

14

The Presidency

IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL:

- ◆ See how the Constitution defines the presidency
- ◆ Focus on presidential power
- ◆ Learn what presidents do
- ◆ Reflect on presidential popularity—and greatness
- ◆ Consider the personal side of the office
- ◆ Tour the Executive Office of the President, and meet the team around a president



GEORGE WASHINGTON, the first president, had to persuade thirteen independent-minded states to think of themselves as one unified nation. Washington sought to foster unity by touring the new country—a grueling journey in the 1790s. He set out with assistants, slaves, horses, and dogs. As the party approached each town, the president mounted a great white steed and cantered handsomely into the cheering throngs, his favorite greyhound trotting at his side. Washington named the dog Cornwallis, after the British general who surrendered to end the Revolutionary War. Poor Cornwallis the greyhound died while touring the southern states, but his name reminded the people that they were part of a proud and independent nation. Everywhere Washington went, the people greeted their president with ringing bells, cheers, songs, speeches, parades, and flags. The crowds felt, at least for a day, like Americans.¹

Who are we? Each president offers a different answer. Washington may be our greatest president, not because of his domestic programs or foreign policies: critics could be scathing about both. Instead, Washington embodied the new nation. He championed American ideals and values, spoke to national aspirations, articulated new ideas, and personified the nation's fragile sense of identity—both to Americans and to the world. Future presidents have struggled, some more successfully than others, to do the same.

The president's role is difficult partly because Americans rarely agree about who we are. The United States are often The *Un*-United States. Washington took slaves on his unity tour. Didn't slavery violate the new nation's ideals? Many Americans insisted that it did.

Two hundred twenty-two years after Washington's tour, President Barack Obama received a report from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The agency had tracked down Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, living in a compound in Pakistan. At least seven different agencies gathered information, gamed scenarios, and offered advice. The president could order an air strike and bomb the compound to rubble. He could inform our ally, the Pakistan government, and coordinate a joint raid.

Ultimately, Obama and his team chose a highly risky option. Helicopters slipped under Pakistani radar and ferried Navy SEALs into the compound. The team stormed buildings, shot and killed Bin Laden and four others, grabbed computers, handcuffed his wives and children for local officials, and disappeared in less than an hour. The president and his aides monitored the dramatic operation in real time. They did not inform the Pakistani government, Congress, or the American people until the raid was over. Obama had many agencies and advisors

● *The president has many advisors but in the end has to make the tough decisions alone.*

to guide him, but ultimately he had to make the call alone. The president, as George W. Bush liked to say, is “the decider.”

The raid demonstrates the extensive power of the modern presidency. Today, the American executive can approve the death of an enemy on the other side of the world. The power and reach of the office raise the same question the delegates debated at the Constitutional Convention. How much authority should the president have? Or, to translate the question for modern times: Has the president grown too powerful for a democratic republic? Or is this exactly the “energy in government” that Alexander Hamilton and James Madison were seeking?

Washington’s tour and Obama’s raid illustrate three essential features about the American president:

The president personifies America. More than any individual, presidents tell us who we are—and what we are becoming.

The president injects new ideas into American politics. Our discussion of Congress emphasized the institution, the rules of the game; the presidency puts more focus on individuals and ideas.

The president has enormous powers. That authority raises a fundamental question: Is the president too powerful for a democratic republic? Or is the office too weak to do what Americans demand of it? Perhaps the same president can be both too strong and too weak at different points. Keep in mind this question of authority as you read the chapter.

Defining the Presidency

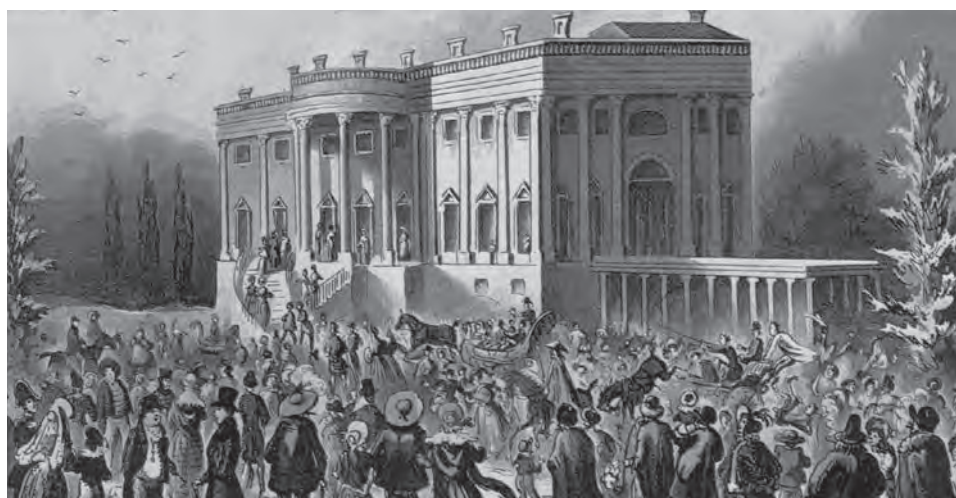
A time traveler from the 19th century would easily recognize today’s Senate or the Supreme Court. However, the modern White House would stun her. The presidency is the branch of the federal government that has changed the most.

One hundred fifty years ago Americans could walk right in the front door of the White House and greet the president. In 1829, during President Andrew Jackson’s inauguration, supporters mobbed the mansion and forced the president to climb out a window for his own safety; aides filled tubs with whiskey and orange juice on the lawn to lure the crowds outside. When William Henry Harrison won the presidency in 1840, so many men milled about the White House hoping to get a government job that the president-elect could not find an empty room to meet with his cabinet. After Warren Harding was elected in 1920, his old Senate colleagues brusquely advised him not to bother them with legislative proposals; they could write the laws without his interference.

Today there are no more mobs in the White House or curt orders from Congress. The presidency is a different institution. Presidents have redefined their roles and renegotiated their powers. To this day, each president has the opportunity to reshape the office. One reason the presidency is so fluid lies in the job description. By now, you know where to look for that: the Constitution.

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- Number of presidents in the last 100 years: **18**
- Number of Democratic Presidents in the last 100 years: **8**
- The shortest presidency: William Henry Harrison, **1 month**
- The longest presidency: Franklin Roosevelt, **145 months**
- Franklin Roosevelt's lifespan compared to the average person at the time **12.4 years**
- Number of presidents younger than Barack Obama when they were elected: **2**
- Last president without a college education: **Harry S Truman (1945–1953)**
- Last president with no formal schooling: **Andrew Johnson (1865–1869)**
- First president to be born in a hospital: **Jimmy Carter (1918–)**
- First woman to run for president: **Victoria Woodhull in 1872**
- First election where women could vote for president nationwide: **1920**
- Number of Presidents who lost the popular vote but still won the election: **4**
[John Quincy Adams, Rutherford B Hayes, Benjamin Harrison, George W. Bush]
- Number of presidents who were sons or nephews of prior presidents: **4**
[John Quincy Adams, Benjamin Harrison, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and George W. Bush]
- The average winning margin in the popular vote in the last 20 elections: **9.8%**
- The average winning margin in the Electoral College vote: **52.2%**
- Highest presidential approval rates ever recorded by Gallup (for Harry Truman, George H W Bush and George W Bush respectively): **91, 89, 89%**
- Lowest approval ratings recorded by Gallup at end of a full term (for Harry Truman, Jimmy Carter, and George W. Bush respectively) **31, 34, 34%**
- Highest approval rates at end of a full term (for Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan, and Dwight Eisenhower respectively) **66, 63, 59%**
- Only president to hold a patent: **Abraham Lincoln (for an invention to free boats trapped on a sandbar)**



● **A Different Era.** After the inauguration, presidents held an open house. Here, Americans crush in to the mansion to shake hands with President Jackson—who had to escape through a window.

The Silence of Article II

Article II of the Constitution, which defines the presidency, seems puzzling at first glance. Article I meticulously defines everything Congress is empowered to do: the instructions run for 52 paragraphs. In contrast, Article II says very little about who the president is and what the president does, devoting only 13 paragraphs to the office. This vague constitutional mandate is one reason why the office keeps evolving. The framers faced three great questions when they defined the office (for more detail, see Chapter 3).

First, *should the United States even have a president?* Traditional republics had always feared executive power, as a lure to kings and emperors. Many Americans wanted to avoid a single president (also known as the chief executive). Instead, they proposed a committee appointed by Congress. The Articles of Confederation had no chief executive: Congress simply selected a presiding officer from its members. The states also had very weak governors.

Before the American Revolution, the English king was widely regarded as too powerful; after 1787, the new nation's leaders were too feeble to govern. The job of the constitutional convention was to find a happy medium. In the end, they selected a single president. The qualifications for the post were simple: a natural-born citizen at least 35 years old who had lived in the United States for 14 years.

Second, *how long should the president serve?* Alexander Hamilton suggested at the convention that presidents be elected for life. No delegates agreed; others suggested four, six, seven, eight, eleven, or fifteen-year terms. Finally, they settled on a four-year term that could be renewed indefinitely. Washington would set a precedent when he stepped down after his second term (dazzling his contemporaries by walking away from power). For a century and a half, American presidents followed Washington's example and served no more than two terms—until Franklin Roosevelt broke the pattern and won four elections between 1932 and 1944. The 22nd amendment, ratified six years after Roosevelt's death in 1945, bars presidents from a third term.

Third, *how should the United States choose its president?* Delegates to the convention believed that the public did not know enough, the state legislatures were too self-interested, and Congress would become too powerful if given the task. They finally settled on a roundabout method, the **electoral college** you encountered in Chapter 9.

Political scientists still debate the electoral college. Should we repeal it and let the public elect the president directly? Or keep things the way they are? Recall from Chapter 9 that there are solid arguments on both sides.

Electoral College:

Americans elect a president by voting for electors who then choose the president. Today, the electors of each state cast their votes for the candidate who won the state.

● Supporters of Democrat Al Gore and Republican George W. Bush protested as the Supreme Court decided to stop the recounting of ballots effectively making George W. Bush the president.



The President's Powers

The Constitution is especially concise when it gets to the heart of the presidency: the powers and duties of the chief executive. It grants the president a limited number of **expressed powers**, or explicit grants of authority. Most are carefully balanced by corresponding congressional powers. **Figure 14.1** summarizes this balance.

The president's real authority lies in a simple phrase at the end of the section: "take care that the laws be faithfully executed." Congress votes on legislation, then sends it to the executive branch to put into effect. In other words, Congress grants **delegated powers** to the president. For example, Congress passes legislation that aims to improve hospital care. It delegates power to the executive branch, which issues a rule saying that hospitals will receive lower federal payments if patients develop infections after surgery.

Modern presidents claim a third source of authority: **inherent powers**. These are not specified in the Constitution or delegated by legislation, but are implicit in the vague Article II phrase, "The executive power shall be vested in a president." During crises, Presidents have often seized new "inherent" powers. During the Civil War, for example, President Lincoln took a series of unprecedented military actions with no clear legal basis. He imposed censorship, ordered a naval blockade and took other actions while Congress was not in session. After the 9/11 attacks, President Bush exercised inherent powers to engage in foreign surveillance, to detain enemy combatants without hearings, and to authorize coercive

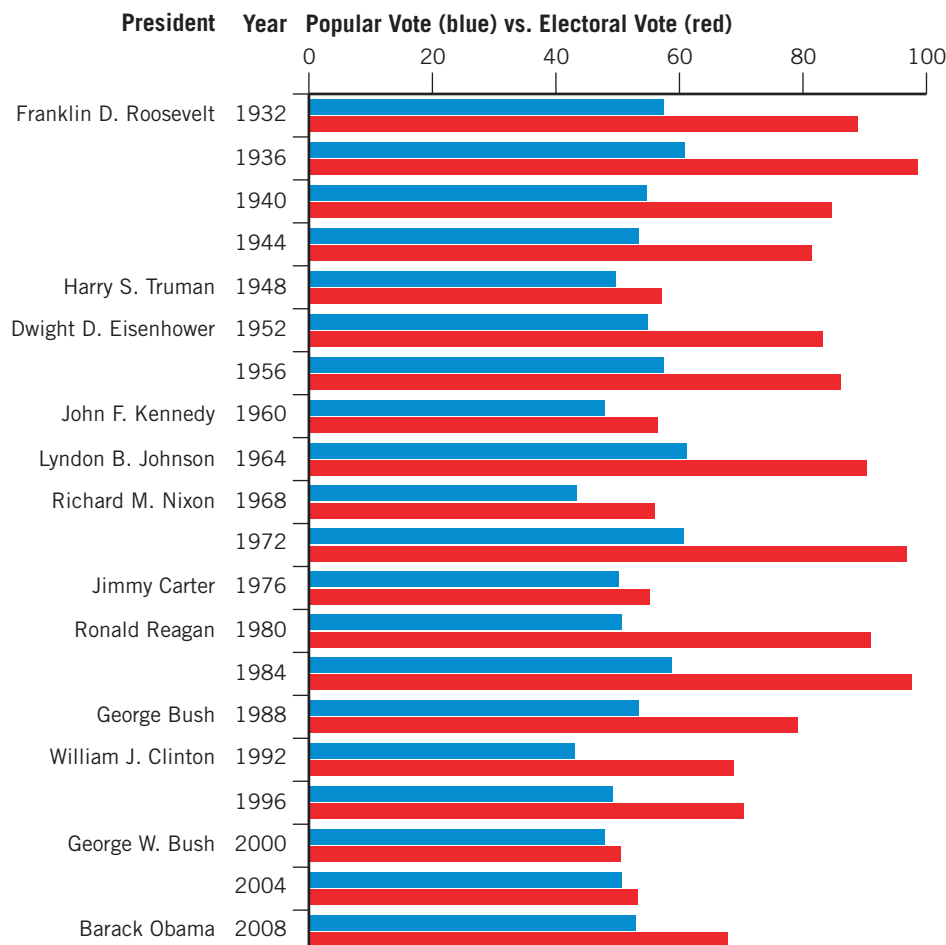
Expressed powers:

Powers to the president explicitly granted by the Constitution.

Delegated powers:

Powers Congress passes on to the president.

Inherent powers: Powers assumed by the president, often during crisis, on the basis of the Constitutional phrase, "the executive power shall be vested in the president."



● **Figure 14.1** The popular vote and the electoral college vote often come out very differently. Even tiny victories in the popular vote can look impressive in the electoral college.

The President's Powers

The president is commander-in-chief of the army, navy, and state militias. But Congress has the power to declare war, set the military budget, and make the rules governing the military.

The president can grant pardons and reprieves for offenses against the United States.

The president can make treaties (with the approval of two-thirds of the Senate), appoint ambassador (with the advice and consent of the Senate),

and select Supreme Court justices and other officers (again, with Senate approval).

The Constitution also authorizes the presidents to solicit the opinions of his cabinet and requires them to report on the state of the union.

interrogation (which critics called torture). Presidents claim inherent powers; the Supreme Court then weighs whether they have overstepped the boundaries of their authority.

The result is a very fluid definition of presidential power. Presidents define their roles, negotiating the limits of the office through their actions at home and abroad. Crises generally expand the presidential role. More than any other institution, the presidency is a constant work in progress. The arc of presidential history begins with a modest constitutional grant of power that has grown enormously through the years.

U.S. presidents long to wield, but have always been denied, all of these powers.

This discussion brings us back to the question we posed at the start of the chapter: Has the president become too powerful? We turn to that question in the next section.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- Presidents serve a four-year term and can run for reelection once.
- They are elected indirectly, via the electoral college.
- The president has three kinds of powers: *expressed* in the constitution, *delegated* by Congress, or *inherent* in the role of chief executive.
- In theory, Congress passes laws and the President executes them. In reality, presidents constantly negotiate the limits of their power—which often expands during crises.

◆ Is the President Too Powerful?

The constitutional framers wrestled with the same issue we debate today: *power*. How much authority do presidents need to protect the nation and get things done? How much power goes so far as to violate the idea of limited government?

An Imperial Presidency?

During George Washington's national tour, a few Americans fretted about his nine stallions, gold-trimmed saddles, personal attendants, and all that adulation. Washington, they whispered, was acting more like a king than president of a homespun republic. They articulated a constant American theme: The president has grown too mighty. Flash forward two centuries. Today, the president

COMPARING NATIONS 14.1: Chief Executives' Power

Although presidents have expanded their authority over time, chief executives in parliamentary systems, those used in most other advanced democracies typically are granted these powers:

- *Emergency decree powers*: greatly expanded authority in national emergencies (and they typically get to decide what counts as an 'emergency').
- *Partial (line-item) veto*: prime ministers and other foreign leaders are able to strip out individual legislative provisions that they find objectionable.
- Exclusive right to *introduce certain kinds of legislation*, especially budgets.
- The ability to *dismiss the legislature and call new elections*.

travels with a cast of hundreds: lawyers, secretaries, cooks, speechwriters, baggage handlers, doctors, aides, snipers, bomb sniffing dogs, and armored cars. When President Clinton visited China, it took 36 jumbo jets (each holding 145 tons of cargo) to carry the presidential team and all its baggage. When the second President Bush visited England, the imperial trappings of the presidential entourage (500 members strong) reportedly surprised the Queen.²

Those concerned about excessive power point to presidential actions that expand the authority of their office. Washington's successor, President John Adams, did not have to worry about cheering crowds. Critics mocked the chubby second president as "His Rotundity." Adams attracted so little attention that he regularly swam naked in the Potomac River (until a woman reporter allegedly spied him, sat on his clothes and demanded an interview). Even Adams, however, aroused widespread fears about executive power when he signed the Alien and Sedition Acts, which gave the executive broad powers to deport "dangerous aliens" and punish "false, scandalous, and malicious" speech. The president seemed to be trampling the 1st amendment by silencing criticism.

Some presidents have stretched the limits of the office by aggressively advancing the **unitary executive theory**. This view holds that the Constitution puts the president in charge of executing the laws, and therefore no one—not Congress, not the judiciary, not even the people—may limit presidential power when it comes to executive matters. Many executive decisions demand swift, decisive, and sometimes secretive action: only an empowered president, the argument goes, can make those instantaneous calls.

The unitary executive theory is controversial. Opponents fear that it upsets the Constitution's intricate checks and balances and tips power from Congress (to pass laws) to the presidency (to sign and then execute them). Proponents respond that they are simply breathing new life into Hamilton's plea in the *Federalist Papers*: To be a great power, the United States must have a robust executive capable of vigorous action.³

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a celebrated historian, warned of an **imperial presidency**. Very powerful presidents, he feared, become like emperors: They run roughshod over Congress, issue secret decisions, unilaterally deploy force around the world, and burst past the checks and balances limiting presidential power. Critics have charged that Presidents Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and George W. Bush all displayed imperial traits; others worry that imperial features have become part of the presidency itself.

Unitary executive theory:

The idea that the Constitution puts the president in charge of executing the laws therefore no other branch should limit presidential discretion over executive matters.

Imperial presidency:

The view that the American presidency has begun to demonstrate imperial traits—that the republic is slowly morphing into an empire.

In short, political leaders from Alexander Hamilton to Vice President Dick Cheney have insisted that the presidency must be strong—and always some members of the public have vigorously responded. At issue are two vital principles: We need a president who is strong enough to lead the country and face our problems. But if presidents become too strong, we lose our republican form of government. This is a deep paradox in American politics: *We need powerful leaders; we fear powerful leaders.*

A Weak Office?

At the same time, the presidency can also seem very weak. Every modern president has complained about his inability to get basic goals accomplished. Congress, courts, the opposing political party, the media, interest groups and bad luck can all humble a president. In the last half century, only three (of nine) presidents completed two full terms. What kind of “imperial” presidency is that?

The president can seem weakest when trying to advance domestic-policy goals. Even under the best of circumstances, as we saw in the previous chapter, it is difficult to get major legislation through Congress. The president nominally runs the executive branch, but the bureaucracy is immense and often difficult to control. Other institutional actors refuse to go along with presidential priorities. Moving the American political process can be extremely difficult, even for the savviest presidents.

For a case study in the weak presidency, take Jimmy Carter. Congressional relations turned frosty early in his term, when Carter unexpectedly vetoed a spending bill. Congress was stung at the abrupt rejection. Carter’s major legislative proposals subsequently ran into trouble on Capitol Hill. Then the economy turned bad. Interest rates spiraled toward 20 percent and unemployment topped 10 percent. Gas prices also soared, forcing customers in some regions to wait in long lines at gas stations.

Carter tried to explain the problem, declaring in one national address that “A crisis of confidence, at the very heart, soul and spirit of our national will . . . is threatening to destroy” America. Critics thought the crisis lay in the president’s office. Carter did not seem to have an answer to all the woes besetting the nation. Shortly after the speech he fired five cabinet officers, which made him seem desperate. A mischievous editor at the *Boston Globe* captured the main reaction to Carter’s speech when he designed a mock headline, “Mush From the Wimp.” By mistake, the headline ran in the first edition.⁴ A few months later, militant Iranian students took 53 Americans hostage at the US embassy in Tehran and held them for 444 days. A weak president seemed to be completely overwhelmed by events all around him.

Back and forth goes the debate. Is the president getting too powerful and overwhelming our republic? Or is the president not up to the job of governing a superpower? Striking the right balance between presidential power and popular control over the president is among the most important issues for American democracy.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- Americans want a powerful president; Americans fear a powerful president.
- The executive branch has grown far stronger over time, especially when it comes to foreign policy.
- Simultaneously, presidential power is restricted, especially when it comes to solving domestic problems.



● **Gas lines:** A case study in troubled presidency: An international energy crisis resulted in long lines at gas stations during the Jimmy Carter years. Presidents take the blame for many events they cannot control—like this one.

What Presidents Do

Over time, presidents have taken on many jobs. Some are described in the Constitution. Others spring up during national crises. Presidents seized still others as they jockeyed for political advantage. By now, the president has accumulated an extraordinary number of hats (and helmets). In this section we'll review the many things the president does—starting with commanding the armies.

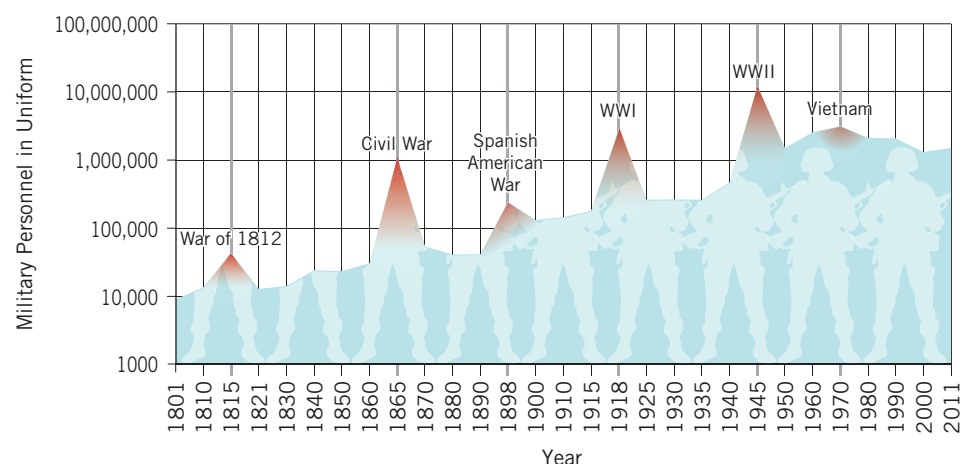
Commander-in-Chief

The Constitution lays it out in taut, simple language: “The president shall be the commander in chief of the Army and Navy of the United States and the militia of the several states, when called into the actual service of the United States.” Congress declares war and presidents manage it.

For many years, the United States had a small standing army and called men to service in wartime. The size of the army jumped 38-fold during the Civil War and 36 times during World War I. After the wars, the army quickly demobilized. This approach reflected classical theory. In great republics like Athens and Rome, citizens took up arms when enemies loomed and then returned home when the crisis had passed—just as George Washington did during the Revolution. Peacetime armies were, according to the traditional perspective, a recipe for empire or monarchy.

This tradition changed after World War II, when the United States faced off against the Soviet Union in the so-called Cold War. An army of around 250,000 (after World War I) grew into a force of over 2 million and spread across the globe. Long before, Tocqueville mused that the Constitution gave the president “almost royal prerogatives which he has no occasion to use.” Now the occasion had arrived and the president's power grew.

Today, America's active duty force numbers 1.4 million with another 1.4 million in reserve. Supplying the military involves the sprawling military-industrial complex described in Chapter 1. The defense budget runs over \$750 billion—not including spending on wars, the Veterans Department, Homeland Security, intelligence agencies, and other related efforts. The military operates 750 installations that span the globe. In short, the Commander in Chief oversees the world's largest fighting force. That role, by itself, makes the president one of the most powerful individuals in the world.



● **Figure 14.2** Active-duty military. Traditionally, the United States called soldiers to war and then demobilized after the war. After the Civil War, each effort left the standing military significantly larger. The United States began to play a global role after the Spanish American war. Source: Historical Statistics, Statistical Abstracts.

Meanwhile, checks on the Commander in Chief have faded. The Constitution authorizes Congress to declare wars, but presidents have rarely waited for Congress to act since the nuclear age dawned in 1945. Facing the doomsday threat of nuclear missiles, military response time is measured in minutes—too fast for Congressional deliberation.

War Powers Act:

Legislation passed in 1973 to increase congressional involvement in undeclared wars. It requires Congress to approve military action after 60 days.

In an effort to regain some of its authority, Congress passed the **War Powers Act** in 1973, requiring congressional approval after troops had been deployed for sixty days. That is a far weaker check than the Constitutional power to declare war. It concedes the President's authority to unilaterally deploy troops; Congress does not get its say until American men and women are already in combat—when it is very difficult to vote no. Presidents have been contemptuous of the War Powers Act. "I don't have to get the permission from some old goat in the United States Congress to kick Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait," President George H. W. Bush told the Texas Republican Convention—even though Bush did seek Congressional approval before launching the first gulf war.⁵ Presidents slip around the War Powers Act by not starting the clock during those 60 days.

Today, the president generally asks Congress for a resolution supporting major military action. In October 2002, for example, President George W. Bush asked for and received an authorization to use force against Iraq if and when he felt it was necessary.

Presidential powers have always waxed during wartime. Franklin Roosevelt's Attorney General once commented, "The Constitution has not greatly bothered any wartime president."⁶ Two things have changed since Roosevelt's day: America's powerful military machine, always poised for deployment. And the perception of perpetual threat—first from the Communists, then from terrorists.

Presidents are deeply engaged by their military role. They start each day with a security briefing that reviews all the dangers stirring around the world; they have a large national security staff; and—the great symbol of our nuclear age—they are never more than a few feet away from the "football."

If you see the president in person, or a wide-angle shot on television, you will glimpse a military officer standing about 20 feet away and clutching a medium-size black briefcase, known as "the football." What's in the bag? Over the years the public has learned that it is a mobile communications center locked into the American



● The Football

nuclear arsenal. Every minute of every day the American president is steps away from an attack that could obliterate any nation from the face of the earth.

Top Diplomat

The Constitution gives presidents the lead role in foreign affairs. Presidents and their international advisers set an overall framework for the U.S. role in the world. Some administrations emphasize international alliances; they work closely with foreign powers and build multi-national institutions. Others prefer to go it alone—they ignore the United Nations, reject the idea of joint military action if American troops would have to serve under foreign leaders, and are reluctant to sign treaties for fear that they will bind the U.S. to foreign governments. Some presidents arrive in Washington eager to spread American ideals around the world. Others believe the bottom line should be American economic interests. And still others prefer to pull back and mind American business at home. We explore these foreign-policy details in Chapter 18; the key point here is that presidents and their teams set the tone for American foreign policy.

Foreign policy issues bombard each president. Should the U.S. take the lead on global warming, or reject international agreements in favor of bulking up domestic manufacturing? Should we press foreign governments on social justice issues (like the right to unionize without facing violence) when negotiating trade agreements? How can the U.S. or a joint alliance of countries persuade North Korea to give up its weapons of mass destruction? Should we be trying to broker

peace in the Middle East? Stop genocide in Darfur? Encourage markets in South America? Presidents and their team constantly meet, discuss, threaten and negotiate with nations near and far.

Foreign diplomacy is not just about trouble spots. The State Department manages 305 embassies, consulates, and diplomatic missions around the world. Presidents must hash out American relations with nearly 200 nations—some friends or “special friends,” others more distant allies or even enemies. Intricate questions arise about how to approach each country: should the president shake hands with our nation’s enemies? Every smile or snub sends a diplomatic message. A president sets the tone and the policy for all these relationships.

Global statecraft is full of unexpected snares. When newly elected President Obama met British Prime Minister Gordon Brown for the first time, the English press howled about “humiliation.” Brown had given Obama a valuable pen carved from the timbers of a 19th century British warship; Obama’s gift was a collection of DVDs. Did the popular president really mean to humiliate the relatively unpopular Prime Minister? Certainly not; the new administration had slipped up. On the international stage, every presidential action is magnified, analyzed, and blogged about.

Two years later, the Obama administration had learned its lesson. When a new Prime Minister, David Cameron, came calling, Obama whisked him via Air Force One (the first foreign leader to ride on the presidential aircraft, noted the English press) to a courtside seat at the first round of the NCAA basketball championship.

Foreign policy crises differ vastly from everyday domestic politics. Passing laws is a long, complicated process full of compromise and constraint. During international crises—hostage situations, terror attacks, the outbreak of wars—all eyes turn toward the president and his team. Often presidents must make fast



● *Obama and the Prime Minister of England at NCAA Play-offs*

decisions with immediate consequences. John F. Kennedy captured the intensity, a few weeks after taking office, in a late-night phone call to former Vice President Richard Nixon during his first international crisis. “It really is true that foreign affairs is the only important issue for a president to handle, isn’t it? I mean who [cares] if the minimum wage is \$1.15 or \$1.25 compared to something like this?”⁷

The First Legislator

The Constitution includes presidents in the legislative process. It authorizes them to: *recommend measures* for Congress’s “consideration,” report to Congress *information on the state of the union*, and *veto legislation* they oppose.

Recommending Measures. Until modern times, presidents generally eschewed legislative affairs, viewed widely as purely congressional business. In 1840, William Henry Harrison devoted his inaugural address—the longest in history—to denouncing the insatiable love of power creeping into the Presidency. He pledged to honor congressional authority by avoiding legislative involvement. Dwight Eisenhower (1953–61) was the last president to share such a view. His Cabinet officers complained and before long Eisenhower was recommending measures—and blasting Congress when they failed to advance his proposals.

Today presidential candidates define the legislative agenda long before they arrive in office. As the 2016 election begins to shape up, click on candidate websites for proposals to deal with issue after issue: economic policy, health care, education, energy, foreign policy, and so on. In our fast-paced media environment, silence on any topic invites criticism. At every news conference and debate, candidates joust over their proposals. Listen carefully: amid all the talk lies a handful of issues that a candidate is passionate about. Presidents-elect generally try to advance these once in office. For President George W. Bush, it was tax cuts, education reform, and privatizing Social Security. Candidate Barack Obama emphasized economic improvement, health reform, and global warming.

Each president arrives in office with a few legislative priorities, but are inevitably enmeshed in many others. Presidential campaign promises require attention. Top advisers lobby to get their favorite programs on the agenda. And unexpected issues require presidential attention along the way.

State of the Union. The Constitution invites the chief executive to report on the state of the union “from time to time.” Today the SOTU address, as insiders term it, is an annual event, delivered with great fanfare before Congress, Supreme Court justices, official Washington, and a national television audience. The State of the Union speech is also the annual focal point of the Cabinet members and other White House officials who compete to get their favorite programs mentioned in the message. Each submits their proposed ideas months in advance, and the president’s staff picks the winners (or substitutes their own favorites).

The president then declares his legislative program for the year in the speech. What you hear is a long and often dull list of programs: for the president’s team, however, each little bullet point is a triumph for one person or department and a defeat for all those pushing programs that failed to make the cut.

Following the SOTU address, each issue undergoes a second round of debates within the administration: Does it really fit our budget? Can we make it work smoothly? Did Congress cheer or yawn when the boss rolled it out? What was the



● State of the Union Address

public reaction? Most policies have friends and enemies in the administration—and if you get your favorite program I may not get mine. The process is a polite version of a knife fight. Proposals that survive go up to Capitol Hill where they face the long, complicated Congressional process we described in the last chapter.

Presidential “Batting Average.” Only members of Congress can formally propose a law, so presidents find supporters in each chamber to submit their bills. The White House has a Congressional liaison team to negotiate and cut deals. Generally hidden from public view, the liaison is a key role in the modern presidency. No matter how talented a liaison might be, frustration inevitably sets in. To the executive branch, legislators seem overly parochial as they focus on their states and districts. Franklin Roosevelt was so frustrated by slow-moving legislators in his Democratic party that he toured the country during the 1938 primary elections trying to ensure their defeat. The effort backfired: his targets easily won reelection and turned even cooler to administration proposals. Most presidents quickly learn the lesson: work closely with Congress. Doing so successfully is one of the most important presidential skills.

We can measure each president’s legislative success—generally referred to as the batting average. There are many different ways to keep score: all the bills the president endorses, the most important bills, or bills that the other party opposes. You can see that when the same party controls the White House and Congress, known as **unified government**, the batting average is much higher—usually around .800. When the opposition party controls Congress (**divided government**) the average usually falls below .500. Some political scientists have argued that divided government makes for a more effective legislative process. But notice how divided government (the red lines) have been yielding less agreement in recent years. As we saw in previous chapters, the two parties are much more uniformly opposed to one another than in the past.

Veto. The Constitution nowhere mentions a presidential veto of legislation. But Article I provides that, once Congress passes a law, presidents have the authority to

Unified government:

Government in which one party controls the White House and Congress.

Divided government:

Government in which different parties control different branches—the House or the Senate or both are in different party hands from the presidency.

President	Party	Years in Office	Percent of Congressional Votes Supporting President's Position	Congressional Control	Outcome
Dwight Eisenhower	R	1953–1954	86.0	Republicans Control Congress	President's party controls Congress
Dwight Eisenhower		1955–1960	67.7	Democrats Control Congress	Opposition party controls Congress
John F. Kennedy	D	1961–1963	84.6	Democrats Control Congress	President's party controls Congress
Lyndon Johnson	D	1963–1969	82.2	Democrats Control Congress	President's party controls Congress
Richard Nixon	R	1969–1974	64.3	Democrats Control Congress	Opposition party controls Congress
Gerald Ford	R	1974–1977	58.3	Democrats Control Congress	Opposition party controls Congress
Jimmy Carter	D	1977–1981	76.6	Democrats Control Congress	President's party controls Congress
Ronald Reagan	R	1987–1989	67.4	Mixed Control (R Senate, D House)	Congress split
Ronald Reagan	R	1987–1989	45.4	Democrats Control Congress	Opposition party controls Congress
George H. W. Bush	R	1989–1993	51.8	Democrats Control Congress	Opposition party controls Congress
Bill Clinton	D	1993–1994	86.3	Democrats Control Congress	President's party controls Congress
Bill Clinton	D	1995–2000	48.1	Republicans Control Congress	Opposition party controls
George W. Bush	R	2001–2006	80.9	Republicans Control Congress	President's party controls Congress
George W. Bush	R	2007–2008		Democrats Control Congress	Opposition party controls Congress
Barack Obama	D	2009–2010		Democrats Control Congress	President's party controls Congress

- President's party controls Congress
- Opposition party controls Congress
- Congress split

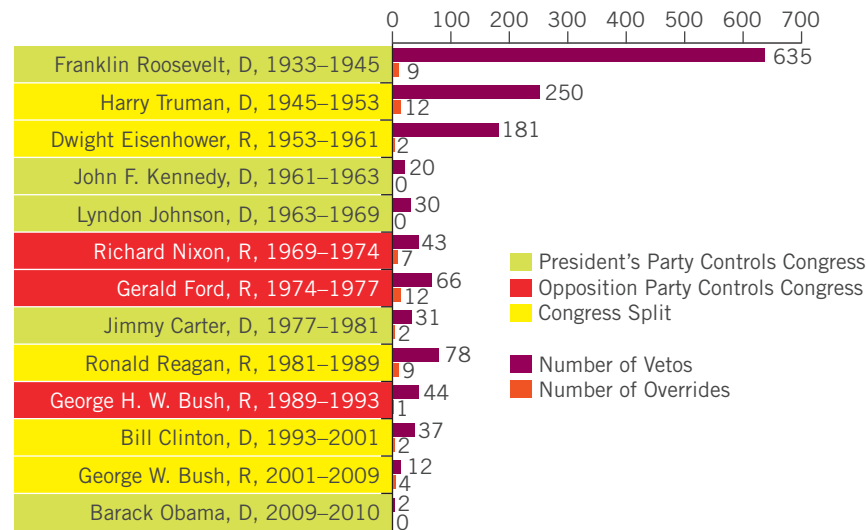
● **Figure 14.3** Presidential Batting Average

sign or **veto** (veto means *I forbid* in Latin). A veto blocks the legislation unless two-thirds of both chambers vote to **override** it, a very high bar to achieve. Presidents have ten days to return the legislation to Congress with a message explaining why they have rejected it. If the president does nothing, the bill becomes law in ten days.

The veto is a formidable weapon. In the last 80 years presidents have rejected more than 1,400 bills. Congress managed to override just 60 times: a Congressional “batting average” of 4%. Recently the veto has become a more partisan weapon, as conflict between the parties escalates. Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Jimmy Carter all flourished the veto pen against a Congress controlled by their own party; in each president’s first two years he struck down 73, 74, and 19 bills respectively. In contrast, the most recent presidents—Clinton, Bush and Obama—*combined* for a total of two vetoes against their own party majorities in their first two years. Each increased use of the veto power only after the opposition party had taken over in Congress.

Veto power: The presidential power to block an act of Congress by refusing to sign it.

Override: Congressional power such that it may overcome a presidential veto with a $\frac{2}{3}$ vote in both chambers.



● **Figure 14.4** Presidential vetoes and overrides

A president’s veto rarely comes as a surprise. As Congress works on a law, the president’s Congressional liaison staff are ever-present. Administration officials may threaten a veto to shape the legislation in favorable ways. When negotiations get especially intense, the president can also go public and threaten Congress. Congressional leaders in turn can threaten to bury a bill the president wants, or openly defy a president to veto popular bills. After all the back and forth, presidents have developed yet another strategy: they can voice their displeasure while signing bills into law.

Signing Statements. Bill signing has become a great Washington ritual, especially for popular legislation. Congressional sponsors flank the president, who has a big pile of pens to hand them out to the program’s key supporters while cameras capture the smiling moment. Legislators brag about how many “pens I’ve gotten from the President.”

In recent decades, presidents increasingly issue **signing statements** as they are signing a bill into law. Along with celebrating the legislative achievement, these statements may offer their administration’s interpretation of the law—one sometimes at odds with Congress’s expressed ideas. President George W. Bush, reflecting a strong view of the unitary executive, used signing statements to challenge an estimated 1,200 sections of Congressional bills—roughly twice as many challenges as all previous presidents combined. Late in the Bush presidency, the

Signing statements: Statements made by presidents when signing bills into law. These often offer the administration’s interpretation of the law.



● **President Obama signs the health care bill**

United States Bar Association condemned the practice as an undue expansion of federal authority.⁸ President Obama, despite campaign promises to avoid signing statements, issued a handful during his first term.* Unless the Supreme Court rules on the matter, this may become another example of the pattern: presidents constantly redefine their own office and expand its powers.

Chief Bureaucrat

The Constitution gives the president the power to appoint the men and women of the executive branch of government, subject to confirmation by the Senate. President Washington took the top officers of the major departments and formed a Cabinet to advise him. The original Cabinet included four officers: the secretaries of War, Treasury, and State, and the Attorney General. By 1800 the executive branch included 200 office holders. These figures stayed in their posts for many years and, in some cases, even passed them on to their sons.⁹

Today, the executive branch includes 15 departments and 2.7 million employees, or more than 4 million counting active-duty military. Presidents appoint some 4,000 positions, including cabinet secretaries and other top officials. We will explore the role of these **political appointees** and the **civil servants** they direct in the next chapter, on the executive bureaucracy.

As chief executive, presidents wield powers that do not need to go through Congress. They can sign **executive orders**, with the force of law, setting guidelines for federal agencies. Contemporary administrations issue around 40-50 executive orders a year. Some are simply instructions for operating the executive branch: setting up a new council or office, for example. Others involve controversial decisions. They can be issued with fanfare or executed secretly. Recent executive orders have declared wilderness areas off limits to snowmobiles (Clinton, rewritten by Bush); introduced new guidelines for interrogating enemy combatants (Bush, rewritten by Obama); required large companies to offer parental leave (Clinton); blocked companies from trading with Cuba or Iran (Bush, Obama); and regulated the use of stem cells in federally funded research (Bush introduced limits, Obama repealed them).

Economist-in-Chief

Economic authority is one power the Constitution definitely does *not* grant the president. The power of the purse—taxing, spending, borrowing, and regulating commerce—is all in Congressional hands. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Roosevelt administration seized responsibility for putting the nation back to work, launching a range of recovery cures. “Take a method and try it,” insisted Roosevelt. “If that fails, try another. . . . Above all try something.”¹⁰

Eventually the idea took root: the president was responsible for a smooth-running economy. The year after Roosevelt died, Congress legislated a Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) to help guide the presidents’ efforts to oversee the economy. Today, each president works with the CEA and other advisers to monitor economic conditions.

White House economists vet every plan and proposal for its impact on American prosperity. Every new administration crowds more economists into its ranks. When the newly elected President won the White House in 2012, among the first presidential moves was to announce an economic team—inevitably a large one, stocked with both formal and informal advisors.* Presidential popularity—and, as

Political appointees: Top officials in the executive agencies appointed by the president.

Civil service: Members of the permanent executive branch bureaucracy who keep their positions regardless of the presidential administration.

Executive orders: Presidential declarations, with the force of law, that issue instructions to the executive branch.

*To be updated for publication based on November 2012 election results.

we saw in Chapter 9, chances for reelection—are heavily influenced by economic conditions.

The Head of State

Most nations have a ceremonial head of state who stands above partisan politics and represents the nation. The Queen of England, the Emperor of Japan, and the President of Israel all play this non-political role while their prime ministers make the policies that govern the countries. Citizens of the British Isles do not need to check their political affiliation when they sing “God Save the Queen”—she represents them across the political spectrum. In contrast, the presidents of the United States play both roles. They stand for the nation even while they represent one party in political debate.

Presidents spend a lot of time in their ceremonial role. They throw out the World Series first pitch, spare a turkey every Thanksgiving, light the White House Christmas tree, smash a bottle of champagne across the bow of a new aircraft carrier, congratulate national heroes, host championship sports teams, and embody America every time the Marine Corps Band plays “Hail to the Chief.” When Presidents travel abroad they represent all Americans, not just their party or their supporters.

During George W. Bush’s presidency, a group of diplomats from across Asia gathered in Bangkok to greet a new U.S. ambassador to the region. The American Ambassador raised his glass and offered a traditional toast: “To George W. Bush.” The foreign diplomats felt uncomfortable. They respected the United States but vehemently disagreed with the administration’s handling of the war on terror. They wanted to toast the United States (which President Bush represented) but not the administration’s policies (which President Bush led).

This tension arises in every administration. It comes from the dual role presidents play: they stand for the nation and they also represent a party and a point of view. The clash between ceremonial and political becomes especially vivid when presidents are running for reelection. Everything they do echoes back on the campaign.

Combining both roles adds to the office’s prestige, and therefore presidents’ power. Bruising policy battles are balanced out by the pomp and circumstance that many other nations reserve for royalty. No rival in Washington can match that.

Party Leader

George Washington repeatedly warned the country against political parties and the strife they brought. However, by his second term, rival parties were already emerging. As suffrage spread beyond landowning gentlemen, parties grew into the largest political organizations in America. They created yet another role for the president: party leader.

This role sharpens the tension we raised in the last section. There is a very fine line between leading the nation (and standing for everyone) and leading the Democrats (which means defeating Republicans). The tension becomes acute during war. As the Cold War developed, Senator Arthur Vandenberg (R-Michigan) famously declared that party “politics stop at the water’s edge”—the nation had to be united to defeat communism. That idea, never fully honored, collapsed in the debate over Vietnam. Almost everything the president does, home and abroad, is now part of the great American political debate.

Ronald Reagan hosted a reception at the White House to celebrate Democratic legislators who had switched allegiance to his Republican party. Bill Clinton astonished everyone at his prowess—rivals called it shamelessness—at raising money for Democratic candidates; Republicans charged that the president rewarded big

donors with a night in the Lincoln Bedroom. When George W. Bush took over, Democrats complained that the president was using the war on terror to defeat Democrats and build a permanent Republican majority. Each side accuses the other of taking politics to unprecedented extremes.

President Obama took office determined to dial down the party conflict. He offered Republicans important positions in his administration, like Secretary of Defense; he tried a bipartisan Super bowl party; and he negotiated long and hard to win over at least a couple of Senate Republicans to his health plan. The efforts failed. When Democrats began calling the Republicans “the Party of “No,” the Republicans defiantly responded that they were the party of “Hell No!” Voters rewarded the sentiment in 2010 with a midterm Republican landslide.

Can anything tamp down the partisan conflict? The secret ingredient is fear. When a president grows very popular, opponents will often go along out of fear that the voters might punish them if they do not. Presidents who get more votes in a district than a House member of Congress, or more votes in the state than a Senator, can be very persuasive—as long as their poll numbers remain high.

The Bully Pulpit: Introducing Ideas

President Theodore Roosevelt was bursting with ideas, opinions, exhortations and warnings. He called the presidency itself a “bully pulpit” (today we might say “awesome platform”). Roosevelt knew that an active president has the country’s ear, an opening to introduce and promote new ideas.

Most presidencies are marked by a few big ideas. In his inaugural John F. Kennedy called the nation to public service. “Ask not what your country can do for you,” said Kennedy. “Ask what you can do for your country.” As the second youngest president in history (after Theodore Roosevelt), Kennedy projected youthful energy and vigor. The president’s ideas seemed part and parcel of the man himself. Ronald Reagan championed a very different idea when he called government the source of our national problems; individuals pursuing the American dream and



● **The Bully Pulpit** *Theodore Roosevelt called the presidency a “bully pulpit.” No other office is more effective for introducing ideas into American politics. Here TR takes full advantage of his pulpit.*

trying to get rich were, he declared, the real source of national vitality. Successful presidents arrive in office with powerful ideas—and persuade the public to embrace new visions of our political life.

Where do the grand themes come from? Presidents develop them on the way to the White House. Ideas reflect a president's personal experience or fire up an important constituency. They bubble up from allies, intellectuals, policy networks, think tanks, and old friends. Big ideas move political mountains because they inspire followers and sustain movements.

A sign of a fading party is a cupboard bare of ideas. When Jimmy Carter won the White House in 1976, a member of his transition team wrote a strange memo. The new administration, he said, must educate its appointees about President-elect Carter's "goals and philosophy." Carter and the Democrats of that era were so vague about their ideas that the president's staff thought it essential to instruct its troops about what their new leader stood for.¹¹

More than any political office in America, the Presidency rises and falls on ideas. "The power of the presidency," as one scholar famously put it, "is the power to persuade."¹² Persuasion involves the ability to put something new before the public, the power to take an unfamiliar notion and get the whole nation talking about it. This book has repeatedly focused on the power and importance of ideas in American politics. The presidency is the institution best geared to inject new ideas into our great national conversation.

The Impossible Job

How can anyone juggle so many different presidential roles? The honest answer is that no one can. Even great presidents cannot handle all their jobs well all of the time. Still, this is what we demand of our presidents.

Each presidential role requires different strengths and skills. No one person will have them all. However, the bully pulpit can help. Bold ideas bring together the many threads of this huge task. They make a presidency coherent. Without that, presidents may seem overwhelmed by the job, skittering from one task to another without a broader sense of purpose and vision.

Finally note one theme that has run through every role: presidential authority has grown in every aspect of the office. The president's many roles are one more way to measure the swelling power and importance of the office. That brings us back again to the central paradox of the executive: The presidency grows ever more powerful, yet the role has grown so large that no one person can perform every aspect of it well.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- The president wears many hats and helmets. Some are specified in the Constitution. Others have developed over time.
- Presidential roles include: Commander in Chief, top diplomat, first legislator, head bureaucrat, economist in chief, head of state, and party leader. Presidents are also uniquely situated to introduce new ideas—tying together these many different roles.
- The president's authority has grown in every one of these many roles. At the same time, it is difficult to do so many different things effectively.

Presidential Leadership: Success and Failure in the Oval Office

Presidents strive to manage perceptions of their performance. They address the public, use (and bypass) the media, schedule eye-catching events, and rely on polls to hone their message. How do we know if they have succeeded? We'll examine three different measures: polls, historical rankings, and the great cycles of political time.

Managing the Public

As the only nationally elected official (excepting the vice president, who is elected as a package with the president), presidents develop a relation to the people, which they cultivate by **going public**. Each new medium—radio, television, Twitter—shifts the way presidents go public.

John F. Kennedy demonstrated the full power of the media when he held the first live, televised press conference in February 1961. It was a smash with the 65 million who watched; Kennedy's approval ratings climbed to 75 percent, and stayed high for 16 months. As we saw in Chapter 12, the first live press conference was an important milestone on the way to the **personal presidency**. Kennedy had shifted how presidents connect to the public: people saw him, watched him, and related to him directly.

Today, presidents continue to look for ways to relate personally to Americans. They call town hall meetings, travel across the country, and give speeches before large crowds. They speak directly to the camera from the Oval Office. Their office tweets supporters. You can follow them on Facebook. Each is an effort to win the public over—sometimes for a specific policy, sometimes for a broad presidential agenda.

Presidents 'go public' primarily through the media. Each effort—the town hall meeting with a small group, the speech in front of thousands—is designed to control the spin that filters out through newscasts, talk shows, and Twitter feeds.

Images are often more important than words. Presidents hug disaster victims, play basketball with the troops, or turn out cheering throngs waving the American flag in a foreign nation. These flattering images can also turn negative. President Johnson lifted his beagle by the ears in front of the press (cruel!). President Ford slipped and fell in public (clumsy!). President George H. W. Bush threw up at a state dinner in Japan (you can imagine!). In a complicated world, a single picture can distill popular perception. They have an impact—positive or negative—when they seem to cut to the core of the president's strengths or weakness. The key point is simple: *President's constantly try to manage their image in the public eye.*¹³

Our 24/7 media era, as you saw in Chapter 9, complicates the effort to touch the public. On the one hand, it is easier than ever to communicate. However, the velocity of the news cycle means that most efforts only linger a few hours before they are displaced by the next story. A generation ago, an important presidential address might dominate the news for several days. Now, the sheer volume of information flowing through the media means that only the most important events will command attention for long. The president's message now requires constant repetition, amplification, and—to grip viewers—a touch of novelty and drama. Going public is a rapidly changing art form.

The White House runs a sophisticated polling operation that guides its outreach efforts. The president's daily schedule frequently includes briefings from the administration's pollster. The president's team scrutinizes the findings, not

Going public: Directly addressing the public in order to win support for themselves or their ideas.

Personal presidency: The idea that the president has a personal link to the public. Made possible by 20th century media.

see for yourself 14.1



Go online to see President Ford's unfortunate stumble.

to develop new policies but to recalibrate the ways they present their message. President Bush doubled down on the war in Iraq and Social Security privatization despite polls that told him it was unpopular; President Obama did the same on health care reform. The administration goals don't change, but the language and the pitch is heavily poll tested in the constant search for the most effective way to communicate to the public.¹⁴

Approval Ratings

Every week, another wave of polls report how Americans view the president's performance. These are used widely, inside and beyond Washington, as a rough barometer of the administration's success. Any one poll can be misleading (as we saw in Chapter xx) but if you eliminate the outliers—the occasional polls that are much higher and lower than the rest—you'll have a snapshot of the administration's ratings that are reverberating through the media and around Washington.

A president riding high in the polls finds governing easier. The press corps and Washington insiders are slightly more deferential. Members of Congress watch the president's popularity in their own states and districts; when presidents are popular, members think twice about opposing them. As the president's approval sinks, criticism rises. Congressional allies back away. Press coverage turns sour. The late night talk shows serve up mockery. As Lincoln put it, "Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment nothing can fail, without it nothing can succeed."¹⁵

All administrations run through polling cycles; no president stays above 50 percent approval for an entire term. Average out differences across administrations and roughly the same pattern emerges: High approval scores at the start, usually above 60 percent; a slow decline that bottoms out midway through the second year; a gradual ascent and peak toward the end of the fourth year. With luck it rises above 50 percent in time for reelection. Each individual administration offers its own unique variations—with general economic performance affecting the general approval level.¹⁶

Dramatic events create spikes in approval (or disapproval). The two highest ratings on record boosted George H. W. Bush after a quick, dramatic victory in the first gulf war, and his son George W. Bush after he responded to terrorist attacks on the world trade center in September 2001 by standing defiantly on the rubble with a bull horn surrounded by cheering firefighters and clean up crews. Each Bush peaked at 89 percent approval rating in Gallup polls. Such spikes in popularity are usually temporary. A year after his military triumph, George H. W. Bush's approval rating had fallen below 40 percent and he lost his reelection campaign. The younger Bush narrowly won reelection, but ended his time in office tied for the lowest ratings after a full term.

Polls offer immediate public feedback, but they do not reflect an administration's importance or help us understand presidents' performance over a full four or eight years. For that we can turn to a different kind of poll.

Presidential Greatness

Back in 1948, historian Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. asked a panel of historians to rank the presidents. Their choice as the top three:

1. Abraham Lincoln, for leading the Union through the Civil War and, in the process, restating the American principle of self rule: "Government of the people, by the people, for the people."

see for yourself 14.2



Go online to see President George W. Bush's bull horn speech at Ground Zero.



● **President Johnson lifts his dog by the ears.** *President Johnson brought himself a lot of negative press with this shot of him lifting his beagle by the ears. Presidents have to constantly manage their image and avoid pictures like this one.*



● **President Bush at the World Trade Center, September 2001.** *President George Bush at Ground Zero. This dramatic moment helped drive the president's approval ratings to one of the highest levels ever recorded.*

2. George Washington, for defining the presidency—and the nation.
3. Franklin Roosevelt, for rethinking the presidency and the federal government's role in national life. FDR took on responsibility for the national economy, and introduced a new American freedom—"the freedom from want."

Poll followed presidential poll—we list five different versions in Table 14.1. Each asks a panel of historians, sometimes with political scientists, to rank-order the presidents: the greats, the near-greats, the mediocre and the failures. The three presidents who led the original list in 1948 always rank highest (although Washington occasionally slips down to number four; too low, in our opinion).

The rankings become more interesting with the next three in most polls:

4. Thomas Jefferson, who led the first party change in American history, replacing John Adams's Federalists with the Democratic Republicans in 1800. Jefferson shrank the size of government, cut the budget, and promised to return government to the people. He also doubled the size of the nation by buying the Louisiana territory from Napoleon. Perhaps DNA evidence about his long affair with a woman in bondage, Sally Hemings, has dropped him in public esteem. But scholars consistently rank his administration in the top five.
5. Theodore Roosevelt now ranks high in most polls; he even occasionally bumps Washington out of the top three. Roosevelt framed the modern presidency by taking his 'bully pulpit' style directly to the public. He projected American power around the globe. And he was a fierce reformer and conservationist. In many ways 'TR' was the first modern president.
6. Woodrow Wilson ranked very high on the initial lists. He saw the United States through World War I, introduced a host of reforms, and fought to engage the United States in postwar diplomacy through the League of

Table 14.1 Presidential Rankings (the results of five surveys of historians and political scientists)

	SCHLESINGER ['48]	SCHLESINGER JR. ['96]	WSJ [2005]	SIENA ['10]	USPC ['11]
George Washington	2	2	1	4	3
John Adams	9	11	13	17	12
Thomas Jefferson	5	4	4	5	4
James Madison	14	17	17	6	14
James Monroe	12	15	18	7	13
John Q. Adams	11	18	25	19	20
Andrew Jackson	6	5	10	14	9
Martin V. Buren	15	21	27	23	27
William H. Harrison	—	—	—	35	—
John Tyler	22	32	35	37	37
James Polk	10	9	9	12	16
Zachary Taylor	25	29	35	33	33
Millard Fillmore	24	31	36	38	35
Franklin Pierce	27	33	38	40	39
James Buchanan	26	38	40	42	40
Abraham Lincoln	1	1	2	3	2
Andrew Johnson	19	37	37	43	36
Ulysses Grant	28	24	29	26	29
Rutherford Hayes	13	23	24	31	30
James Garfield	—	—	—	27	—
Chester Arthur	17	26	26	25	32
Grover Cleveland	08	13	12	20	21
Benjamin Harrison	21	19	30	34	34
William McKinley	18	16	14	21	17
Theodore Roosevelt	7	6	5	2	5
William H. Taft	16	22	20	24	25
Woodrow Wilson	4	7	11	8	6
Warren Harding	29	39	39	41	38
Calvin Coolidge	23	30	23	29	28
Herbert Hoover	20	35	31	36	26
Franklin Roosevelt	3	3	3	1	1
Harry Truman	—	8	7	9	7
Dwight Eisenhower	—	10	8	10	10
John F. Kennedy	—	12	15	11	15
Lyndon B. Johnson	—	14	18	16	11
Richard Nixon	—	36	32	30	23
Gerald Ford	—	28	28	28	34
Jimmy Carter	—	27	34	32	18
Ronald Reagan	—	25	06	18	8
George H. W. Bush	—	24	21	22	22
Bill Clinton	—	20	22	13	19
George W. Bush	—	—	—	39	31

Note: Historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. polled historians in 1948. Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. polled historians and political scientists in 1996. The Wall Street Journal, did a "balanced" poll asking both liberal and conservative scholars. Sienna College polled 740 professors in 2010. The United States Presidency Centre [USPC] at the University of London offers the perspective of British scholars of the U.S. presidency 2011.

Nations—though Congress rejected his plan. Looking at more recent polls, Wilson’s star is fading; he now sometimes slips out of the top ten. Modern historians fault him for doing a terrible job selling his vision for post-war American involvement in Europe, and for introducing racial segregation into federal government offices.

Changing perspectives on past issues alters our view of presidential performance. Andrew Johnson took office in 1865, after Lincoln’s assassination. Rankings from the 1940s saw Johnson as a president who tried to moderate the demands of the so-called Radical Republicans, hell bent on punishing the South for the Civil War. In contrast, recent scholars take civil rights more seriously and rank Johnson among the worst presidents for resisting aid to the former slaves—even opposing the post-Civil War constitutional amendments. Likewise, concern about his mistreatment of Native Americans has pushed Andrew Jackson out of the top rank.

Liberals and conservatives rarely disagree about how the presidents rank. Ronald Reagan is an exception, though his ratings from left-leaning scholars have climbed in recent polls. Such agreement returns us to the question: what makes a great president?

There are plenty of answers. President Harry Truman said that all the great presidents were especially decisive. Political scientists Marc Landy and Sidney Milkis suggest that great presidents redefine the presidency. Our view is that great presidents redefine America; they reshape the way the nation sees itself. Or, to put it slightly differently, *Great presidents tell us who we are*. Their definitions of America resonate with the public and endure over time.

Greatness in Context: The Rise and Fall of Political Orders

Presidents are by no means masters of their destiny. The times make the president as much as he makes the times. Individual presidents fit into national cycles of politics and power. Presidential scholar Stephen Skowronek describes each presidency as part of a great historical pageant: the rise and fall of political orders. A political order is a set of ideas and actors who dominate an era.¹⁷ On Skowronek’s telling, orders rise and fall in three steps. Every president fits somewhere in the cycle.

Step 1: A New Order Rises. Outstanding leaders take over the presidency and shake up the political system. Abraham Lincoln or Franklin Roosevelt or Ronald Reagan introduces a fresh philosophy of government. They lead a political party with new allies and new ideas into power. The public responds enthusiastically to this bold break with old political ways.

For example, Lincoln led the newly formed Republican Party to power and drew a range of political groups into its ranks. Some of Lincoln’s followers joined the party to oppose the sin of slavery. Others joined the cause because they believed in “free labor” capitalism; they resisted slavery not as a moral cause, but because it blocked the development of capitalism. Self-proclaimed “nativists” lurked on the fringes of Lincoln’s Republican Party because the Democrats had embraced Irish and German immigrants, whom the nativists despised. This new coalition joined a host of ideas and interests from different regions of the country. Together they elected Lincoln and then, in the agony of civil war, fused into a powerful governing alliance. Republicans dominated American politics for 70 years. In that entire time only two Democrats made it to the White House.

Step 2. *The Order Refreshed.* Every governing coalition eventually grows tired. The great president who boldly articulated its themes is gone. Many of the original goals are won. New problems arise that have nothing to do with the philosophy that fired up the party in the first place. The ideas begin to look out of date; the great coalition begins to unravel. In fortunate times, a new leader will come along and infuse the party with a fresh variation of the old philosophy, renewing the aging order.

Thirty-five years after Lincoln's assassination, Republicans had vanquished slavery and free-labor capitalism ruled the nation. The nation now faced new problems, some of them caused the capitalist order Republicans had ushered in. Theodore Roosevelt (1901–1909) remade the Republican Party for a new modern era. Full of modern ideas (along with plenty of bluster), Roosevelt shook up the Grand Old Party and rebuilt it for a new era of giant corporations, globalism, and technological revolution. "TR" advanced social and economic reforms and revitalized the coalition that had originally rallied around the Republican standard: powerful business corporations eager to expand their reach and a rising middle class hungry for government reforms. He also revived an older skepticism about inferior immigrants sapping native strength.

Step 3. *The Old Order Crumbles.* No order lasts forever. Over time, the party finds its ideas increasingly irrelevant. The old order feels outdated, a political dinosaur.

Republicans were unprepared to cope with the Great Depression. After all, they were the party of markets and capitalism—and those had imploded. The old political order collapsed around the presidency of Herbert Hoover between 1929 and 1933.

Back to Step 1, where the cycle begins again. Franklin Roosevelt and the Democrats roared into power in 1933 with new ideas and a broad new coalition, all pitched against the old Republican principles. The rising Democrats introduced a new philosophy based on collective effort and social security. A new order came to power. It would be refreshed (step two) by John F. Kennedy (in 1960). Republicans would not elect two presidents in a row for the next 50 years—until Ronald Reagan came along in 1981 and, in turn, marked the beginning of a new Republican order.

Every president comes to Washington with fresh hope and promise. Political historians look back and see that they operate within a cycle. Some (Lincoln, Roosevelt, Reagan) take office as the head of a new coalition with fresh ideas. Others come to Washington at the end of an era (Herbert Hoover, Jimmy Carter). They face a far more difficult governing challenge. To some extent, the rankings we saw above reflect each president's place in political time.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- Presidents try to manage public perceptions of the job they are doing. They get immediate feedback from polling. A president's place in history, however, usually does not emerge right away.
- Great presidents change the way Americans see themselves. They change what government does. They forge a new answer to the question, "*Who are we?*"
- Individual presidents don't completely control their own destiny. They operate in the historical cycle of political orders.

Table 14.2 Political Orders: Where Are We Now?

THE DEMOCRATIC ORDER (1932–1968)		
<i>Roosevelt</i>	Democrat	1932
<i>Roosevelt</i>	Democrat	1936
<i>Roosevelt</i>	Democrat	1940
<i>Roosevelt</i>	Democrat	1944
Truman	Democrat	1948
Eisenhower	Republican	1952
Eisenhower	Republican	1956
John F. Kennedy	Democrat	1960
<i>Lyndon Baines Johnson</i>	Democrat	1964
THE REPUBLICAN ORDER (1969–1992)		
Richard Nixon	Republican	1968
<i>Richard Nixon</i>	Republican	1972
Jimmy Carter	Democrat	1976
<i>Ronald Reagan</i>	Republican	1980
<i>Ronald Reagan</i>	Republican	1984
George W. Bush	Republican	1988
WHERE ARE WE NOW? (1992–PRESENT)		
Bill Clinton*	Democrat	1992
Bill Clinton*	Democrat	1996
George W. Bush*	Republican	2000
George W. Bush	Republican	2004
Barack Obama	Democrat	2008
Obama/Romney	[to be updated]	
<i>Note: Italics indicate landslides *did not get 50% of the popular</i>		

The Personal Presidency

In at least one respect, the presidency is very simple: it is always about one individual. At the heart of the enterprise stands a person with strengths and weaknesses, quirks and foibles. Only 19 men held the office across the entire 20th century. Their personalities imprinted their administrations in many ways, big and small.

Presidential Style

James Madison was just a bit over five feet tall, weighing less than 100 pounds. He wore tall hats to add height, clothed himself entirely in black, and never owned

What Do
You Think?

14.1 Changing Political Order

Political historians debate where the U.S. stands today in the great cycle of power. The order was evident between 1932–68: Democrats won eight elections, five by landslides. That was followed by a Republican order; the Republicans won six out of the next seven elections, three by landslides. While Nixon established electoral victories, President Reagan who defined this order. But where are we now? What do you think?

The Reagan philosophy is still relevant. According to this view, government is the problem; free markets and individualism are the solution; tax cuts and deregulation the policy choices. George W. Bush tried to update it with compassionate conservatism.

Barack Obama founded a new Democratic political order. This view is focused on new problems such as inequality.*

Unsure. Do you see a new order emerging with a new set of ideas (share the wealth) and new coalition partners (perhaps immigrant groups)? Or do we still live in the Age of Reagan?

more than one suit at a time. He was both diminutive and timid. Early historians blasted him for his cautious leadership during the War of 1812. But scholars have warmed to Madison. He was guided by a fierce attachment to the Constitution that he had drafted. He believed that the office was greater than the man. Who better than a small, shy, modest, black-clad figure to avoid too much “personality” in the presidency?

Or take some darker personal qualities: Secluded in his hideaway office across the street from the White House, the fireplace crackling as the air conditioner hummed, Richard Nixon scribbled on yellow legal pads into the night. He was brilliant—and often seemed paranoid. Nixon usually dealt directly with four or five aides; their job was to keep others at bay. Sitting alone, writing away on his yellow pads, he dreamed up stunning ideas.

At the time the United States was locked in a cold war with two great communist powers, Russia and China. Nixon calculated that our two enemies were bitterly opposed to one another as well. He negotiated secretly with China. When the Russians discovered the thaw between China and the U.S., they feared being left out in the cold. They too pursued closer relations with the U.S. Nixon had invented a way to ratchet down the bitter cold war by playing off our enemies against one another.

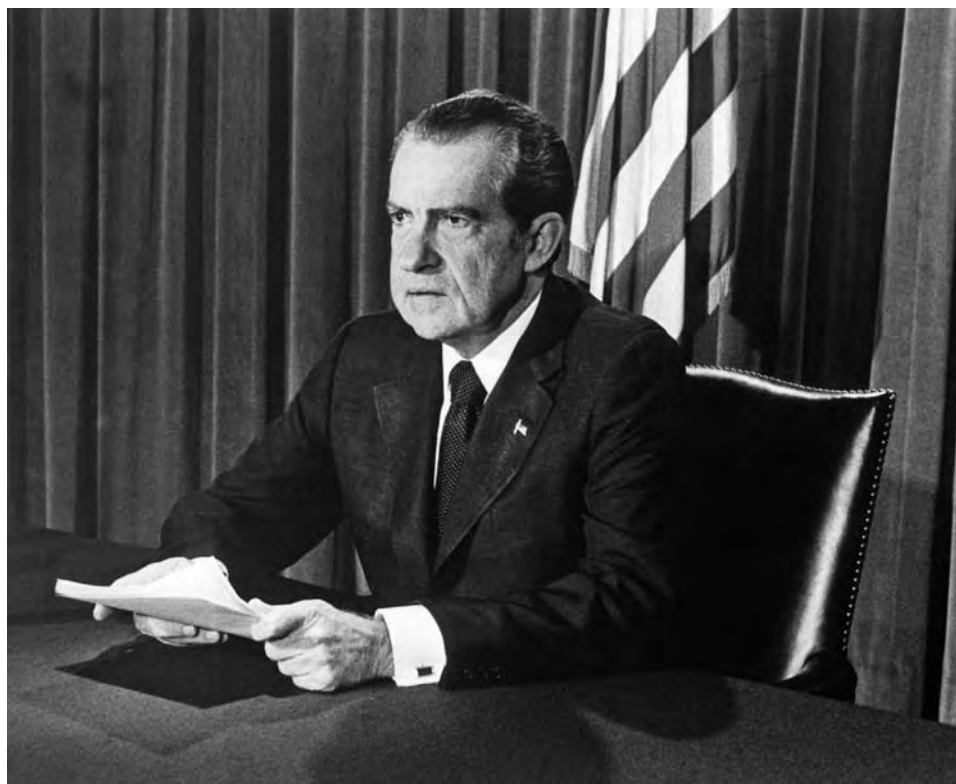
Nixon also cooked up a national health insurance plan that serves as a model (for Democrats) to the present day. But, sitting alone and often drinking heavily into the night, he stoked the fears that ultimately cost him the White House.

Or consider a very different political genius: *Ronald Reagan* loved to tell stories. He told them to make a point, to deflect people from saying things he did not want to hear, to reorient a conversation that was going the wrong way



● Madison

*To be updated for publication based on November 2012 election results.



● Nixon

or—well, just because he loved telling them. “He could drive you crazy [telling] . . . the same stories over and over again,” reported Congressman Dan Rostenkowski (D-IL). “He really made no show whatsoever of listening to arguments . . . He saw reality, not as a thing to bow to but a thing that could be changed and shaped.”¹⁸

Was it really true that, during World War II, army bureaucrats granted Reagan’s unit permission to destroy a warehouse full of useless files, “provided copies are made of each paper destroyed?” Who knows? The parable was irresistible: government bureaucracies choke the life out of any enterprise.

After college, Reagan broke into radio as a sports announcer. Broadcasting in Des Moines, Iowa, he recreated baseball games in the studio while a telegraph operator sat by his side and handed him summaries of each play. In the 9th inning of a scoreless game between the Chicago Cubs and the St. Louis Cardinals, the wire went dead. If he reported the truth, Reagan would lose his audience to the big stations broadcasting directly from the ballpark. So he kept right on talking. “I knew there was only one thing that wouldn’t get into the score column and betray me,” said Reagan, “a foul ball.” So, as Reagan told it, the batter, Billy Jorges, fouled off one pitch after another—for seven minutes. When the telegraph finally started working again, Reagan discovered that Billy popped up on the very first pitch. “Well, not in my game he didn’t,” quipped Reagan. For days people would meet young Reagan on the street and remark on all those fouls—while he agreed that it had been amazing, and never let on that he’d invented the whole at-bat.¹⁹

Such tall tales went to the heart of Reagan’s successes and failures as president. He focused on parables rather than policies. His airy indifference to the analytic world of evidence, arguments, and ideas freed him to repeat his handful of



● Reagan

moral lessons, to impress them on American discourse. They helped him change the whole framework of American politics to a more rugged individualism that scorned handouts and collective action. He made it work because he wrapped that individualism in a nostalgic vision of America. In Reagan's America, young boys were forever chasing baseballs after Billy Sturgis fouled another one off.

Madison's republican simplicity, Nixon's brilliance and paranoia, Reagan's pointed storytelling and gauzy vision of American free enterprise all shaped the way they governed and the mark they left. This kind of territory used to be the province of historians and anthropologists, not political scientists. But it is vital to acknowledge—and carefully study—the *personal* dimension of the presidency.

A Model of the Personal Presidency

Some political scientists have tried to build models to analyze presidential personality. James Barber authored the best-known effort, which categorizes presidents into four basic personality types. When it first came out, Barber's theory became so popular that President-elect Jimmy Carter told an interviewer he hoped he would fit into Barber's first group. The four groups follow:

Active-Positives have high self-esteem and adapt well to changing circumstances. Their core goal is to be productive. Since they relish what they do, they are usually

What Do
You Think?

14.2

Watch the President in action, delivering speeches and interacting with staff and family.

How would you describe his personal style?

What are its elements?

Think about how they seem effective and what their shortcomings appear to be.

pretty good at it. Thomas Jefferson, Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman all fit this category.

Active-Negatives seek power and ambition. This type often has a troubled presidency, because they find it psychologically difficult to admit failure and keep pursuing ill-fated policies. For this type of personality, admitting an error raises a primal fear: losing control. Think of Herbert Hoover, clinging to a pro-market philosophy during the Great Depression; Lyndon Johnson, slogging on in Vietnam, and Richard Nixon, stonewalling media and even his own advisers after the Watergate break-in.

Passive-Positives need affection. They hope that by being agreeable they will win over others. Such people typically do not work very hard and, Barber claimed, do not have much self-esteem, so they seek the approval of others. Barber placed James Madison and Ronald Reagan in this category.

Passive-Negatives throw themselves grimly into their work; they are all duty and no zest. They duck conflict and promote vague, shifting principles. Facing major decisions, they forget about the big picture and only worry about the correct procedure. Calvin Coolidge (“Silent Cal”) fits this description. Barber raised a lot of eyebrows when he also put George Washington in this category.

Barber’s is a simple theory that you can also apply to your friends and professors. Certainly some presidents seem to fit. “Silent Cal” Coolidge, for example, complained: “One of the most appalling trials that confront a President is the perpetual clamor for public utterances.” He preferred to be left alone, a classic Passive-Negative.²⁰

The Burden of the Office

Running the nation, as you can see in photographs of every president over their time in office, is an exhausting job. Fourteen presidents and former presidents died during the 20th century; eleven passed away prematurely. Eight of them fell more than seven years short of expected life spans for men of their age. Presidents before they take office usually appear relatively young, handsome, smiling; by the time they step down, they often look careworn and gray.²¹



● The younger Bush when first elected president.



● Bush only eight years later at the end of his term.

The morbid health statistics remind us that the Oval Office houses a vulnerable human being. Presidents get sick, take dubious drugs, get drunk, contemplate suicide, fret about ailing parents, burn with insecurities and bury people they love. None can escape the human condition. All wrestle with an extremely difficult job.

Personal frailties have an impact on presidential successes and failures, on wise choices and mistakes. Like all people, presidents are individuals with limitations on even their soaring abilities, blind spots that hamper their political and strategic vision.²² The insight returns us to a central question of this chapter: Has the president developed too much power in the modern era?

THE BOTTOM LINE

- While presidential scholars generally focus on ideas and institutions, the presidency also has a critically important personal dimension.
- All presidents exhibit a distinctive personal style.
- Presidents are limited human beings with strengths and weaknesses. That is precisely why the Constitution located the office in an intricate system of checks and balances.

The President's Team: A Tour of the White House

When Herbert Hoover moved into the Oval Office in 1929, he presided over a presidential staff of four administrative assistants, plus 36 typists, clerks, and messengers. That was it. No speechwriter, no press secretary, no Congressional liaison; no Chief of Staff, no drug czar, no budget director. Today, the presidency is more than a man or an idea or a party. It is a bureaucracy staffed by thousands of people.

The Political Solar System: Presidential Appointments

Every time a new president is elected, thousands of people hope for a job. College professors who've always dreamed of government service, college students who worked on the campaign, business executives looking for a plum on their resume, and supporters who believe the president-elect will make America a better place: all want to work for the new administration.

To get a job in a presidential administration, do not start by being modest. You must campaign: one executive angling to be Secretary of the Treasury a few years back tasked four subordinates to do nothing but promote his name to the administration's transition team in charge of selecting top appointees (yes, he got the job).

This section highlights those officials working directly for the president. A crucial opening point: Power is always measured by proximity to the president. The executive branch is like the solar system, with the president as the sun and everyone else rotating around him. A trump card in any Washington, DC, conversation: "When I was talking to the president . . ." Most people who work for the president are in an orbit somewhere past Pluto: they never get any face time. Let us look at some who do.



● **Vice President Cheney.** *Vice President Cheney was a savvy Washington operator who developed a reputation for wielding formidable power during the George W. Bush administration's first term. With time, his power waned and, by the end of the administration, he often found himself isolated within the Cabinet.*

The Vice President

Traditionally, the Vice President's primary job was to stand in the wings in case the president dies. That awful transition happened eight times in American history, four times by murder. That means almost one in five presidents came to office after the death of his predecessor. There were at least four more close calls: Assassins fired point-blank at Andrew Jackson (the gun jammed), Franklin Roosevelt (shooter missed the president, killed the mayor of Chicago), Gerald Ford (a bystander grabbed the gunman's arm, diverting the shot), and Ronald Reagan (the bullet lodged less than an inch from his heart).

Besides standing by in case of catastrophe, vice presidents are directed by the Constitution to preside over the Senate and cast a vote in case of a tie. There is not much power in presiding; it is more like being a parliamentarian than a majority leader, and it only happens on special occasions.

Otherwise, a vice president's responsibilities are entirely up to the president. For a long time, the role was meager. Senator Daniel Webster rejected the vice presidential nomination in 1848 with an acid comment: "I do not choose to be buried until I am really dead." Bad move: Webster would have become the 13th president when Zachary Taylor died after a month in the White House. Franklin Roosevelt's first Vice President, John Nance Garner, offered the most famous assessment of the post when he said the job was "not worth a pitcher of warm spit."

The weak vice presidency continued well into the 20th century. Harry Truman had barely met with President Roosevelt when FDR's death in 1945 catapulted him into the Oval Office. "Boys," he said when he met the press the next day, "if you

ever pray, pray for me now.” In 1960, reporters asked President Eisenhower what ideas Vice President Nixon, who was running to succeed him, had contributed. “If you give me a week,” quipped the president nastily, “I might think of one.”

The vice presidency finally became an important office during the Carter administration. From Carter through Obama, six of the last seven presidents were Washington outsiders who had never held a federal job; every newcomer chose a longtime federal-government insider as his vice president, relying on them as advisors, confidants, and envoys. Slowly but surely, vice presidents gathered the emblems of power: A seat at cabinet meetings (1950s), an office in the White House (1970s), a vice presidential jet (Air Force 2, in the 1970s), a growing staff, and—perhaps most important in status-obsessed Washington—regular meetings with the president.

In recent years, vice presidents are put in charge of major administration efforts: Dick Cheney managed the war on terror for President Bush, and Joe Biden has been a major voice on foreign policy for Barack Obama. Even with these changes, vice presidents’ power and influence still depend on the president.

The Cabinet

Members of the cabinet have two primary roles: They run executive-branch departments, and they meet to discuss policy with the president in cabinet meetings. Once the cabinet served as a president’s governing team. As we saw earlier, Washington’s initial cabinet had four members. By Abraham Lincoln’s time, there were seven. Today the cabinet has grown to 15 members; add the vice president and other important officers on the president’s staff, and meetings are too large to serve as a real decision-making body.

We discuss the cabinet, and the hundreds of thousands of federal bureaucrats who work under cabinet secretaries in the executive agencies—in the next chapter. Today, cabinet meetings have become largely ceremonial occasions.

In most administrations, a handful of cabinet officers rise above the rest and shape administration policy. Political scientists call them the “Inner Cabinet”: the secretaries of State, Defense, Treasury and Justice—precisely the quartet in Washington’s original cabinet. Most other cabinet secretaries operate far from the centers of power. Departments like Transportation and Energy have vital roles to play. But, unless they have personal connections or unusual responsibilities, they are rarely part of a president’s inner circle.

Cabinet secretaries often come to see issues from the perspective of their own bureaucracy rather than the administration or the party. After all, they are surrounded by tens of thousands of employees who do a lot of work with limited resources and look to the secretary to champion their causes. Richard Nixon’s close adviser John Ehrlichman grouched that the administration chose good solid conservatives to run the cabinet departments—and then watched their appointees run off and “marry the natives.” They abandoned the administration’s priorities, complained Ehrlichman, and began to think like their subordinates.

Presidents must manage the tension between senior cabinet officials and their closest circle of advisors. At one cabinet meeting during the Carter years, the secretary of Housing and Urban Development summed up her frustration by blurting out: “We can move government forward by putting phones in the White House staff offices and then using them.” Translation: No one in the White House even returns my phone calls. The president’s inner circle (and the power of proximity) had shifted from the cabinet to the White House staff.²³



● The president's cabinet

The Executive Office of the President

In modern times, influence over the president has leaked steadily into the **Executive Office of the President (EOP)**, made up of agencies that help a president manage his daily activities. These administrators and advisors surround the chief executive. President Franklin Roosevelt organized the EOP in 1939; it now has about 1,700 employees. Many are experts who stay on from one administration to the next. Presidents who have been most adamant about expanding the EOP are conservatives frustrated that the cabinet agencies did not share their values. Richard Nixon created or revamped four of the EOP offices, Ronald Reagan added three more. Today every president—left, right or center—relies on them.

In the Executive Office of the President, a familiar clash gets especially intense. On one hand, most EOP employees are experts on specific issues—drug policy, health care, or the budget. On the other, they have to serve each president's political philosophy (not to mention reelection prospects). Slowly the balance between these goals has tipped toward politics.²⁴ Let's visit the most important offices in the EOP.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB). This is the most powerful agency in the executive branch—known (not very fondly) as “the agency that says ‘no.’” The OMB uses its authority over the federal budget to manage the entire executive branch. During the Reagan administration, the agency acquired its most powerful weapon—**central clearance**: the power to review and “clear” (or OK) anything a member of the administration says or does in public. All members, from the Secretary of Defense to an analyst in the Small Business Bureau, must submit every speech they make, opinion piece they write, Congressional testimony they deliver, and policy they propose to OMB for its approval. Until they get OMB's nod, they may not say or publish a word.

The OMB vets every administration proposal. When Congress passes a bill, OMB coordinates various White House officials' recommendations about signing

Executive Office of the President (EOP): The agencies that help the president manage his daily activities.

Central clearance: The OMB's authority to review and “clear” (or OK) anything a member of the administration says or does in public.

or vetoing the legislation. Officials at the OMB often get the last word as well. Imagine how frustrating it is for energetic new Secretaries to take over their departments, only to learn they must clear everything they say or propose with the budget office.

Notice a slow change in our political process, over the last 30 years or so: *economic thinking rules*. Pundits describe the tension between experts (number crunchers) and political appointees (pushing the president's agenda and big ideas). An enduring change is the way the entire system tilts towards and empowers the economic perspective.

Before the Nixon Administration organized the OMB (in 1971), fiscal control was much looser. President Lyndon Johnson famously low-balled his economic estimates. One day, instructing a young senator from Massachusetts named Ted Kennedy, Johnson warned him not to let economic projections slow up his favorite bills and illustrated the point with Medicare. "The fools [at the Bureau of the Budget] had to go projecting [Medicare] down the road five or six years, and when you project it the first year it runs \$900 million."²⁵ Those anticipated costs, complained LBJ, cost him votes in Congress; he advised the new Senator to stop economists from interfering with important proposals. Today, OMB requires cost-benefit analyses for all White House policy moves. The era of suppressing cost estimates is long past.

The Council of Economic Advisers (CEA). Meet another clutch of economists. The Council and its chairman keep an eye on the whole economy, private as well as public. This office does economic analysis for the president: unemployment predictions, productivity measurements, economic forecasts, and all the rest.

The National Security Council (NSC). The NSC brings together the powerful officers who make national security policy: Secretaries of State, Defense, Intelligence, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Treasury (economists again) and others. The National Security Advisor directs the Council, and must work for consensus across all the different perspectives and formidable personalities: diplomatic, military, and economic. In some administrations, the National Security Advisor is as influential as the Secretaries of State or Defense. Empowering the NSC has tightened White House control over foreign policy making, as we will see in more detail in Chapter 18.

The list of advisory roles in the Executive Office of the President reflects the hats and helmets that the president wears. Organizing a new EOP office is one way for administrations to signal the things they consider most important. Nixon added the Council on Environmental Quality, George W. Bush an office for his Faith Based Initiatives.

The Heart of Power: The White House Office (WHO)

Our tour ends at the heart of power. The White House Office is part of the Executive Office of the President, but it also stands apart. This group of 400 or so advisors, aides, and associates work directly for the president, most of them in the West Wing. At the center is the **Chief of Staff**, the President's gatekeeper, traffic cop and coordinator. Other important offices include speechwriters, White House Counsel (the president's official lawyer) and the legislative affairs team.

Until President Obama, the two parties organized their White House Offices very differently. Franklin Roosevelt set a mixed example for future Democrats: creative chaos. Roosevelt surrounded himself with gifted intellectuals, gave them overlapping tasks, and let them freelance from issue to issue. In theory,

Chief of Staff: The individual responsible for managing the president's office.

bold ideas would flow from an office full of talented, loosely-organized thinkers. Many Democratic administrations tried to mimic Roosevelt. John Kennedy valued broad-minded intellectuals and encouraged them to weigh in on any subject. So did Bill Clinton; early in his administration, staffers would jump in and out of meetings and conversations regardless of their assigned tasks. The bull sessions went on deep into the night. People would wander into any meeting and throw in their two cents worth.

In contrast, Republicans like clearly defining organization and tasks. You'll find no vague or dotted lines on their personnel tables. The Republicans usually model their organization on the military or traditional business: crisp lines of authority go from the president to the chief of staff. Everyone has a clearly defined role.

Democrats often dismiss their rivals' style as unimaginative, stifling and conformist. Republicans answer that good organization avoids confusion and error; the Democrats are disorganized and undisciplined. Each style has advantages and drawbacks.

In either style, the chief of staff makes the White House run. He or she directs traffic through the president's office, oversees the schedule, sums up the decisions that are made, and follows up to see that those decisions are understood and implemented. The office requires a strong, talented, smooth, competent administrator familiar with the levers of power. Occasionally, a president will try to act as his own chief of staff (Jimmy Carter) or bring in a political neophyte (Bill Clinton); when that happens, trouble generally looms. The other extreme is equally dangerous. If the chief of staff seems arrogant, aloof, or rude, the White House loses support and cooperation.

The White House staff is like a little village, full of odd folkways and habits that reflect the way the President wishes to run the country. For example, Ronald Reagan put special emphasis on his speechwriting team; they spent hours watching his past speeches to learn his rhythms and his way of thinking. The president reworked their draft speeches with great care. Reagan's successor (and vice president), George H. W. Bush, found this process artificial. He thought the president should speak plainly. He demonstrated the new order by stripping the speechwriting team of its White House Mess (dining hall) privileges. The village recognized a major demotion.

When a new president comes to town, attention focuses on his Cabinet selections. The wise observer knows to track more subtle appointments to the White House Office. After all, no matter how brilliant the Secretary of Labor or how experienced the Secretary of HHS, they will have to rely on unseen advisors in the White House to convey their ideas, programs and problems to the president.

Officials located farther from the West Wing—like cabinet secretaries, in their giant departments scattered around Washington—can seem desperate in seeking presidential attention. Cabinet meetings can be a circus, with every member anxious to get a minute alone with the president. But busy presidents are deft at vanishing. The route to influence—the path to “yes” on any program—runs through the White House Office staff.

Unlike the high-ranking members of the Cabinet agencies, most EOP staffers are not subject to Senate confirmation. They are elected by no one, overseen only by the chief of staff, and often have regular access to the president's ear. Should the president's advisors, rather than the experienced cabinet secretaries confirmed by the Senate, run the executive branch? Again, we confront the fundamental question: power and control versus democracy and enhanced accountability. Perhaps the 24-hour media cycle forces presidents to keep power and expertise right at their fingertips. Perhaps granting authority to White House staff makes the whole federal



Want to learn to talk like a Washington bureaucrat? Start practicing now. Casually toss off something like: “I’m given to understand that WHO is the real force in the EOP.” That’s two indecipherable acronyms (the more the better) and, of course, the passive voice: you don’t want to risk revealing your sources!



● Cartoon about Mrs. Roosevelt

“For gosh sakes, here comes Mrs. Roosevelt!”

leviathan more responsive to the will of the people. Most advanced democracies are, ultimately, ruled by experts. American government is run in part by men and women with a sharp eye on winning the next election.

One final feature of the White House staff strikes most newcomers: It is young—much younger than the staff running other governments, large corporations, universities, or major non-profit organizations. Cabinet Secretaries with years of experience often complain that their access to the president is governed by young people in their twenties and thirties.

The First Spouse

One team in the White House Office does not fit any traditional political category: the office of the president’s spouse. Traditionally, the ‘First Lady’ role was simply that of hostess. Eleanor Roosevelt broke the traditional mold and pioneered a new role, the first lady as activist. She discovered a batch of love letters between her husband Franklin and his secretary, Lucy Mercer. Rather than split up, the couple became energetic political partners. Eleanor was a powerful liberal activist, a popular symbol of the New Deal, and a forceful advocate for Franklin and his policies. In effect, she became a one-woman campaign for liberal social policy. A *New Yorker* cartoon captures the first lady’s spirit. Deep underground, two sooty coal miners stop their labors as one remarks with surprise: “for gosh sake, here comes Mrs. Roosevelt.”

Few first ladies were as active or committed as Eleanor Roosevelt, but she set a pattern of policy engagement that her successors have followed. Lady Bird Johnson chose “beautification” of American cities and highways. Nancy Reagan became a spokesperson for the war on drugs. Mrs. Reagan was the first to achieve that mark of status, an office in the West Wing. Bill Clinton assigned his wife Hillary the signature policy initiative of his presidency, national health care reform. In fall 1993, Hillary Clinton’s virtuoso performance in a series of Congressional hearings appeared to signal success for national health insurance. The legislation failed, but Mrs. Clinton went on to her own successful political career—and established a new ceiling for first ladies’ contribution to presidential action.

By the time Michelle Obama came to the office, expectations were high. Here was a charismatic first lady with a Harvard Law degree and a successful career

independent of her husband. With some fanfare, Mrs. Obama focused on childhood obesity, a prominent policy issue. She is honorary chair of President Obama's signature White House Council for Community Solutions, and she plays a very visible role as "First Mother"—an emblem of the American family. Political scientists—especially those interested in gender and power—have begun to pay particular attention to the role of the first spouse.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- Each president directs a massive organization—the executive branch of the federal government—with over four million employees (including the military).
- Cabinet Secretaries manage the great bureaucracies of the executive branch of government, but are often removed from proximity to the president.
- Over time, executive branch policy making has migrated from the cabinet to the Executive Office of the Presidency—the network of offices that help the president manage the government.
- The president's innermost circle is the White House Office. These close advisors—often relatively young—include the chief of staff, speechwriters, legislative liaison, and the office of the First Lady.

Conclusion: The President in Action

President Obama took office with soaring hopes. He was a symbol of American aspiration: after centuries of racial struggle, the United States had elected an African American leader. Like all presidents, Obama put a new set of ideas, proposals, and priorities before the American people.

Obama travelled around the world—London, Ankara, Port of Spain, Moscow, Accra, Cairo—drawing a sharp line with his predecessor. "We must embrace a new era of engagement based on . . . mutual respect," Obama told the United Nations.²⁶ The United States would no longer act unilaterally, without regard for other nations' views. Ten months after his inauguration he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize—a sign of how world leaders cheered a pivot away from the go-it-alone American attitude.

The new president shifted America's policymaking. The issues he cared about became those in the news and before Congress: health care reform, college loans, education, and clean air. Obama removed American troops from Iraq and expanded the number in Afghanistan, while setting a definite withdrawal date—all controversial actions. The Oval Office reverberates with power and responsibility.

From another angle, it is full of limitations, checks and balances. The economy remained weak—and sapped President Obama's popularity. Congress rejected some of his signature reforms. It blocked him from closing the military prison at Guantanamo. He won health care reform—an extraordinary achievement—although Republicans threatened to repeal it. Obama's Democratic Party lost its House majority, their largest midterm defeat in a century. The most powerful office on earth was hemmed in by checks and balances.*

*To be updated for publication based on November 2012 election results.

see for yourself 14.3



Go online to see Obama's address to the UN.

The Obama record raises, once again, the fundamental question about the presidency. It is a far more powerful office than it was a century ago. Has it grown too powerful for a republic? Or, on the other side, is it too hobbled to carry out the mandate of the public? Or would it be most accurate to say that the same president can be too powerful or too weak, depending on the issue, the circumstances, and the incumbent?

Any newly elected President takes his turn. He comes to Washington with high hopes and expectations. He puts new ideas before Congress and the American people. A new administration adjusts America's foreign policy stance toward the world. A new transition team pores over resumes and begins the process of staffing the leadership positions of the federal government. Before long, the familiar questions rises again: Is any administration too powerful?*

Who are we? The president offers us an answer—actually, several different answers. Americans seek a powerful, confident figure at the government's center. At the same time, we fear strong executives and hem them in through a labyrinth of checks and balances. We want our collective democratic voice ringing in the ears of our national leaders—but also want our security protected in ways that may require secrecy and fast, decisive choices. We are a people who demand small government—yet complain when every need isn't speedily met by the executive branch. We are a complicated, diverse, paradoxical people—like the presidency that reflects and serves us.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- *The president personifies America.* More than any individual, the president tells us who we are—and what we are becoming.
- *The president injects new ideas into American politics.* Our discussion of Congress emphasized the institution, the rules of the game; the presidency puts more focus on individuals and ideas.
- The president has three kinds of powers: those expressed in the constitution, those delegated by Congress, or those inherent in the role of chief executive.
- The executive branch has grown far more powerful over time, especially when it comes to foreign policy.
- The office of the president constantly raises the same fundamental question: *Is the president too powerful for a democratic republic? Or, on the other hand, is the office too weak to do what Americans demand of it?* Or, perhaps, the president is both too strong and too weak at the same time.
- The president wears many hats and helmets. The presidential roles include: Commander in Chief, top diplomat, first legislator, head bureaucrat, economist in chief, head of state, and party leader. The president's authority has grown in every one of these many roles. At the same time, it is difficult to do so many different things effectively.
- Presidents try to manage public perceptions of the job they are doing by going public and getting feedback from polls. Individual presidents don't completely control their own destiny. They operate in the historical cycle of *Political Orders*.
- The presidency always has a personal dimension. Presidents are limited human beings with strengths and weaknesses. That is precisely why the Constitution located the office in an intricate system of checks and balances.
- The president directs a massive organization—the executive branch of the federal government—with over four million employees.

*To be updated for publication based on November 2012 election results.

Over time, executive branch policy has flowed from the Cabinet Secretaries to the Executive Office of the Presidency—the network of offices that help the president manage the government.

The president’s innermost circle is the White House Office. These close advisors—often relatively young—include the chief of staff, speechwriters, legislative liaison, and the office of the first lady.

KEY TERMS

Central clearance, 00

Chief of Staff, 00

Civil service, 00

Delegated powers, 00

Divided government, 00

Electoral college, 00

Executive Office of the President (EOP), 00

Executive orders, 00

Expressed powers, 00

Going public, 00

Imperial presidency, 00

Inherent powers, 00

Override, 00

Political appointees, 00

Signing statements, 00

Unified government, 00

Unitary executive theory, 00

Veto power, 00

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Some people have suggested changing the president’s term to one seven year term without the possibility of reelection. What do you think?
- Should we abolish the Electoral College?
- What do you think: Is the president too strong? Or too weak? Would anything change your opinion?
- Name seven different rolls the president plays. Which do you consider the most important right now? How well does President Obama [*or successor*] carry out this role?
- How well do you think President Obama [*or successor*] “goes public”—appealing to the American public to support his policies? Do *you* respond positively to his speeches and legislative requests?
- Review the table 14.1 ranking the U.S. presidents. After reading this chapter, what would you say

- makes a great president? Where would you rank the current president?
- Explain how presidents—from George Washington to Barack Obama—help Americans understand (and define) who we are? What does President Obama [*or successor*] tell the world about the United States?
- Explain the role of the Office of Management and Budget? What does this agency do? What perspective were they designed to bring to the policy debates?
- Describe the First Lady’s role. Despite getting involved in policies, the first ladies are often more popular than the presidents. Why do you think that is so?
- Describe the three stages of every political order. Where do you think we stand today in the great cycle of Political Time?

ENDNOTES

¹Joseph Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Random House, 2004), pp. 194–95.

²Paul Harris, Kamal Ahmed, and Martin Bright, “Seeing Eye to Eye,” *The Observer*, November 16, 2003, p. 1.

³Steven Calabresi and Christopher Yoo, *The Unitary Executive: Presidential Power from Washington to Bush* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁴Kirk Scharfenberg, “Now it Can be Told: The Story Behind Campaign ‘82’s Favorite Insult.” *Boston Globe*, Nov. 6, 1982.

⁵Bush quoted in the Federal News Service, June 20, 1992.

⁶Francis Biddle, *In Brief Authority* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 219.

⁷For a description of this episode, taken from White House telephone tapes, see David Blumenthal and James Morone, *The Heart of Power: Health and Politics in the Oval Office* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 142.

⁸See Kevin Evans, “Challenging Law: Presidential Signing Statements and the Maintenance of Executive Power.” *Congress and the Presidency* 38:1 (2011).

⁹Leonard White, *The Federalists* (New York: Macmillan, 1942).

- ¹⁰For a description, see James Morone, *The Democratic Wish*, quote at p. 131.
- ¹¹December 21, 1976 memo from Pat Caddell to “Governor Carter.” The Carter Library [full cite?]
- ¹²Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents* (rev. ed.; Free Press, 1991).
- ¹³Samuel Kernel, *Going Public* (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2007).
- ¹⁴Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Politicians Don’t Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
- ¹⁵Robert W. Johanssen, ed., *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 65.
- ¹⁶Barbara Hinckley, *Follow the Leader: Opinion Polls and the Modern President* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
- ¹⁷Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).
- ¹⁸Noonan, *When Character Was King*, 242-243-245-249.
- ¹⁹Reagan, *Rest of Me*, 66-7; *American Life*, 73.
- ²⁰James David Barber, *Presidential Character* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972). On Barber and other personality theories, see Michael Nelson, “The Psychological Presidency” in *idem.*, ed., *The Presidency and the Political System* (8th ed., Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2005), pp. 170-194.
- ²¹Mortality data from Robert E. Gilbert, *The Mortal Presidency: Illness and Anguish in the White House* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), pp. 4-5.
- ²²Rose McDermott, *Presidential Leadership, Illness, and Decision Making* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- ²³Joseph Califano, *Governing America: An Insider’s Report from the White House and the Cabinet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), p. 431, and personal interview with the authors, June 15, 2006.
- ²⁴For a fine description, see Matthew Dickinson, “The Executive Office of the President: the Paradox of Politicization” in Joel Aberbach and Mark Peterson, eds., *The Executive Branch* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- ²⁵Johnson quoted in Blumenthal and Morone, *Heart of Power*, p 8.
- ²⁶President Barack Obama, Address to the UN General Assembly, September 23, 2009.

