

The impossible presidency: a book review essay

Theme and author background

In this recent contribution to presidency literature, Jeremi Suri puts a spotlight on the pressures, distractions, and expectations of the presidential office. Despite the increase in executive authority over time, presidents are less able to fulfill campaign promises and satisfy voters. A series of suggestions are advanced in the Epilogue to perpetuate a “new beginning.” Jeremy Suri is a history and public affairs professor at the University of Texas, where he holds the Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Leadership in Global Affairs and is author or editor of eight previous books. He is a frequent contributor to major newspapers and magazines and has appeared on a plethora of television talk shows. Suri was cited as one of the Smithsonian Magazine’s Top Young Innovators in 2007.

Review of content

The Introduction, titled “Alone,” presents the main premises of the study. Suri argues that “the presidency is the most powerful position in the world, but it is set up to fail” (ix). While many view power as an effective means to success, Suri blames power for the modern ills of the presidency. Faced with demands that exceed capabilities, contemporary presidents have overcommitted, overpromised, and overreached. Because they likewise must confront emergencies, chief executives become more reactive than proactive and are more consumed with managing crises than in leading the nation in a positive direction. To comprehensively cover the presidential office over time, Suri separates the book into two parts: Rise and fall. Part I consists of six chapters which examine the creation and evolution of the executive office. Part II is comprised of three chapters which expound on the difficulties encountered by contemporary chief executives. Chapter 1 details the etiology of the presidency. At the Constitutional Convention of 1787, the delegates faced a schizophrenic past when it came to executive power. On the one hand, the framers of the Constitution were wary of centralized executive power like that vested in monarchs. On the other hand, they experienced the dearth of executive authority in the nation’s first national government, the Articles of Confederation. Relying on the works of political philosophers as well as their own memories, the founders created an office which was innovative yet balanced. Chapter 2 delineates the many challenges faced by George Washington as America’s first president under the Constitution.

Washington set many precedents which would define the office going forward. He was able to minimize divisions which occurred domestically as political parties developed. Further, he maneuvered to keep the country neutral between Britain and France. By assuming a unifying role for the office, Washington avoided controversial issues which beset later presidents. In Chapter 3, the manner by which Andrew Jackson altered the executive office is examined. Jackson’s populist presidency coincided with an increase in suffrage. Jackson saw his duty as protecting the working class from elites. He favored partisan political appointments, elimination of the national bank, expansion of veto authority, removal of Native Americans to western territories, and retention of slavery by states. His fights with Congress and the Supreme Court tested the boundaries of the political system in which he operated.

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Samuel B Hoff

George Washington Distinguished Professor, Department of History, Political Science and Philosophy, Delaware State University, USA

Correspondence: Samuel B Hoff, George Washington Distinguished Professor, Department of History, Political Science and Philosophy, Delaware State University, USA, Email shoff@desu.edu

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Chapter 4 assesses Abraham Lincoln’s impact on the American presidency. Lincoln strived to combine elements of the Washington and Jackson presidencies while setting standards of his own. While understanding the importance of rhetoric and argumentative skills, Lincoln nonetheless knew that the reservoir of presidential authority resides in the people. In his successful effort to eliminate slavery and save the Union, Lincoln “made the president into a true national executive, articulating a transformative vision and forcing the nation’s resources and policies in that direction” (p. 100).

In Chapter 5 of the text, Suri furnishes an overview of Theodore Roosevelt, who brought his self-confident, impatient, New Yorker features to the presidential office. His progressive orientation meant that he took an activist approach to solving national problems. Accordingly, he led domestic policies dealing with coal mines, railroads, and trustbusting among others. Because “he did not have the patience for tradition or even gradual change” (p.103), he bristled at limitations placed on the office. This perspective was most obvious in the area of foreign affairs, where TR shaped relations for all subsequent presidents and became the first American to earn the Nobel Peace Prize.

Chapter 6 uncovers the national healer role played by President Franklin Roosevelt. Though he grew up with a life of privilege, FDR’s medical challenges and the economic crises he inherited upon taking over as chief executive conditioned his attitudes and actions. He was able to connect with struggling citizens to instill hope. His community-based approach to prosperity not only helped the country to escape the Great Depression, but to prepare for eventual global conflict during World War II. Suri states that FDR was the last great president because the office was still small enough to control. However, as the office became larger, the presidency became lonelier, “as global power and personal isolation go hand in hand” (p.179).

In the first of three chapters documenting the decline of the presidential office, Chapter 7 covers the terms of John F. Kennedy (JFK) and Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ). According to Suri, the office had by then become so difficult to manage that presidents often lost focus on what policies were most important to the country. In the case of JFK, a series of international crises diverted his attention from the domestic area. Conversely, LBJ flourished as a legislative leader in prodding Congress to act on a series of civil rights and voting rights initiatives, but was ineffective as commander-in-chief during

the Vietnam War. Suri observes that both JFK and LBJ were frustrated with the flood of new responsibilities and concomitant expectations being added to the president's job description.

Ronald Reagan's time in the oval office is the subject of Chapter 8. President Reagan's initial year in office saw a number of positive developments, even as he recuperated from an attempted assassination. But the momentum of his first year could not be sustained in the domestic domain, as the tax and spending cuts eventually added to

the national debt. The Reagan administration's policy toward the Soviet Union adapted to the transition in that country and in Eastern Europe overall, setting the stage for the events of 1989 and thereafter. However, Reagan's detached management style contributed to a number of scandals which beset his administration. Even if Ronald Reagan ended his presidency on a high personal note, the office continued to suffer from an overload of increasing responsibilities. Titled "Magicians of Possibility," Chapter 9 portrays the presidential paths of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. Suri finds that both brought charisma and empathy to the office, and that both used their moderate approach to improve social and economic issues. Unquestionably, they also attracted rabidly partisan opposition which lingers to this day. Though reelected to a second term as chief executive, Presidents

Clinton and Obama oversaw a period of gridlock amid divided party control of the legislative and executive branches. Meanwhile, there was no diminution of demands being hoisted on the chief executive. The Epilogue, labeled "New Beginning," starts out with Suri's assessment of how America ended up with Donald Trump as its 45th president: "It was impossible to lead as president in 2016, and voters recognized that. They elected an anti-leader, Donald Trump, whose main qualification was that he had never served in public office and had no desire to act like a traditional public servant" (p.289-290). Subsequently, Suri states that the long rise and short fall of the presidency provides the opening for consideration of changes to improve performance. Among the ideas he advances is a clearer definition of responsibilities; restoring the primacy of facts to discussion; more unifying public discourse; and strengthening public and private institutions alike. Perhaps Suri's most consequential and controversial proposal is to revise the American political system to resemble that of a semi-presidential one, where a president and prime minister govern together and split duties. Ultimately, he finds that the road to revising the presidency begins with the American people.

Comparison to other studies

In their recent *Foreign Affairs* article, James Goldgeier & Elizabeth Saunders¹ refer to the current executive office as the "unconstrained presidency." Arguing that the condition of excessive and unchecked executive power predates Donald Trump, the authors identify legislative acquiescence, bureaucratic sidelining, and loss of overseas allies as reasons. They call for a revival of congressional expertise in foreign policy as a weapon for harnessing the president's authority in that area. John Dickerson's 2018 article in *The Atlantic* adds to the image that the presidency is impossible to control. He attributes many of the same reasons for the condition as Goldgeier and Saunders. His menu for helping the president to do his job includes elevating experience; trusting staff and cabinet; targeting inclusion in the legislative process to the end; and taking leisure time when needed. In their 2017 book, *The Imperial Presidency and the Constitution*,

editors Gary Schmitt, Andrew Busch, and Joseph Bessette examine the claim that recent presidents have violated the bounds of law and the Constitution. The various topics reviewed have a common thread in identifying the mainly negative fallout which occurs following implementation of authority from a unilateral perspective. The most recent edition of Arthur Schlesinger's *The Imperial Presidency* in 2017 affords the opportunity to contrast threatening features about the office over time, as the study traces the concentration of power from George Washington to George W. Bush.

Critique

Two reviews evaluating Suri's study were published shortly after the release of his 2017 book. While agreeing with many of Suri's premises, Karen Greenberg² accuses him of admitting defeat in proposing the president-prime minister arrangement and "missing out on the moral of his own story—namely, that in many ways Obama displayed the combination of restraint and simplicity of style that Suri applauds in George Washington, and that the criticisms of Obama were less about his abusive exercise of power than his intentional determination to keep things in balance" (p. 35). Another review of Suri's book, by reporter Greg Jaffe,³ criticizes the author's depiction of the emergence of Donald Trump as discounting "the real passion that Trump inspired among his supporters, who still see him as both a strongman and savior" (p. 4). Given these observations, it would seem easy to minimize Suri's research as well. However, there were some notable strengths, including the chronological organization and rich comparisons between disparate chief executives. Further, Suri defines and applies the "reactive" concept well to demonstrate the consequences of confusing priorities.

The most serious shortcoming in Suri's work lies in the depiction of the presidency as simultaneously gaining power and responsibilities even as its status as an institution has declined. There is no logical reason to peg the early 1960s as the period when both of these began in earnest, just as there is no rationale for skipping Richard Nixon's transgressions in the review of the contemporary executive office. Moreover, agreement with Suri's findings ignores contrary conclusions about the role of the presidency in the political system, such as those advanced by Calvin McKenzie⁴ and Samuel B. Hoff.⁵ In the former case, the author claims that the presidency is at a distinct disadvantage compared to the other branches of government, while in the latter instance, the author posits that a perpetual battle between the president and Congress occurs in certain areas of dual authority. The actual condition of the presidency is dynamic and constantly changing. Historically, presidential authority has alternated from strong to weak, such that some scholars have identified discernible patterns or cycles.⁶ However, instead of cycles one should measure presidential influence by degree, taking into account personal, institutional, cultural, systemic, and historical factors. Using that formula, Suri's book is an accurate reflection of the time in which it was penned, but hardly qualifies as a comprehensive treatise.⁷⁻⁹

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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