1 Evaluating the Presidency

Michael Nelson

First impressions are important, in politics as in everything else. Numerous studies of political socialization have found that long before children have any real knowledge of what the federal government actually does, they already think of the president in terms of almost limitless power and goodness. In this chapter, Michael Nelson uncovers powerful traces of this first understanding in the later impressions of politically aware adults. Presidential scholars, White House correspondents, average citizens, members of Congress, and civil servants working in the federal bureaucracy—each of these important constituencies may seem at first blush to hold attitudes that are detrimental to presidential power. Closer inspection, however, reveals that each group's surface judgments overlie more fundamental orientations toward politics that exalt presidential power.

The November 1, 1948, issue of Life magazine is a collector's item because of a picture on page 37 that is captioned, "The next president travels by ferry over the broad waters of San Francisco bay." The picture is of Thomas E. Dewey. Of greater significance, however, is an article that begins on page 65 and is titled "Historians Rate U.S. Presidents." The article was written by Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., who had called on fifty-five of his fellow historians to grade each president as either "great," "near great," "average," "below average," or a "failure." When Schlesinger tallied up the results, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Andrew Jackson scored as great presidents. Ulysses S. Grant and Warren G. Harding were rated as failures. The rest fell in between.

As interesting as the Schlesinger evaluations and their many imitators are, the important lessons to be learned from them may be more about the judges than about their judgments, more about the presidency than about the presidents. What standards do scholars use to evaluate presidents? Against what image of the presidency do they measure the Lincolns and Hardings, the Reagans and Clintons? What standards for evaluation are used by other important
judges of the presidency: journalists, citizens, members of Congress, bureaucrats?

Answering these questions can tell us a lot, not only about the presidency’s evaluators, but also about the presidency itself. Presidents, after all, want the “verdict of history” that scholars eventually render to be favorable. In the short run, they need to win the support of journalists, the mass public, and congressional and bureaucratic officeholders if they are to succeed. To do so, presidents must understand the standards of evaluation that these groups apply to them.

Scholars: Strength Amid Confusion

Schlesinger followed his 1948 survey of historians with another in 1962. The results were strikingly similar: the same pair of “failures” and, with the exception of Jackson, the same set of “greats.” More important, historians in the late 1940s and early 1960s appeared to be measuring presidents against the same two standards: strength and the desire to be strong. “Washington apart,” Schlesinger wrote, “none of [the great presidents] waited for the office to seek the man; they pursued it with all their might and main.” Once in office, their greatness was established because “every one of [them] left the Executive branch stronger and more influential than he found it.” When dealing with Congress, they knew “when to reason and to browbeat, to bargain and stand firm, ... and when all else failed, they appealed over the heads of the lawmakers to the people.” Nor did the great presidents shy away from confrontations with the Supreme Court. They were, to be sure, inattentive to administration of the bureaucracy, but this freed them, according to Schlesinger, for the more important tasks of “moral leadership.”

A 1968 survey by Gary Maranell not only confirmed Schlesinger’s conclusion that “strength” and “activeness” were important criteria in the historians’ model of the presidency but also found that “idealism” and “flexibility” were not.

The historians’ model was very much like that of the other group of scholars who write and talk about the presidency, political scientists. Their view in the 1950s and 1960s was summed up nicely in the title of an article by Thomas Cronin: “Superman: Our Textbook President.” After reviewing dozens of American government textbooks written in those two decades, Cronin found that political scientists typically characterized the presidency as both omnipotent and benevolent. The idea that strength and goodness go hand in hand shone through, for example, in James MacGregor Burns’s textbook assessment that “the stronger we make the Presidency, the more we strengthen democratic procedures.” It also animated the most influential book on the presidency of this period, Presidential Power. “A president’s success” in maximizing power, wrote its author, Richard Neustadt, “serves objectives far beyond his own and his party’s. . . . Presidential influence contributes to the energy of the government and to the viability of public policy. . . . What is good for the country is good for the president, and vice versa.”

Underlying the political scientists’ model was a seemingly quasi-religious awe of the presidency. Clinton Rossiter began his book The American Presidency by confessing his “feeling of veneration, if not exactly reverence, for the authority and dignity of the presidency.” He described Lincoln as “the martyred Christ of democracy’s passion play” and quoted favorably the “splendid judgment” of the English radical political leader John Bright in 1861 that there is nothing more worthy of reverence and obedience, and nothing more sacred, than the authority of the freely chosen magistrate of a great and free people; and if there be on earth and amongst men any right divine to govern, surely it rests with a ruler so chosen and so appointed.

Herman Finer was equally reverent, although in a polytheistic way. Finer characterized the presidency not only as “the incarnation of the American people in a sacrament resembling that in which the wafer and the wine are seen to be the body and blood of Christ” but also as “belong[ing] rightfully to the offspring of a titan and Minerva husbanded by Mars.”

Thus strength and the desire to be strong, power and virtue, omnipotence and benevolence—all were tied together in what may be called (only half facetiously) the “Savior” model of the presidency. According to the model’s underlying rationale, the president is the chief guardian of the national interest, not only in foreign policy (because no one else can speak and act for the nation), but also in domestic affairs because of the pluralistic structure of government and society. Members of Congress cater to influential interests within their constituencies, scholars argued, but the president can mobilize the unorganized and inarticulate and speak for national majorities against special interest groups.

Scholars’ normative preference for presidential strength in the 1950s and 1960s had more to it than their value judgments about the proper distribution of power among the branches of government. It was rooted in their liberal policy preferences as well. Democratic historians outnumbered Republicans by two to one in the Schlesinger samples, for example. One of the reasons they found the strength of the presidents they labeled “great” so appealing was...
that, as Schlesinger put it, each of these presidents "took the side of liberalism and the general welfare against the status quo." William Andrews observed a similar partisan and ideological bias among his fellow political scientists, many of whom had worked in liberal Democratic administrations. When it comes to the presidency, he concluded, "the constitutional theory follows the party flag." 11

In sum, argued scholars of the Savior school through the mid-1960s, presidential strength and ambition would serve the national interest. How, then, to explain the nation's subsequent experience with Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon in the late 1960s and early 1970s? In foreign affairs the power of these presidents sustained a large-scale war in Vietnam long after public opinion had turned against it. The power of the president as "chief legislator," in Rossiter's phrase, prompted such hasty passage of Great Society social welfare programs that the programs' flaws, which might have been discovered in bargaining between the president and Congress, were not found until later. Many of these flaws were in administrative design and implementation, the very areas of activity that the Savior model had encouraged presidents to avoid. Finally, in 1972 and 1973 the host of abuses of presidential power known as Watergate occurred, forcing Nixon's resignation in August 1974.

The flawed presidencies of Johnson and Nixon convinced many scholars that presidential strength and the general welfare, far from being synonymous, were now more likely to appear as opposites: Satan to the earlier model's Savior. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. had helped to create the Savior model with his glowing biographies of Jackson, Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy, especially in glowing biographies of Jackson, Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy, especially in glowing biographies of Jackson, Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy, especially in glowing biographies of Jackson, Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy, especially in glowing biographies of Jackson, Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy, especially in glowing biographies of Jackson, Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy, especially in glowing biographies of Jackson, Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy, especially in glowing biographies of Jackson, Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy. In 1973 Schlesinger came back with a book berating the "imperial presidency." 12 Marcus Cunliffe called the office a "Frankenstein monster," 13 Nelson Polsby noted that the careers of most of the "great" presidents were tied up with total war. 14

The new task for presidential scholars was to explain why strength in the presidency was likely to be harmful to the nation rather than helpful, as they previously had thought. Their search carried them into two primary areas: the person and the office.

The expedition into personality as a source of presidential pathology was led by James David Barber. Barber identified a presidential character type, the "active-negative," whose efforts to maximize power are born of a deep-seated and psychologically unhealthy need to dominate others. 15 When active-negatives encounter serious challenges to their power, as all presidents eventually do, they react rigidly and aggressively. Such was the case with Johnson and Nixon. The nation survived their presidencies, but considering the nature of modern nuclear weaponry, Barber argued, even one more active-negative could be one too many.

Other scholars looked to the office to explain why presidential strength was likely to be destructive. Cronin claimed that the "swelling of the presidency" — the sheer growth of the White House staff — had turned it into "a powerful inner sanctum of government isolated from the traditional constitutional checks and balances." 16 George Reedy suggested that "the life of the White House is the life of a court," in which the president "is treated with all the reverence due a monarch." He explained,

There is built into the presidency a series of devices that tend to remove the occupant of the Oval Office from all of the forces which require most men to rub up against the hard facts of life on a daily basis. . . . No one interrupts presidential contemplation for anything less than a major catastrophe somewhere on the globe. No one speaks to him unless spoken to first. No one ever invites him to "go soak your head" when his demands become petulant and unreasonable. 17

Ironically, no sooner had the Satan model of a powerful but dangerous presidency taken hold among political scientists and historians than events again intruded in the form of the unusually weak administrations of Gerald R. Ford (1974—1977) and Jimmy Carter (1977—1981). The immediate response of presidential scholars was not unlike that of the ancient Israelites when Samson transgressed and had his strength cut away: They beheld the new weakness and were distressed by it. The Samson model of the presidency — others called it the "imperiled" or "tethered" presidency — came in startling contrast to those that had preceded it. 18 The model ruefully portrayed a large and growing gap between what presidents can do and what they are expected to do.

The Samson model traced the presidency's apparent incapacity to two sources: the office's constitutional dependence on other political institutions for support and the recent decline in the ability or willingness of those institutions to provide it. According to Samson theorists, parties had grown too weak to help, Congress too decentralized to bargain with, the bureaucracy too fragmented and powerful to lead, and the media too adversarial for its spotlight to be an asset for the president. Among the public, single-issue groups harshly critical of government were proliferating, even as those parts of the population supposedly most inclined to support the president — the less educated, religious
fundamentalists, and the strongly partisan—were dwindling in number. Thus presidents “had to work harder to keep the same popularity.”

Yet even as the president’s ability to meet demands for action was supposedly declining, the volume, intensity, and complexity of those demands were said to be increasing. Godfrey Hodgson argued that the American people expect too much of their president:

> He must simultaneously conduct the diplomacy of a superpower, put together separate coalitions to enact every piece of legislation required by a vast and complex society, manage the economy, command the armed forces, serve as a spiritual example and inspiration, respond to every emergency.

With demands on the presidency so great, Samson theorists argued in the late 1970s, no individual president could be expected to meet them. They cited the recent high turnover in the presidency as a sign of the weakness of the institution. Ronald Reagan’s inauguration in 1981 made him the sixth president to be sworn into office in only twenty years.

But once in office Reagan quickly refuted the Samson model of the presidency, just as the Johnson and Nixon administrations had the Savior model, and Ford and Carter had the Satan model. A political cartoon from the summer of 1981 depicts an angry professor storming out of a door marked “Political Science Department.” Papers fly around the office in his wake, one the title page of a book manuscript marked, “The Limits of Power,” another a newspaper with the headline “Stunning Tax, Budget Wins for Reagan.” In the foreground a secretary explains to a startled student: “He just completed the definitive, 600-page work on why special-interest groups, weak parties, and a fragmented Congress make presidential leadership impossible.” Reagan’s landslide reelection in 1984 demonstrated that his dramatic legislative victories in 1981 were no fluke.

Savior, Satan, Samson—the sheer velocity of the turnover in these models since the 1960s would seem to indicate that the best one-word description of how scholars evaluate the presidency is confusion. The sources of this confusion are not hard to trace. Although the models purported to describe the enduring institution of the presidency, they were created in overheated response to specific presidents. In addition, each of the three models combined, albeit unwittingly, an empirical question (Is the presidency strong or weak?) with a normative one (Is this condition of presidential strength or weakness good or bad for the American political system?). Both types of questions are worth asking, but not in the same breath. Thus in the Savior model, which prevailed from the Roosevelt through the Kennedy administration, the answers were: the presidency is a strong office, and this is good for the system. The Satan model displaced it when scholars, overreacting to the lessons of Johnson and Nixon, decided that the strength of the presidency, although great, was dangerous. Then, startled once again by the weak administrations of Ford and Carter, they went back to the drawing board and constructed the Samson model (the office is weak, which is bad).

Yet underlying this confusion has been a recurring, if sometimes implicit, celebration of presidential strength. The Savior model exulted in the presence of strong presidential leadership; the Samson model mourned its apparent demise. Even the Satan school may be understood as the scholarly equivalent of a lovers’ quarrel with the presidency. Although he warned of active-negative character types, for example, Barber placed his hopes for the country in the election of “active-positives,” presidents who would seek to dominate the system out of zest rather than zeal. And in attacking the excessive power of the “imperial presidency,” Schlesinger Jr. stopped short of endorsing any serious effort to limit the office constitutionally. Eisenhower’s remarkable rise in stature among historians, from the bottom third of all presidents in 1962 to the top ten in several recent scholarly rankings, owes less to any new appreciation of what was long thought to be his passive style of leadership than it does to research that shows him to have been a deceptively strong “hidden-hand” leader.

In the 1990s and 2000s strength as the standard for evaluations of presidents seems as firmly established in the minds of presidential scholars as it was in the heyday of the Savior model in the 1950s and 1960s. A 1996 survey of eminent historians and political scientists by Schlesinger Jr. revealed that “[t]he choice of best and worst presidents has remained relatively stable through the years.” Explaining the high regard that the great presidents continue to enjoy among his academic colleagues, Schlesinger noted that little had changed since his father’s 1948 and 1962 surveys. In the eyes of presidential scholars, he wrote, a great president was one who “took risks ... provoked controversy ... stood for Theodore Roosevelt’s ‘bully pulpit.’” The main change in scholarly opinion that was reflected in a 2000 survey by two law professors, James Lindgren and Steven G. Calabresi, was the addition of another strong president, Ronald Reagan, to the ranks of the “near-great.”

**Journalists: Strength Amid Cynicism**

If confusion describes changing scholarly views of the presidency, the comparable one-word description of recent journalistic standards of evaluation is
cynicism. Underlying this surface attitude, however, is an implicit exaltation of presidential strength. Like presidential scholars, the White House press corps tends to encourage a powerful executive.

Historically, journalistic cynicism toward the presidency can be traced to Vietnam and Watergate.3 White House reporters felt that a breach of trust occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s: They had been lied to repeatedly by presidents and their aides, and because they had reported those lies in their newspapers and news broadcasts in good faith, they felt they had been used. Stephen Hess described “the residue of that era” among the Washington journalists he interviewed as “distrust of public institutions and politicians in general.”16 That distrust carried over into routine events such as the presidential press secretary’s daily briefing, where, according to the former Newsweek editor Mel Elfin, “reporters vie with each other to see who can ask the toughest questions and never let Watergate happen to us again.”27

A more deeply rooted and important source of cynicism among journalists, however, may be the “status frustration” of the White House press corps. This frustration has developed out of the growing imbalance between reporters’ social and professional status, which is exalted, and the job itself, which is degrading.

Of the high status of the White House press corps, little needs to be said. The White House correspondent, notes one journalist, is “part of the whole social circle” of Supreme Court justices, cabinet secretaries, and prominent members of Congress.28 Professionally, the presidency is among a handful of what Hess called “high-prestige beats” in Washington.29 White House reporters are usually guaranteed prominent placement for their daily dispatches and tend to be high on the list of journalists who are invited to give lucrative lectures and write magazine articles or books. The presidential beat is also a gateway to better things in the profession. David Halberstam described the beat as “an institutional ticket. The guy who gets to the White House goes on to some bigger job,” such as editor, columnist, or television anchor.30

In stark contrast to these external indicators of success and prestige is the job itself, which has been well described as “the body watch.” The body reporters are watching is the president’s, and the purpose of the watch is to find out everything that the president does, both officially and privately. To do so means staying near. As Elfin put it, “The worst thing in the world that could happen to you is for the president of the United States to choke on a piece of meat, and for you not to be there.”31

Staying near, however, is a goal that usually can be achieved only in the most technical sense. The White House press room is just yards away from the Oval Office, but the distance is seldom spanned. Reporters are forbidden to roam the halls of the White House and Executive Office Building in the time-honored modus operandi of their profession, and their access even to the office of the press secretary is limited to the assistants’ outer sanctums. (During his brief tenure as Clinton’s communications director, George Stephanopoulos tried to fence in reporters still more tightly, but he ultimately relented under intense media pressure.) Charged by their editors to “body-watch” the president, reporters typically must rely on the secondhand reports of the press secretary, who comes out once a day to brief them, or on other presidential aides or visitors to the Oval Office, who may choose to speak to them or not. When reporters are allowed to see the president, it is almost always in a setting defined both physically and procedurally by the administration. Members of the White House press corps enjoy high status in part because they are so visible, but the irony is that “they are visible because of the large amount of time they spend waiting for something to happen—for the briefing to start, for the president to appear for a White House ceremony in the Rose Garden, for a visitor to arrive, for a statement or a transcript to be released.”32

The frustration that journalists feel in a job whose main activities are stenographic is great. A briefing room full of White House reporters when the press secretary appears is not unlike a classroom full of middle school students who have just been informed that a substitute teacher is on the way. In their daily reports to the public, in which professional and editorial standards forbid overtly hostile displays, status frustration, joined to the hangover from Vietnam and Watergate, shows up in more subtle form. As one study of the subject records, reporters now present news about the White House along with an item that casts doubt on the credibility of what has been said or on the reliability of the person who has said it. They indicate to their viewers that a cynical approach is a realistic approach when analyzing the motives of the president and his advisers.33

Cynicism boils over into blatantly negative coverage when a president’s rectitude comes to be doubted. Nixon and Watergate, Ford and his early pardon of Nixon, Carter’s reluctance to fire the scandal-tainted budget director Bert Lance, the Reagan administration’s selling of arms to Iran and diversion of some of the proceeds to the contra rebels in Nicaragua—in all cases, suspicion of presidential wrongdoing provided a license for journalists to place a black hat on the president’s head and white ones on their own. Not surprisingly, they took out after Clinton in 1994, when questions were raised about the propriety of his and Hillary Rodham Clinton’s investment in the Whitewater
real estate development during his tenure as governor of Arkansas, and in 1998, when evidence emerged about his adulterous affair with one-time White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Journalists also tried their hardest to tie President George W. Bush and Vice President Richard B. Cheney to the Enron scandal in 2002.

Yet, on balance, most presidents receive mostly favorable press coverage. As the journalist and former White House staffer James Fallows noted in his 1996 book Breaking the News, "The 'toughness' of today's media is mainly a toughness of demeanor rather than a real toughness of reporting." In their study of how CBS, Time, and the New York Times covered the presidency from 1953 to 1978, Michael Grossman and Martha Kumar found that about twice as many stories were favorable to the president as were unfavorable. The pattern they detected continued into the Reagan years, then fell off for the first president Bush and Clinton. Yet if anything, the two-to-one ratio in favor of the presidency may understate the true situation. Flattering pictures of presidents in Time and the Times and on CBS outnumbered unflattering ones in Grossman and Kumar's research by margins of 33 to 1, 34 to 1, and 6 to 1, respectively. Local and regional media, which the authors did not study, tend to be more supportive of the president than the national media. George W. Bush benefited from strong positive coverage in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Even more pertinent to the issue of journalists' standards for evaluating the presidency are the kinds of actions by presidents that generate the most favorable coverage. According to Grossman and Kumar, reporters respond enthusiastically to presidential actions that convey strength. They list five categories of such stories:

1. appearing decisive—military leadership
2. appearing decisive—firing contrary subordinates
3. being in command—the president as expert
4. being in command—the president as effective intellectual
5. being recognized as a leader—foreign travel

In sum, when strong action—or the appearance of strong action—comes from the White House, journalists tend to applaud it. The extent to which this tendency has continued is evidenced by the titles of the most influential book on Reagan and the press, On Bended Knee, and the corresponding book about Clinton's media relations, Spin Cycle. The tendency to celebrate presidential strength also was apparent in press coverage of George W. Bush when he launched the war on terrorism. Instead of "Bush," he became "the president" in news stories, and the gleeful reporting of "Bushisms"—that is, Bush's occasional grammatical errors and malapropisms—gave way to journalistic praise of the president's "plain-spokenness." At other moments of strength the press was equally fawning. When Bush was reelected by a 2.4 percentage point margin in 2004, for example, reporters generally accepted his claim to a mandate.

Why do reporters who are cynical about the presidency continue to cover it favorably? One reason is occupational necessity. Most White House correspondents must file several stories every day. Because of the severe limitations that are placed on reporters' ability to gather information independently, the president or the press secretary is in a good position to define the agenda they cover. "They have this huge built-in element of control over you," explains one Washington Post reporter. "You're locked into this little press room with only a telephone connecting you to the rest of the White House, and they have the option of taking your calls or not. All you get is staged events—press conferences, briefings, photo opportunities." Dom Bonafede of the National Journal observed during the Ford years that "every day when [press secretary Ron] Nessen gets out there he determines, with his opening statement, what the news is going to be for that day." Within a few months of taking office in 1981, the Reagan administration refined the task of information management to an art, alternating techniques of secrecy and publicity to shape the flow and even the "spin" (the public relations term for "meaning") of news. Reagan's team was so adroit that when Clinton got off to a bumpy start with the press in early 1993, his solution was to add one of the Reagan administration's leading spinmeisters, David Gergen, to his senior staff. George H.W. Bush invented yet another new twist. A stickler for secrecy, he nonetheless appeared before reporters more than any president since Franklin Roosevelt. Bush managed the news by putting out lots of information, virtually all of his own choosing. Thus, even when reporters tagged on a cynical twist, it was usually to a story that the White House had packaged.

Editors demand more than routine stories from their White House correspondents; they also expect an occasional exclusive to give them a leg up on the competition. These almost always come through leaks of information from members of the White House staff. Such leaks are usually intended to make the president look good. The personal success of presidential assistants, after all, is tied very closely to the political success of the president. But according to the late Peter Lisagor of the Chicago Daily News, reporters really have little choice but to use whatever they get:
The competition and competitive pressure is such that guys have to get a story. If they get something that someone else might not have—no matter how self-serving [for the White House] it may seem and no matter how hardnosed they may feel themselves to be—they may often go with the story.

Considerations other than occupational necessity also contribute to reporters' favorable portrayal of a powerful presidency. Their worldview, or implicit conception of how the political system works, greatly affects how they perform their job. "Journalists define the center of government action as the executive," noted David Paletz and Robert Entman, and "personalize the institution as one man." A study by Elmer Cornwell of front-page newspaper headlines from 1885 to 1957 found "a long-term upward trend [in presidency-centered coverage] in absolute terms and relative to news about Congress"; Alan Balutis's extension of Cornwell's data through 1974 found both trends growing stronger. As for television, Doris Graber's study of network evening news programs in 1994 and 1995 found that they broadcast nearly five times as many stories about the president as about Congress and that the stories about Congress usually were shorter and appeared later in the program. Whether presidential coverage is favorable or unfavorable may be less important than the coverage itself. Simply by dwelling on the presidency, the media reinforce images of its strength and importance. Finally, reporters tend to look at government through the lens of electoral politics. They often describe relations between the presidency and other policymaking institutions, especially Congress, in terms of victories and defeats for the president. This, too, reinforces the notion that strong presidents who dominate the system are good presidents.

Citizens: Strength Amid Contradiction

The American presidency combines the roles of chief of government and chief of state. As chief of government, the president is called on to act as a partisan political leader, in the manner of the British prime minister. As chief of state, the president is the equivalent of the British monarch: the ceremonial leader of the nation and the living symbol of national unity.

Because the presidency embodies both roles, the general public tends to evaluate presidents by standards that seem contradictory. According to Cronin, Americans want the president to be "gentle and decent but forceful and decisive," "inspirational but don't promise more than you can deliver," "open and caring but courageous and independent," a "common man who gives an uncommon performance," and a "national unifier-national divider." George Edwards offered several similar sets of contradictory public expectations about presidential style, including "leadership vs. responsiveness" and "statesman vs. politician." Most of these apparent paradoxes are really one: Americans want the president to be a chief of state who will unite them and a chief of government who will lead and thus divide them.

Expectations of presidential policymaking also seem to be contradictory. On the one hand, the public expects the president to reduce unemployment, cut the cost of government, increase government efficiency, deal effectively with foreign policy, and strengthen national defense. In a survey taken shortly after Carter's election in 1976, 59 percent to 81 percent of the respondents, depending on the policy in question, said they expected Carter to accomplish these goals. The comparable figures following Reagan's 1980 election ranged from 69 percent to 89 percent. Similarly high expectations were recorded after Clinton was first elected in 1992.

Yet the conventional wisdom among scholars is that the public also would prefer that Congress—the other, constitutionally equal branch that the voters elect—dominate the presidency in the policymaking process. For example, after reviewing a wide variety of poll data from as far back as 1936, Hazel Erskine concluded, "Whenever given a choice between congressional vs. presidential decision-making, the people tend to trust Congress over the chief executive. Whether the issue pertains to specific domestic or military matters, or to authority in general, seems immaterial." In apparent contradiction of their high expectations of presidential performance, then, Americans are philosophical congressionalists. But in truth, all this means is that when pollsters ask abstract questions about institutional relations, the public tends to side with Congress against the president. (It is hard to imagine that questions about the proper balance of power between the branches come up very often in ordinary conversation.) When one looks at evidence about attitudes and feelings that bear more directly on political behavior, the balance shifts. The American people, like American scholars and journalists, want and admire strength in the presidency.

One finds first that Americans are operational presidentialists. Whatever they may say about proper institutional roles in theory, the presidents they like are the ones who take the lead, and the Congresses they like are the ones that follow. Stephen Wayne provided evidence for the first half of this proposition in his report on a survey that asked people what qualities they admired most in their favorite president. "Strong" led the list by far; "forceful," "ability to get things done," and "decisive" ranked third, fifth, and seventh, respectively.
Concern for the average citizen, "honest," and "had confidence of the people" were the only often-mentioned qualities that were not clear synonyms for strength. As for Congress, the only times that a majority of the respondents have approved of its performance in several decades of Harris and Gallup surveys have been when Congress was most responsive to strong presidential leadership.49

Americans can also be described as emotional presidentialists. Almost all of their political heroes from the past are presidents.51 When candidates run for president, they promise to be like the best of their predecessors. In contrast, members of Congress—the "only distinctly native American criminal class," in Mark Twain's jest—serve in political folklore as the butt of jokes. Congressional aspirants tend to "run for Congress by running against Congress."52

Heroic feelings about the presidency show up most dramatically when a president dies. Surveys taken shortly after President Kennedy's assassination found Americans displaying symptoms of grief that otherwise appear only at the death of a relative or close friend. They "didn't feel like eating" (43 percent), were "nervous and tense" (68 percent), and felt "dazed and numb" (57 percent).53 They also feared, for a short time at least, that the Republic was in danger.54 Similar emotional outpourings seem to have accompanied the deaths in office of all presidents, whether by assassination or natural causes and whether they were popular or not. In Great Britain, it is a royal death, such as that of King George V in 1936 or Princess Diana in 1997, that occasions such deep emotions, not the death of the prime minister, the chief of government.55

The public's emotional attachment to the presidency has implications of its own for strong leadership. The honeymoon that a president enjoys with the people at the start of the term is, in a sense, an affirmation of faith in the office. New presidents almost always receive the early approval of millions of citizens who had voted against them, and some presidents are able to keep their public approval ratings at near-honeymoon levels for a year or more. As we will see, popularity with the voters is quite conducive to presidential leadership of Congress.

Presidents can also trade on the public's emotional support for the office in foreign affairs. Citizens will "rally round the flag" in the form of their chief of state in all sorts of international circumstances.56 According to a study by Jong Lee, wars and military crises head the list of support-inspiring events, followed by new foreign policy initiatives, peace efforts, and summit conferences.57 Nixon's public approval rating went up twelve percentage points after his October 1969 "Vietnamization" speech; Ford's jumped eleven points after he "rescued" the merchant ship Mayaguez; and Carter added twelve points to his rating as a result of the Camp David summit that brought Israel and Egypt together. Reagan enjoyed a number of such boosts: from 45 percent to 53 percent after the Grenada invasion in 1983 and from 62 percent to 68 percent after the 1986 bombing of Libya, for example. In early 1991 Bush's approval rating soared higher (89 percent) than any previous president's after the U.S. victory against Iraq in the Gulf War. His record was broken by his son, George W. Bush, after he launched the war on terrorism in September 2001. The younger Bush's popularity rose from 51 percent to 90 percent and remained near that peak for months, the strongest and most sustained rally effect in the history of polling.58

Rossiter summed up the symbolic and political importance of the presidency:

No president can fail to realize that all his powers are invigorated, indeed are given a new dimension of authority, because he is the symbol of our sovereignty, continuity, and grandeur. When he asks a senator to lunch in order to enlist support for a pet project, . . . when he orders a general to cease caviling or else be removed from his command, the senator and . . . the general are well aware—especially if the scene is laid in the White House—that they are dealing with no ordinary head of government.59

The evaluators of the presidency to whom Rossiter referred are not outside of government but are fellow officeholders. Like scholars, journalists, and the general public, members of Congress and bureaucrats evaluate the presidency in ways that are superficially detrimental to presidential leadership. Yet their underlying attitudes offer support for strong presidents.

Members of Congress: Strength Amid Constituency Centeredness

Whether animated by a selfish urge to do well or a selfless desire to do good, the modern member of Congress wants to be reelected.60 As Richard Fenno explained, "For most members of Congress most of the time, [the] electoral goal is primary. It is the prerequisite for a congressional career and, hence, for the pursuit of other member goals."61 From 1946 to 2004 an average of more than 90 percent of all representatives sought another term in each election, as did approximately 85 percent of all senators.62

To be reelected, members must please their constituents, a task best accomplished by working in Congress to advance local interests as defined by local people. A Harris survey conducted for the House Commission on Administrative

14 Nelson
Review asked respondents whether they thought their representative should be primarily concerned with looking after the needs and interests of “his own district” or “the nation as a whole.” They chose “his own district” by a margin of 57 percent to 34 percent. About two-thirds of voters in another survey said that when a legislator sees a conflict between “what the voters think best” and “what he thinks best,” the legislator should obey the voters. Additional studies confirm these findings.63

Personal ambition and constituents’ demands powerfully influence how members of Congress behave in office. Most channel their energy and resources into activities that translate readily into votes. This creates an anomaly. Although Congress’s main constitutional task is to legislate in the national interest, most of the activities that produce votes for members are nonlegislative, primarily “pork-barreling” and casework.64 (Pork-barreling involves getting federal grant and project money for their home states and districts; casework is handling constituents’ complaints about their personal dealings with the federal bureaucracy.) David Mayhew added “advertising” to the list of leading congressional activities: newsletters or questionnaires mailed home, personal visits, Web sites, and similar efforts “to create a favorable image but in messages having little or no issue content.”65

What time is left for legislative activity generally is spent in two reelection-oriented ways. First, members propose laws that sound pleasing to the voters. This takes little effort but enables them to gain publicity in local media and to answer nearly any constituent’s inquiry about policy or legislation with, “I’ve introduced a bill on that very subject.” Almost every member of Congress, for example, introduced or cosponsored a health care reform bill in 1994. (None passed.) At the same time, simply proposing laws commits them to none of the difficult, time-consuming, and largely invisible activities needed to get legislation over the hurdles of subcommittee, committee, and floor passage in each house.

Second, legislators work hard on those few areas of lawmaking that are of particular interest to the local constituency and to large campaign contributors. For example, the senators from a farm state can be certain that their effectiveness, not just their rhetoric, on agricultural issues will be monitored closely by opinion leaders back home. This explains why, for example, farm state members dominate the Agriculture Committees in both houses and westerners dominate the Natural Resources Committee in the House and the Environment and Public Works Committee in the Senate.66 Once on these committees, members often enter into mutually beneficial relationships with the interest groups and executive agencies in their policy “subgovernment.” By supporting programs that interest groups favor, legislators obtain campaign contributions and other electoral benefits. From agencies they receive special consideration for their constituents and influence over the distribution of patronage and contracts in return for generous appropriations and loose statutory reins.

Not surprisingly, representatives and senators also evaluate the presidency according to constituency-based criteria. To presidents who have an extensive legislative agenda, this can seem discouraging. Their difficulty in moving bills through a constitutionally bicameral legislature is compounded by Congress’s culture of constituency service, which diverts members from serious legislative activity into the more electorally rewarding business of pork-barreling, casework, and advertising. Successful presidential leadership also requires that members direct their attention to national concerns. But congressional ambition is such that local issues, or the local effects of national issues, usually come first. Finally, most presidential initiatives call for legislative alteration of the status quo. Such proposals often conflict with the general satisfaction that each component of the various subgovernments, including the congressional committees and subcommittees, has with existing arrangements.

Nevertheless, in other, perhaps more important, ways Congress’s constituency-centered culture enhances rather than inhibits presidential strength. These are the power to initiate, the power of popularity, and power in foreign policy.

**Power to Initiate**

During the past century, the public has placed ever-greater demands for action on the federal government, most of which have required the passage of new legislation. To satisfy each of these demands, Congress as an institution has had to move through the long, tortuous, and largely subterranean process of developing programs and steering them past its own internal obstacles to action. Representatives and senators naturally have wanted the legislative process to work, but as noted earlier, the pursuit of reelection takes them mainly into nonlegislative areas of activity.

Again and again since 1932, members of Congress have found their way out of this dilemma by turning to the presidency. Not only did Congress give Franklin Roosevelt a virtual blank check to deal with the Great Depression as he saw fit—in the fabled first hundred days, it passed more than a dozen pieces of Roosevelt-spawned legislation—Congress also authorized actions that allowed the president to institutionalize the role of policy initiator. The Bureau of the Budget was transferred from the Treasury Department to the newly created...
Executive Office of the President and was empowered to screen all departmental proposals for legislation before Congress could see them. In addition, the president was authorized to hire a personal political staff, largely for the purpose of developing and selling legislation to Congress.

In succeeding administrations, these trends continued. The Employment Act of 1946 called on the president (with the aid of the White House’s new Council of Economic Advisers) to monitor the economy and recommend corrective legislation in times of economic distress. Similar congressional requests for presidential initiative were included in many other acts. When President Eisenhower, deferring to what he assumed would be Congress’s preference, did not submit a legislative program in 1953, senators and representatives of both parties complained. Since then, every president has used the annual State of the Union address to shape Congress’s policy agenda for the year. Remarkably, when Congress wanted to express its deep dissatisfaction with President Nixon’s economic policies in 1971, it passed a law that forced on him the power to impose wage and price controls on the entire economy. When Congress wanted to place the burden on President Clinton to cut federal spending in 1996, it gave him the line-item veto. (The Supreme Court quickly found the line-item veto to be an unconstitutional delegation of power to the president.) In 2002, many legislators demanded that the president’s Office of Homeland Security be converted into a cabinet department and granted new powers. Congress sometimes demands strength from the president even when the president does not want to act strongly.

**Power of Popularity**

The power to initiate legislation that members of Congress have ceded to the presidency in the interest of their own reelection is formidable in itself, but what of the power to get laws passed? Again, the constituency-centered culture of Congress can work to the advantage of presidential strength. The same congressional preoccupation with reelection that has led members to try to insulate their relationship with the voters from national political forces has also made them extremely sensitive to any national forces that might cost them votes. In particular, when legislators think that the president’s support among the voters is high, they are more likely to follow presidential leadership.67

Perceptions of presidential popularity may grow out of a landslide election victory that is accompanied by unusually large gains for the president’s party in Congress. Such gains invariably are attributed, accurately or not, to the president’s coattails or to a mandate shared with Congress. Either way, the election creates a heightened disposition among legislators of both parties to support the president’s legislative agenda: copartisans because they want to ride the bandwagon, and at least a few electorally vulnerable members of the opposition party because they want to avoid being flattened by it. Such was the case following the landslide elections of Johnson in 1964—his party gained thirty-seven seats in the House—and Reagan in 1980—when Republicans won thirty-three new seats in the House and took control of the Senate with a gain of twelve seats.

Midterm elections also can heighten congressional perceptions of presidential popularity, even though the president is not on the ballot. Because the president’s party almost always loses seats at midterm, any departure from this pattern is consequential. When the Democrats gained five House seats in the 1998 elections, Clinton’s immunity to removal from office by Congress over the Lewinsky affair was ensured. Similarly, members of Congress interpreted Republican gains in 2002 to mean that they had better pass Bush’s version of a new law creating the Department of Homeland Security and support his efforts to lead the country into war against Iraq.68

The obsession with reelection that governs legislators’ reactions to election results sometimes causes them to respond in a similar manner to indexes of presidential popularity during a president’s term. Because reelection-oriented members of Congress “are hypersensitive to anticipated constituent reaction” to their actions, it is not surprising that the amount of support Congress gives to a president’s legislative agenda is related to some extent to his public approval rating.69 Most presidents enjoy a honeymoon period of high voter approval at the start of the term. Broadly speaking, among recent presidents, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Reagan maintained their initial popularity throughout their tenure, Johnson and Nixon kept theirs for the first two years, and Carter and the elder Bush held their ground in the polls for at least the first year. Even after their approval ratings declined, all but Johnson were able to revive their initial popularity, at least for short periods.70 Johnson and Reagan held on long enough to get their particularly dramatic legislative programs through Congress virtually intact, Johnson in 1964 and 1965 and Reagan in 1981.

**Power in Foreign Policy**

Congress’s constituency-centered culture also encourages presidential strength in foreign policy. Historically, Congress has been assertive only on the foreign policy issues that concern voters the most: unpopular wars and policies that have a clear domestic politics coloration, such as foreign trade and support for nations, especially Israel, with vocal and well-organized ethnic lobbies in this country.
Until the cold war ended in the early 1990s, these issues were overshadowed by the worldwide conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. The ongoing war on terrorism that Bush launched in 2001 has overshadowed them once again. For members of Congress to pursue an interest in foreign policy much further than their constituents’ interests is to tempt electoral fate. In one recent period, three consecutive Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairs were defeated in reelection bids by opponents who charged that they cared more about world politics than about local concerns.

Bureaucrats: Strength Amid Careerism

Career civil servants may seem to be the group whose favorable evaluations presidents need the least. In civics book theory, they are part of the president’s executive chain of command and perform purely administrative, not policymaking, functions. In practice, however, Congress and the courts, not just the chief executive, have a rightful say over what bureaucrats do. And in modern society, bureaucracy increasingly has involved those who implement policy in its making.

Like members of Congress, career civil servants, who comprise virtually 99 percent of the federal workforce, often are motivated by self-interest. “The prime commitments of civil servants,” wrote Erwin Hargrove, “are to their career, agency, and program. The markers of success are autonomy for their bureaus and expansion of budgets.” Such self-interested commitments make life difficult for the department secretaries and other political executives whom the president appoints to manage the bureaucracy in pursuit of the administration’s policies.

The stance of presidents and their executive appointees toward the career bureaucrats, observed James Fesler, includes “an assumption that the bureaucracy is swollen, a doubt of careerists’ competence, and an expectation of their unresponsiveness to the administration.” This view of the unresponsive bureaucrat seemed to be validated by Joel Aberbach and Bert Rockman in their 1970 study of the political beliefs of high-ranking civil servants in several social service agencies. Large majorities of the bureaucrats whom they interviewed disapproved of President Nixon’s policies to reduce the social agencies’ programs and budgets. This was especially true of the 47 percent who were Democrats, but the bulk of the 36 percent who were independents also opposed the president. These data seemed so supportive of the stereotype of the self-interested bureaucrat resisting the policies of the elected president that Nixon actually quoted the authors’ *American Political Science Review* article in his memoirs: “Our findings . . . pointedly portray a social service bureaucracy dominated by administrators hostile to many of the directions pursued by the Nixon administration in the realm of social policy.”

But far from proving Nixon’s point, Aberbach and Rockman actually laid the groundwork for a later study that appears to have refuted it. In 1976 Richard Cole and David Caputo conducted a similar survey and discovered that most high-level bureaucrats, including Democrats and especially independents, by then supported Nixon’s policies. “We find the ‘pull’ of the presidency to be very strong,” Cole and Caputo concluded.

What accounts for the apparent willingness of career bureaucrats to respond to strong presidential leadership? In part the stereotype of bureaucratic self-interest has been overdrawn. As Fesler noted, most careerists feel obliged “to serve loyally the people’s choice as president. Because senior careerists have been through several changes in administration, this is a well-internalized commitment.” Presumably, the stronger a president’s leadership, the easier it is for loyal bureaucrats to follow.

A more important explanation may be the president’s capacity to redefine the self-interest of career bureaucrats. Cole and Caputo reported that the Nixon administration played an unusually purposeful and active role in the job-promotion process within the upper reaches of the civil service. Civil servants sympathetic to the administration’s policies received special favors. This group included not only Republicans but also many independents and some Democrats, who recognized that the administration meant business and therefore adapted their views to further their own careers.

Nixon’s successors have enjoyed even greater resources for influencing the bureaucracy than he did. The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, which was passed at the request of President Carter, created a seven-thousand-member corps of senior civil servants—the Senior Executive Service—whom the president may transfer or demote more easily than in the past. Reagan, according to Terry Moe, made “explicitly political use of the Senior Executive Service, usually by removing career officials from important slots and filling them with partisans. He also used reductions in force as a legal means of eliminating whole bureaucratic units staffed by careerists.” Subsequent presidents have followed suit. George W. Bush successfully insisted that presidential appointees in the new Homeland Security Department be granted much greater control over the department’s civil service employees than prevails in most of the bureaucracy. At the beginning of his second term, Bush insisted that each cabinet member spend several hours a week in the White House, meeting with presidential officials.
staff members. Bush's purpose was to make sure that all of his departmental secretaries knew what his policies were so that they could communicate them accurately and authoritatively to the civil servants in their departments. 79

In sum, the civics books are not entirely wrong. Some bureaucrats follow the ethic of loyal service to the president because they believe in it. Others follow because promotions are based on faithful obedience to the president. In either event the result is the same: "Senior bureaucrats, like Supreme Court justices, 'follow the election returns.' " 79

Summary and Conclusion

Presidential scholarship in recent decades has been marked by a bewildering succession of new models of the presidency, each the product of an admixture of empirical and normative assessments, each constructed in hasty overreaction to the most recent president. Journalists' coverage of the presidency has been tinged by a Vietnam- and Watergate-induced cynicism whose real source may be the status frustration of the modern White House press corps. Citizens pin their hopes for chief-of-state-like symbolic leadership and chief-of-government-like political leadership on one office, the presidency. Members of Congress view the White House through constituency-colored lenses, judging the presidency mostly by the narrow standard of personal reelection ambitions. Tenured civil servants, whose working life is committed to the bureaucracy, also tend to evaluate the presidency in terms of their own careers.

Each of these assessments, although true in part, is superficial. Underlying the scholars' confusion is an implicit appreciation that significant policy change, whatever its ideological direction, requires a strong president. The career needs and worldviews of journalists lead them, too, to exalt presidential strength. Citizens apparently want to have the contradictions in their expectations resolved through presidential actions that are strong and appear to be unifying. Legislators and bureaucrats realize, albeit reluctantly at times, that their career interests can be served by strong presidential initiatives.

On the whole, the underlying admiration for and celebration of presidential strength by scholars, journalists, citizens, members of Congress, and career bureaucrats should be a source of comfort to presidents and to all who have fretted in recent years about a decline in the authority of the presidency. But two cautionary notes need to be sounded.

First, strength means different things to different people. Scholarly celebrants of a strong presidency have traditionally dismissed the president's administrat
21. Seraph, a fourth model of the presidency as an institution that is and should be weak, has never dominated presidential scholarship, but it has its adherents. See, for example, Fred Greenstein, "Change and Continuity in the Modern Presidency," in The New American Political System, ed. Anthony King (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1978); and Peter Woll and Rochelle Jones, "The Bureaucracy as a Check upon the President," Bureaucrat 3 (April 1974): 8-20.
28. Ibid., 206-207.
30. Quoted in Grossman and Kumar, Portraying the President, 183.
31. Ibid., 43.
32. Ibid., 36.
33. Ibid., 301.
35. Grossman and Kumar, Portraying the President, chap. 10, and see fig. 12-1 for data on Reagan, Bush, and Clinton.
38. Quoted in Grossman and Kumar, Portraying the President, 33.
39. Ibid., 182.
40. Paletz and Entman, Media Power Politics, 55.
48. Richard Fenno Jr., Home Style: House Members in Their Districts (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), 245. According to Fenno, "Most citizens find it hard or impossible to think about Congress as an institution. They answer questions about it; but they cannot conceptualize it as a collectivity."
52. Fenno, Home Style, 168.
54. Ibid., 197.
64. Fiorina, *Congress*, 41–49.