
Reviews

Perspectives on the U.S. Presidency:
Three Review Articles

'The Living Embodiment of the Nation'

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The American Presidency: An Intellectual History, by Forrest McDonald. *Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1994. 516 pp. \$29.95.*

Forrest McDonald's *The American Presidency: An Intellectual History* is a most impressive work. Few contemporary books in American politics reflect the careful and prodigious research, as well as the considerable breadth of knowledge and historical insight brought to bear by McDonald. If you are looking for behavioral models and typologies of presidential behavior, this is not the right book. But if you seek a deeply historical and substantively rich overview of the U.S. presidency, this book is without peer.

As one might expect, given McDonald's reputation as a leading scholar of the American founding, about half of the book is devoted to a discussion of the numerous influences shaping the creation of the presidency as well as the institution's evolution during the formative early years of the republic. No less than five chapters out of sixteen are devoted to assessing the importance of the "great commentators on English law and constitutional custom," political philosophers, ancient and contemporary historians, and the experience of the colonial and revolutionary eras as reference points for the Framers of the Constitution in their creation of the presidency.

McDonald's discussion of this broad array of influences is not

without its contradictions, however. "It seems fair to say," writes McDonald, "that the Framers could not have accomplished what they did without the political philosophies of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Bolingbroke, Hume, De Lolme, and a few others" (39). Yet, in his next chapter, McDonald argues convincingly that political philosophy was substantially less important than the lessons of history as a guide for the Framers in shaping the Constitution. As he puts it:

*The
lessons of
history.*

History, to most of the authors of the Constitution, was more valuable than political theory because it was more real; as Bolingbroke put it, history was philosophy teaching by example. Eighteenth-century Americans read widely in history, thought historically, and cited history as authority. During the first three weeks of the Philadelphia convention, for instance, delegates buttressed their positions with historical references at least twenty-three times, not counting references drawn from British, colonial, or recent American history, inclusion of which would treble the total. A number of delegates delivered lengthy addresses on the lessons to be learned from ancient or modern history. During the same period only one political philosopher was mentioned by name. (67)

*Washington's
dignified
presidency.*

A noted biographer of Washington and Jefferson, McDonald offers what may well be the best chapter-length treatments on record of the precedent-rich Federalist and Jeffersonian Republican eras. Ever sensitive to the role of decorum in shaping the office of the presidency, Washington sought the advice of Adams, Hamilton, Jay and Madison on the appropriate rules of behavior for the new office. Washington wished to strike a balance between, in his words, " 'too free an intercourse and too much familiarity,' which would reduce the dignity of the office, and 'an ostentatious show' of monarchical aloofness, which would be improper in a republic" (214). For the inauguration ceremony itself, "Washington took the oath of office in the Senate chamber, where both houses of Congress had gathered, and then he delivered his address." This procedure "was consciously patterned after the arrangements in England, where the king, at the beginning of each session of Parliament, addressed both houses in the chamber of the Lords." But Washington, wearing a suit of brown broadcloth made in Connecticut, hoped to take some of the monarchical edge off the proceedings.

Even when it came to "the niceties of federal-state relations," Washington was very considered in his actions. When he was invited to review the militia in Massachusetts, Washington declined,

“ ‘otherwise than as a private man’ because they were under state jurisdiction.” Having deferred to state sensibilities in that regard,

he similarly refused John Hancock’s invitation to stay in the governor’s residence in Boston but agreed to have dinner together—on the assumption that Hancock would acknowledge the subordinate position of governors by first paying the president a courtesy call. Hancock instead sent a message that he was crippled with gout and could not leave home, whereupon Washington flatly refused to see him except in Washington’s own lodgings. Next day the governor, heavily swathed in bandages, called upon the president. (216)

While some of Washington’s contemporaries found such concerns pretentious or comical, Washington did not. “It was his task,” McDonald writes,

to enable the American people to make the transition from monarchy to republicanism by serving as the symbol of nationhood and to institutionalize the symbol by investing it in the office, not in the man. To that end, he behaved as if his every move was being closely scrutinized, which to a considerable extent it was. (216)

The standard of excellence that McDonald not surprisingly meets in his discussion of the early period in the evolution of the presidency is matched or exceeded in subsequent chapters of the book. Vast amounts of information are distilled and presented in each chapter. In his discussion of the modern presidency, for example, McDonald eloquently weaves together strands of the works of Clinton Rossiter and Richard Neustadt. The Neustadtian theme finds expression in McDonald’s observation that the president

*Blending
Neustadt and
Rossiter.*

must inspire confidence in his integrity, . . . competence and capacity to take charge. . . . Indeed, it is scarcely possible to govern well in the absence of such confidence because the president’s job is to persuade other people to implement his decisions, and his persuasiveness rests largely on what those others perceive his public perception to be. The image thus determines the reality. (425)

McDonald’s discussion of Thomas Jefferson also has a Neustadtian ring to it. McDonald suggests that Jefferson was an “intensely private man,” with “a passionate aversion to confrontation, argument, and disharmony,” who chose to wield power, “not by direct exercise of his constitutional authority, but by bargaining, persuasion, and the careful husbanding or expenditure of his counters in the political game” (247).

But while Neustadt advised John F. Kennedy to “deinstitution-

*The president
vs. the
presidency.*

alize" and "humanize" the presidency, McDonald warns that Jefferson's "humanizing" of the presidency allowed him to exert influence independent of office, with adverse consequences for his successors. "By stripping from everyone pretense and the trappings of status," Jefferson "established a milieu in which he was quite without a peer. In the intimate surroundings in which he was host and master of the house, he was clearly the first among equals." But "his methods could be effective only with a man of Jefferson's gifts at the helm" (248).

Garry Wills offers a similar critique of Neustadt's formula for highly personalized leadership in his book *The Kennedy Imprisonment*. "The Neustadt school," Wills writes,

maintained that the presidency is only what each President makes it, that the office is defined by the man, not vice versa. This has led to the intense personalization of the institution. . . . This personalization creates charismatic expectations in noncharismatic times, to be followed by inevitable disappointment.

Hence, Wills argues that while George Washington's authority "was lent, in diluted and diffused manner, to the constitutional procedures he affirmed by his resignation of power," the charismatic leaders attempt to contrive a "crisis" atmosphere even when no crisis exists.

In acknowledging the limitations of the "personalized" presidency, McDonald's focus is far more compatible with the work of Clinton Rossiter than it is with the Neustadtian perspective. The Rossiterian influence is evident in McDonald's pronouncement that "the president is during his tenure the living embodiment of the nation. Hence it is not enough merely to govern well; the president must also seem presidential."

*Merging the
monarchical
and the
ministerial.*

Rossiter perceptively noted that the presidency fuses the dignity of a king with the governmental adeptness of a prime minister. McDonald shows through numerous examples of actions and rhetoric how various presidents, from Washington onward, have mixed, merged, or ignored these roles. McDonald's discussion of Woodrow Wilson and Ronald Reagan, for example, serves quite nicely to explicate the "chief executive" and "chief of state" roles.

Shortly before taking office, Wilson wrote that the president "must be the prime minister, as much concerned with the guidance of legislation as with the just and orderly execution of law, and he is the spokesman of the Nation in everything." Congress, as "the law

making part of the government," should, according to Wilson, "be very hospitable to the suggestions of the planning and acting part of it," the presidency (359). To stress this point, McDonald observes, Wilson "abandoned precedent by appearing in person to address Congress," much as a prime minister addresses the parliament.

While Wilson focused his energies on the "chief executive" role, Ronald Reagan was chief of state *par excellence*.

He saw the main task in his role as head of state (as distinguished from head of government) as restoring the nation's confidence and self-respect after the traumas of Vietnam and Watergate. President Carter had perceived the same need but had exacerbated the problem by giving a television speech in 1979 in which he almost whinily complained about a "crisis in confidence." Reagan, by contrast, exuded faith in himself and in his country, and the confidence was contagious. (453)

The contrast between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan on the chief of state role is striking. While Reagan clearly understood the importance of preserving what Walter Bagehot described as the habitual reverence of the people for institutions that instill a sense of dignity in their government, Carter seemed to have no such conception of the office. McDonald cites Tip O'Neill's memoirs to illustrate this point. Commenting on Carter's efforts to, in press secretary Jody Powell's words, "de-pomp" the presidency, O'Neill wrote,

*De-pomping
the presi-
dency.*

What Carter failed to understand is that the American people love kings and queens and royal families. They want a magisterial air in the White House, which explains why the Kennedys and the Reagans were far more popular than the four first families who came in between them. (426)

O'Neill was not alone amongst members of Congress who yearned for a more presidential air. Dan Rostenkowski once surprised Carter during the president's visit to Chicago by having the house band strike up "Hail to the Chief" as Carter entered the room. Until this point, such pomp had been strictly forbidden by Carter, but the enthusiastic response that he received from the Chicago audience convinced Carter to allow the practice to continue.

Carter, Forrest McDonald makes clear, was not the first president to attempt to "de-pomp" the presidency. When it came to the ceremonial, ritualistic, and symbolic functions of the presidency, McDonald notes, Jefferson seemed intent on rejecting them out of hand. Unlike Washington before him, Jefferson "shunned display,

protocol, and pomp; he gave no public balls, held no levees, had no public celebrations of his birthday." Moreover,

He abandoned the monarchical ritual of appearing in person before the legislative branches and afterward exchanging formal messages. When Jefferson had anything to say to Congress, he sent his secretary with a written note. . . . He never held court for government officials or, though he understood the ritualized niceties of European diplomacy, for foreign ministers. Instead, he held an endless succession of small dinner parties, invitations to which were handwritten and signed not "The President of the United States," as Washington and Adams had signed, but simply "Th: Jefferson." There were rarely more than twelve guests at a time, and the seating was pell-mell. . . . Unwigged, casually dressed, Jefferson charmed his guests . . . (253)

*The negative
campaigns of
yesteryear.*

The lively interplay between historical insight and contemporary analysis of the presidency makes for interesting and informative reading. In a midterm election year that will be remembered for its negative campaigning, McDonald reminds us that negative campaigning is as old as American politics. While George Bush was chastised by the press for not instantaneously repudiating the non-candidate sponsored commercials on the saga of the furloughed felon Willie Horton in 1988, and for calling Clinton and Gore "bozos" in the 1992 race, these incidents pale in comparison to the campaign that Andrew Jackson faced in 1828. Supporters of John Quincy Adams vilified Jackson as "an uncouth frontier ruffian, a murderer, and an adulterer." And, as if this were not enough, Jackson's detractors "slandered his wife" and charged that Jackson's mother "had been the concubine of a black man and thus that he was a bastard mulatto" (430).

Jackson's supporters responded in kind, "charging Adams with corruption, with using public funds for private advantage, for having had premarital sex with the woman he later married and for being involved, while minister to Russia, in facilitating the seduction of an American girl by the tsar."

McDonald's insights also suggest that earlier elections were marred by many of the same faults that political scientist Thomas Patterson attributes to modern elections in his new book *Out of Order*. Patterson notes, for example, that media coverage of modern elections places great emphasis on personalities and tactics while little attention at all is paid to issues and substantive policy differences. As McDonald notes, "the striking fact about the 1828 election

. . . is that nothing at all was said about what the candidates would do if elected" (430).

By 1885, McDonald notes, "the technology that made mass-circulation newspapers and magazines possible, created an enormous demand for news." Indeed, "demand far exceeded supply, and reporters early on learned to file stories about nonevents such as speeches, ceremonies, and rumors." Since presidents and presidential candidates "were among the few people whose names newspaper readers everywhere could recognize . . . Americans were fed information (or misinformation or disinformation) about their president on a daily basis" (435). Again, not much has changed.

*News from
nowhere.*

Nor are adversarial relations with the press new. Woodrow Wilson made it clear that he viewed reporters as impertinent, disrespectful, and prying. "The reporters, for their part, regarded Wilson as cold and aloof, prone to lecture as if he were still a professor, and somewhat dictatorial in his efforts to control the news" (437). Needless to say, Wilson did not ingratiate himself with the press.

What *has* changed in press coverage of the presidency is the ideological thrust of reporting. During Franklin Roosevelt's presidency, such major newspapers as the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Detroit Free Press*, and *Chicago Tribune* were "vehemently anti-administration" (444). Roosevelt had the editorial support of just 37% of the daily newspapers in 1936 though he won 60% of the popular vote. Consequently, Roosevelt turned to the radio airways to get his message across in undiluted form with "carefully scripted, diligently rehearsed, and beautifully executed" talks.

Today, of course, the major newspapers tend to champion activist "Rooseveltian" presidencies like Bill Clinton's while conservatives emulate Roosevelt's clever practice of turning to radio as the communications medium of preference. Unable to exert editorial control over radio talk-show hosts, Washington-based reporters for the major news dailies, like Jack Nelson of the *Los Angeles Times* and Charles Corddry of the *Baltimore Sun*, excoriate and demonize the likes of Rush Limbaugh as alleged purveyors of misinformation.

Last, but not least, McDonald's reading of history is refreshingly different from the Rooseveltian lenses of a Neustadt or an Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. A brief look at McDonald's observations concerning Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan underscores the differences. Regarding Wilson, for example, McDonald writes:

*A non-
Rooseveltian
perspective.*

Radical as Wilson's conception of the presidency was, it was moderate compared to his conception of himself, which was little short of messianic. Indeed, the day after his election, the Democratic national chairman called on him to confer about appointments, only to be rebuffed by Wilson's statement, "Before we proceed, I wish it clearly understood that I owe you nothing. Remember that God *ordained that I should be the next President of the United States.*" He was a master of oratory who described every issue, no matter how trivial, in terms of a great moral crusade, always with himself as the nation's (and later the world's) moral leader—and he believed what he was saying. Given that attitude, it followed that people who opposed him were unenlightened or evil; it was therefore impossible to meet them halfway. (360)

After winning reelection in 1916 by a narrow margin in the electoral college and again by a minority of the popular vote, Wilson had become "frustrated domestically," and "directed his attention to saving the world 'for democracy.'" In 1918, McDonald wryly observes, "Republicans regained control of Congress, and they made life hell for Wilson" (364).

*The onset of
the big
government.*

McDonald's discussion of Franklin Roosevelt is prefaced by a discussion of how Herbert Hoover's own legislative proposals to combat the steadily worsening depression in 1931 set the stage for Roosevelt's activism. Chief among Hoover's bills was the Glass-Steagall Act, which had vast implications for the expansionistic presidency of Roosevelt's era. Designed to counteract the devastating contraction of currency and credit, it broadened the kinds of commercial paper that were acceptable for rediscount (and thus usable as the basis for the issuance of money) in the Federal Reserve System, and it also made government debt acceptable for that purpose. Politicians took a while to perceive the implication for fiscal policy: The more the federal government borrowed, the greater was the potential money supply. That innovation, coupled with the income tax on personal and corporate incomes authorized by the Sixteenth Amendment, made the growth of the Leviathan state and the imperial presidency fiscally possible (365).

Roosevelt was more than willing to start the nation and the presidency moving in that direction. As McDonald puts it: "Having reached the pinnacle of legislative power and having taught the people to look to the president as the remedy for every problem, Roosevelt went too far and committed political blunders that made it impossible for himself and for successors to fulfill the expectations he had raised" (367).

Bill Clinton should read at least this much of McDonald's book, but he ought to read pages 378-79 as well. In these pages, which concern Reagan's economic program, McDonald notes that the program was not all doom and gloom. On the down side, federal expenditures increased from \$657 billion to \$1,064 billion over a seven-year period, and "by no means just because of defense spending, since outlays for civilian programs increased considerably faster." On the plus side, "the nation experienced a period of economic growth and prosperity that lasted more than seven years." Federal revenues increased from \$599 billion in 1981 to \$909 billion in 1988. And while Reagan left a legacy of increasing deficits, the economy was growing so rapidly that the deficit "was less as a percentage of gross national product when Reagan left office than when he had entered it." As an added bonus, in McDonald's view, the deficit "had the effect of preventing Congress from enacting many new social or economic programs."

McDonald gets in a few digs at Congress along the way. He notes, for example, that no real spending cuts were made under Gramm-Rudman-Hollings, "not even of the bogus variety Washingtonians called a cut: a smaller-than-projected increase." After nearly two years of struggling with the deficit, George Bush broke his "no new taxes" pledge and agreed to support a tax increase in exchange for a promise to cut spending. As McDonald notes, "Congress lived up to half the agreement, namely the tax increase" (380).

In addition to containing a heavy dose of meaningful history, Forrest McDonald's book is chock-full of memorable anecdotes. His vehicles for developing the story of the presidency are often as humorous as they are trenchant. Bill Moyers, for instance, once said, "The real problem with Lyndon Johnson is that *he* probably believes about ninety percent of what he reads or *hears*. So he finds it perfectly natural to expect the *people* to believe about 90% of what he *says*" (472).

*History
with
humor.*

Even the poet Robert Frost serves as a keen lens for observing the presidency. A lifelong Democrat, Frost, in McDonald's view, captured the essence of Woodrow Wilson's legacy to future presidents when he wrote in 1928 that Wilson "saw as vastly as anyone that ever lived. He was a great something, if it was only a great mistake." Frost added: "Some might think his failure was in missing a mark that someone to come after him will hit, but I suspect it was

worse than that: he missed a mark that wasn't there in nature or in human nature" (439).

McDonald closes one of his chapters with the following remark: "By the year 1992 American citizens had become sick unto death of their government and of their president. Somehow they managed to retain faith in the office of the president—if the right candidate would come along" (381). McDonald did not suffer the burden of having to appraise Bill Clinton's presidency in the first edition of this remarkable book. He does note, however, that Clinton's path to the presidency included a saxophone solo on the Arsenio Hall show and an appearance on MTV. Tony Coelho, a top adviser to Clinton, acknowledged a few weeks before the mid-term elections of 1994 that there is "a feeling among the American people that maybe he's not quite up to being president." Because Clinton had "become a prime minister," Coelho added, "people don't know he has a vision. He's got to keep being president." Perhaps Coelho has already read McDonald's book. Many others ought to.

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