and the personal strength to unite us, to steel our moral will, to move the country forward, and to make the country governable. The vision, and perhaps the illusion, is that, if only we can identify and elect *the right man*, our loftiest aspirations can and will be accomplished.

With little variation, the college text includes two chapters on the presidency. Invariably, these stress that the contemporary presidency is growing dramatically larger in size, gaining measurably more responsibilities (often referred to as more hats) and greater resources. Students read that more authority and policy discretion devolve to the president during war and crises; and since our country is now engaged in sustained international conflict and acute domestic problems, presidents are constantly becoming more powerful. One text points out that "as the world grows smaller, he will grow bigger."

Then, too, writers tend to underline the vast resources available for presidential decision-making—the array of experts, including White House strategic support staffs, intelligence systems, the National Security Council, the Cabinet, an Office of Science and Technology, the Council of Economic Advisers, and countless high-powered study commissions. To the student, it must appear that a president must have just about all the inside information and sage advice possible for human comprehension. A casual reading of the chapters on the presidency fosters the belief that contemporary presidents can both make and shape public policy and can see to it that these policies *work as intended*. Textbooks encourage the belief that the "president knows best" and that his advisory and information systems are unparalleled in history. The capacity of the presidency for systematic thinking and planning is similarly described as awesome and powerfully suited to the challenges of the day.

Clinton Rossiter wrote one of the most lucid venerations of the chief executive. In the *American Presidency*, he views the office as a priceless American invention which has not only worked extremely well but is also a symbol of our continuity and destiny as a people:

Few nations have solved so simply and yet grandly the problem of finding and maintaining an office or state that embodies their majesty and reflects their character. . . .

There is virtually no limit to what the President can do if he does it for democratic ends and by democratic means. . . .

He is, rather, a kind of magnificent lion who can roam widely and do great deeds so long as he does not try to break loose from his broad reservation. . . .

He reigns, but he also rules; he symbolizes the people, but he also runs their government. . . .

Recently written or revised government textbooks emphasize the importance of personal attributes, and there is little doubt that dwelling on the president's personal qualities helps to capture the attention of student learners. Not surprisingly, this personalization of the presidency also is reflected in a great deal of campaign rhetoric. Presidential candidates go to a considerable length to stress how personally courageous and virtuous a president must be. Nelson Rockefeller's (1968) litany of necessary qualities is as exaggerated as anyone else's:

The modern Presidency of the United States, as distinct from the traditional concepts of our highest office, is bound up with the survival not only of freedom but of mankind. . . . The President is the unifying force in our lives. . . .

The President must possess a wide range of abilities: to lead, to persuade, to inspire trust, to attract men of talent, to unite. These abilities must reflect a wide range of characteristics: courage, vision, integrity, intelligence, sense of responsibility, sense of history, sense of humor, warmth, openness, personality, tenacity, energy, determination, drive, perspicac-

ity, idealism, thirst for information, penchant for fact, presence of conscience, comprehension of people and enjoyment of life—plus all the other, nobler virtues ascribed to George Washington under God.

The Lion's Transformation

The personalized presidency is also a central feature of contemporary political journalism, and no journalist does more to embellish this perspective than Theodore White. His "Making of the President" series not only enjoys frequent university use but additionally serves as presidency textbooks for millions of adults who savor his "insider" explanations of presidential election campaigns.

White's unidimensional concentration on the presidential candidates, their styles, and personalities promotes a benevolent if not reverential orientation toward the American presidency. His narrative histories of American political campaigns have an uncanny way of uplifting and seducing the reader to watch and wait an election's outcome with intense concern—even though the books are published almost a year after the event. His style ferments great expectations and a heightened sense of reverence for the eventual victor. At first there are seven or eight competing hopefuls, then four or five, penultimately narrowed down to two or three nationally legitimized candidates and finally—there remains just one man. Clearly the victor in such a drawn-out and thoroughly patriotic ritual deserves our deepest respect and approval. White subtly succeeds in purifying the victorious candidate: in what must be a classic metamorphosis at the root of the textbook presidency image, the men who assume the presidency seem physically (and implicitly almost spiritually) to undergo an alteration of personal traits.

On JFK's first days in the White House, 1961:

It was as if there were an echo, here on another level, in the quiet Oval Office, of all the speeches he had made in all the

squares and supermarkets of the country. . . . He had won this office and this power by promising such movement to the American people. Now he had to keep the promise. He seemed very little changed in movement or in gracefulness from the candidate—only his eyes had changed—very dark now, very grave, markedly more sunken and lined at the corners than those of the candidate.

On Richard Nixon soon after his ascendancy, 1969:

He seemed, as he waved me into the Oval Office, suddenly on first glance a more stocky man than I had known on the campaign rounds. There was a minute of adjustment as he waved me to a sofa in the barren office, poured coffee, put me at ease; then, watching him, I realized that he was not stockier, but, on the contrary, slimmer. What was different was the movement of the body, the sound of the voice, the manner of speaking—for he was calm as I had never seen him before, as if peace had settled on him. In the past, Nixon's restless body had been in constant movement as he rose, walked about, hitched a leg over the arm of a chair or gestured sharply with his hands. Now he was in repose; and the repose was in his speech also—more slow, studied, with none of the gear-slippages of name or reference which used to come when he was weary; his hands still moved as he spoke, but the fingers spread gracefully, not punchily or sharply as they used to.

What, then, constitutes the recent textbook version of the American presidency? As always, any facile generalization of such a hydra-like institution is susceptible to oversimplification, but, on balance, more consensus than contention characterizes literature on the American presidency. Four summary statements may be singled out without doing great violence to the text literature. Two of these accentuate a dimension of presidential omnipotence, and two others emphasize an expectation of moralistic-benevolence. Taken together, this admixture of legend and reality comprise the textbook presidency of the last 15 years.

Omnipotence:

1. The president is the strategic catalyst in the American political system and the central figure in the international system as well.

2. Only the president is or can be the genuine architect of United States public policy, and only he, by attacking problems frontally and aggressively and interpreting his power expansively, can be the engine of change to move this nation forward.

Moralistic-Benevolence:

3. The president must be the nation's personal and moral leader; by symbolizing the past and future greatness of America and radiating inspirational confidence, a president can pull the nation together while directing us toward the fulfillment of the American Dream.

4. If, and only if, the right man is placed in the White House, all will be well, and, somehow, whoever is in the White House is the right man.

The "Selling of a Textbook"

Radio, television, and the emergence of the United States as a strategic nuclear power have converged to make the presidency a job of far greater prominence than it was in the days of Coolidge and before. While this is readily understood, there are other factors which contribute to runaway inflation in the attributed capabilities of White House leadership.

A first explanation for the textbook presidency is derived from the basic human tendency toward belief in great men. Most people grow up with the expectation that someone somewhere can and will cope with the major crises of the present and future. Since the New Deal, most Americans have grown accustomed to expect their president to serve this role. Who, if not the president, is going to prevent the communists from burying us, pollution from choking us, crime and conflict from destroying our cities, moral degradation from slipping into our neighborhood theaters? Within the complexity of political life today the

president provides a visible national symbol to which we can attach our hopes. Something akin to presidential cults exists in the United States today just as hero-worship, gerontocracy reverence, and other forms of authority-fixation have flourished in most, if not all, larger societies. Portraits of Washington, Lincoln, the Roosevelts, and Kennedy paper many a classroom wall alongside of the American flag. While deification is presumably discouraged, something similar is a common side product during the early years of schooling.

On all but two occasions during the past 17 years, the president of this nation has won the Most Admired Man contest conducted annually by the Gallup polls. The exceptions in 1967 and 1968 saw President Johnson lose out to former President Eisenhower. Mentioning this pattern of popular response to a recent conversation partner, I was informed that "If they were not the most admired men in the country they wouldn't have been elected president!" And his response is, I believe, a widely respected point of view in America. On the one hand we are always looking for reassurance that things will work out satisfactorily. On the other hand, we admire the dramatic actions of men in high places who are willing to take action, willing to cope with the exigencies of crisis and perplexity. Political scientist Murray Edelman writes quite lucidly about this problem:

And what symbol can be more reassuring than the incumbent of a high position who knows what to do and is willing to act, especially when others are bewildered and alone? Because such a symbol is so intensely sought, it will predictably be found in the person of any incumbent whose actions *can* be interpreted as beneficent.

A second explanation of recent textbook orthodoxy is unmistakably related to the commercial and political values of most text writers. Market considerations are hard to ignore and several text authors unabashedly cite commercial

remuneration as a major incentive. The "selling of a textbook" may not be unrelated to a book's function and ideological orientation.

Most textbook authors are motivated by the goal of training "good" citizens just as much as by the goal of instructing people about the realities of the highly competitive and often cruel world of national party and policy politics. But the training of citizens often seems to require a glossy, harmonious picture of national politics, which inspires loyalty but conflicts with reality. When this occurs, as one text writer told me, "the author almost invariably emphasizes citizen training, usually at the expense of instruction."

Building the Great Cathedral

A Franklin Roosevelt halo-effect characterizes most of the recent treatments of the presidency. Writers during the 1950s and well into the '60s were children or young adults during the Depression years. Not infrequently, they became enlisted in one way or another in executive branch service to help fight or manage World War II. These times were unusual in many ways—including an extraordinary amount of attention paid to the way in which President Roosevelt employed the powers of the presidency. Moreover, in the arena of national and international leadership, FDR upstaged all comers as he magnified the personal role and heroic style of a confident, competent leader in the context of tumultuous times. The mantle of world leadership was passing to the U.S., beginning what some writers refer to as the American Era. Understandably these developments, especially the dramaturgy of the New Deal presidency, affected soon-to-be written interpretations as well as popular images of the presidency.

A final reason for the textbook presidency lies in the very nature of the American political and electoral system. We elect a president by a small margin, but after election he is supposed to speak for *all* the people. Textbook and

school norms suggest that one can vigorously question a presidential candidate, but after the election it is one's duty to united behind the winner. It is as though the new president were the pilot of an aircraft with all of us as passengers, whether we like it or not. Hence, we all have a stake in his success.

To be sure, this institution of ritualistic unification serves a need: it absorbs much of the discontinuity and tension promoted in our often hectic and combative electoral campaigns. Then there is the typical first-year grace period in which serious criticism is generally considered off limits. This presidential honeymoon is characterized by an elaborate press build-up in which it appears as though we are trying to transform and elevate the quite mortal candidate into a textbook president.

Other methodological factors also contribute to idealized versions of presidential leadership. Overreliance on case studies of presidential behavior in relatively unique crises is part of the problem. Textbook compartmentalization of problems and institutions is yet another. Both the student and the average citizen may quite reasonably get the impression that national policy is almost entirely the product of a president and a few of his intimates, or alternately of a few select national officials along with the president's consent. Only the presidents can slay the dragons of crisis. And only Lincoln, the Roosevelts, Wilson, or men of that caliber can seize the chalice of opportunity, create the vision, and rally the American public around that vision. The end result may leave the student quite confused, if not ignorant, about the complex transactions, interrelationships, and ambiguities that more correctly characterize most national policy developments.

In all probability we pay a price, however unwittingly, for the way we have over-idealized the presidency. Although this price is difficult to calculate, I shall suggest some of the probable consequences of the textbook presidency—beginning with the dangers of

our unwarranted expectations of the president's power and of his capacities as a spiritual reservoir.

Most Americans now believe, along with Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt's, celebrated assertions, that the presidency is a "bully pulpit" and preeminently a place for moral leadership. Few of our citizenry wince at James Reston's observation that "the White House is the pulpit of the nation and the president is its chaplain." British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, on the other hand, could quip, "If people want a sense of purpose, they should get it from their archbishops."

We are accustomed to regarding our "sense of purpose" and pious presidential pronouncements as nearly one and the same. Accordingly, Richard Nixon invoked God five times in his presidential inaugural and talked often of spirit and the nation's destiny: "To a crisis of the spirit, we need an answer of the spirit. . . . We can build a great cathedral of the spirit. . . . We have endured a long night of the American spirit. But as our eyes catch the dimness of the first rays of dawn, let us not curse the remaining dark, let us gather the light. . . . Our destiny offers not the cup of despair, but the chalice of opportunity."

But the trappings of religiosity, while temporarily ennobling the presidential personage, may run the risk of triggering unanticipated and undesirable consequences. Some presidents apparently feel the need to justify a particular strategy on the grounds that it is the moral and righteous course of action. But this moral emphasis can become elevated to overblown courses of behavior. For example, Wilson's attempts to help set up the League of Nations became imbued with a highly moralistic fervor, but the moral environment that generated the commitment was allowed to expand, as Wilson's own role as the nation's preacher expanded, until there was virtually no room for a political negotiator, a non-moralist Wilson to transform the idea into a reality. Perhaps Herbert Hoover's apolitical moral and ideological

commitment to rugged individualism similarly inhibited alternative approaches in response to the Depression. Similarly, President Johnson's drumming up of moral and patriotic support for our Vietnam commitment probably weakened his subsequent efforts at negotiations in the languishing days of his Administration.

Part of the problem is related to the way campaigns are conducted and to the intensive hard sell—or at least "oversell"—seemingly demanded of candidates. Necessarily adopting the language of promise and sloganism, candidates and their publicists frequently pledge that they will accomplish objectives that are either near impossible or unlikely. Recall the early declaratory intentions of the War on Poverty, Model Cities, the Alliance for Progress, the war on behalf of safe streets, and an ambitious. Nixon promise to underwrite "black capitalism."

The Cost of Elevation

The textbook presidency image may also influence the quality of civic participation. The moral-leader-to-layman relationship is quite often viewed as a one-way street. If the president is our national chaplain, how do we cultivate a democratic citizenry that is active and not passive, that may, on selective occasions, responsibly dispute this national moral eminence? Having been nurtured in the belief that presidents are not only benevolent but also personally powerful enough to end war, depression, and corruption, it is difficult for most average citizens to disagree strongly with their president, no matter what the circumstances. Students are instructed that it is proper to state one's differences in a letter to congressmen or even to the White House. But beyond these rather limited resources, the citizen-student is left alone and without a sense of personal efficacy. Due to the almost assured deference and relative lack of opposition, American presidents can expect at least a five-to-one favorable ratio in their tele-

gram and mail response, and usually a three- or two-to-one ratio in national opinion poll responses about their handling of the presidency.

Most popular is the choice of quietly (if not silently) rallying around the president and offering him permissive support, hoping by such action to strengthen his and the nation's resolve against whatever real or apparent challenges confront the nation. Another pattern of behavior, that of apathy and indifference, is selected by sober citizens who feel secure in the belief that "presidents know best." Thus, a president can usually take it for granted that when major difficulties are faced, most Americans will support and trust him, at least for a while, often tendering him even increased support. It is difficult sometimes for Americans to differentiate between loyalty to president and loyalty to nation. As a result, presidential public support comes not only from those who feel the president is right, but is measurably inflated by those who, regardless of policy or situation, render support to their president merely because he is their president, or because he is the only president they have.

Few people are inclined to protest the actions of their president, but for those selecting to dissent, the textbook wisdom seems to encourage a direct personal confrontation with the president. If he alone is so powerful and independent, it appears logical to march on the White House and, if necessary, "break" or "dump" the president in order to change policy. But this may be one of the least economical strategies, for, as we have seen, breaking or changing presidents does not ensure any major shift in the execution of national policies.

The point here is that on both sides of the presidential popularity equation his importance is inflated beyond reasonable bounds. On one side, there is a nearly blind faith that the president embodies national virtue and that any detractor must be an effete snob or a nervous nelly. On the other side, the president becomes the cause of all per-

sonal maladies, the originator of poverty and racism, inventor of the establishment, and the party responsible for a choleric national disposition.

If the textbook presidency image has costs for the quality of citizen relationships with the presidency, so also it can affect the way presidents conceive of themselves and their job. To be sure, the reverence and loyalty rendered to a new president are a rich resource and no doubt are somewhat commensurate with tough responsibilities that come along with the job. But, at the same time, an overly indulgent citizenry can psychologically distort the personal perspective and sense of balance. Former presidential press secretary George Reedy's acrimonious criticisms of the monarchial trappings of the contemporary White House deserve attention:

The atmosphere of the White House is calculated to instill in any man a sense of destiny. He literally walks in the footsteps of hallowed figures—of Jefferson, of Jackson, of Lincoln... From the moment he enters the halls he is made aware that he has become enshrined in a pantheon of semi-divine mortals who have shaken the world, and that he has taken from their hands the heritage of American dreams and aspirations.

Unfortunately for him, divinity is a better basis for inspiration than it is for government.

The quality of advice, intelligence, and critical evaluation necessary to balanced presidential decision-making can also be adversely affected by too respectful an attitude towards the chief executive. If presidents become unduly protected or insulated, and if White House aides and Cabinet members tender appreciation and deference in exchange for status and accommodation, then the president's decision-making ability is clearly harmed.

The relatively sustained 15-year ascendancy of the textbook presidency's idealized image of presidential leadership may be coming to an end. The general American public probably still believes

in a version of the New Deal presidency caricature, but the near monopoly of this view is under challenge from a growing list of critiques of liberal presidential government. We are currently witnessing an apparent recrudescence of an interpretation of the presidency, which holds that no one national political leader can galvanize our political system toward the easy accomplishment of sustained policy change or altruistic goals.

Toward Revision

Contemporary policy studies suggest that the more we learn about presidential policy performance, the more it appears that presidents (in both domestic and foreign policy) only rarely accomplish policy "outcomes" that can be credited as distinct personal achievements. More realistically, the presidency serves as a broker for a few party priorities and as a strategically situated and important participant among vast numbers of policy entrepreneurs and policy-bearing bureaucrats. More often than not a president's personal policy views are essentially moderate and only vaguely refined. When in office, however, he finds himself constantly surrounded by people who have "high-energy" interest and investments in specific policy options. Both the president and these elites, however, are in turn surrounded by what Scammon and Wattenberg call the real majority—the large majority of American voters in the center.

In a sample of recent in-depth interviews with 30 White House staffers who served Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, I found that a majority of these presidential advisers feel that the president exercises selective or relatively little power over policy matters. There are some who say that "he [the president] has a lot of influence on those problems he is willing to spend time on," but more responded that "he has far less than people think he has, he is far more constrained than popularly thought." In fact, many even express the somewhat restrained and almost anti-textbook pres-

idency view that presidents can accomplish a limited number of projects and hence should carefully measure their requests and energies. Emphasizing this point were the following two respondents:

I think the White House under Johnson was excessively activist—there was an impulsive need to do something about everything RIGHT NOW! There was always the feeling [given by the president] that we should fix this and fix that and do it now! Overall I think it went too far—there are definite costs and liabilities in that type of excessive aggressive activism. . . .

And a second staffer:

Except in times of emergencies, presidents cannot get much accomplished. . . . In some areas a president can have a psychological influence, a psychological effect on the nation, for example by speaking out on crime concerns. And in an eight-year period a president can start a shift of the budget and of the political system, but it takes a lot of pressure and a lot of time. Basically, the thing to remember is that a presidential intention takes a very long time to get implemented.

On balance, of course, it is true that under certain circumstances a president can ignite the nuclear destruction of a substantial portion of the world or commit U.S. troops into internationally troubled crisis zones. But the American president is in no better position to control Bolivian instability, Chilean Marxism, or Vietcong penetration into Cambodia than he can make the stock market rise or medical costs decline. It is misleading to infer from a president's capacity to drop an A-bomb that he is similarly powerful in most other international or domestic policy areas. The more we learn about the processes of government, the more it becomes apparent that presidents are rarely free agents when it comes to effecting new policies—or dismantling policies which they have inherited. ■

VIEWS OF THE PRESS:

The Sell-Out of the Pulitzer Prize

by James Aronson

On May 3, 1967, a story appeared in the nation's newspapers about the denial of a Pulitzer Prize to Harrison Salisbury, an assistant managing editor of *The New York Times*, for international reporting—specifically for his reportage as the first correspondent of a major United States newspaper permitted into North Vietnam. The reaction of much of the nation's press to the Salisbury affair, particularly the Washington press corps and some of Salisbury's own colleagues at the *Times*, indicated a considerable sympathy with the Pulitzer board's fears. Indeed, the intemperance of the reaction was almost unparalleled.

Salisbury was a veteran correspondent, one of the first - ranking *Times* men, who had served for several years in the Soviet Union and had managed to get permission to write from Rumania, Bulgaria, and Mongolia when many others had failed. For more than a year he had sought a visa for North Vietnam without success. On December 14, 1966, a cable arrived at the *Times* office in

New York informing Salisbury that a visa was awaiting him in Paris; he could fly into Hanoi on the International Control Commission plane.

The permission came at a time when Hanoi was charging that residential sections of the city had been bombed by United States planes. Washington offered ambiguous responses, saying first that there had been no change in the policy of restricting the bombing to military targets; then rejecting the charge that Hanoi had been bombed on the days alleged (December 13 and 14); and finally, five days later, saying that civilian areas may have been struck by accident. This last statement was issued the day before Salisbury arrived in Hanoi. Salisbury's first dispatch was published in the *Times* on December 25, without advance publicity. It said:

Contrary to the impression given by United States communiques, on-the-spot inspection indicates that American bombing has been inflicting considerable civilian casualties in Hanoi and its environs for some time past It is a sad fact that, based on the evidence of their own eyes, Hanoi residents don't find much credibility in United States bombing communiques.

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