



The American presidency

Imperial or imperilled?



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President Clinton's encounters with scandal appeared to threaten the standing and integrity of the presidential office. Have the events of September 2001 allowed George W. Bush to restore the confidence of the nation in the presidency and to reassert presidential dominance in foreign policy?

The American presidency is on a roller-coaster ride. Impeachment, scandal and political crisis characterised the closing years of the Clinton presidency. In 2000, a fiercely contested presidential election produced a president who had received a minority of the popular vote in America and whose legitimacy was questioned. Terrorist attacks upon America in 2001 again thrust the office to national and international prominence. George W. Bush declared war on terrorism and created an international coalition to this end. His approval ratings soared to unprecedented levels as a result. Did the Clinton years threaten the

legitimacy and standing of the presidential office? Has the presidency recovered from a period of doubt and crisis? Is George W. Bush an inspirational leader or power hungry and imperial in foreign affairs?

The imperial presidency

The president is granted many powers by the Constitution of the United States. Across time these powers have been enhanced by presidential action, particularly during times of war. Under President Nixon, in particular, it was thought that the presidency had become overly authoritative at the expense of the other branches of government. Both domestically and internationally, Nixon appeared to expand the power of the office and subvert the American system of separation of powers.

It was thought by many that the presidential office had become all-powerful, that it had become imperial. This was especially the case in foreign affairs, where the Constitution offered little in the way of guidance about who should be in charge of the policy agenda. However, in the 1970s the problems of Watergate and Vietnam seemed to curtail the power of the presidency and quelled perceptions of an imperial office.

A presidency resurgent?

Confidence in the presidency was boosted by the election of Reagan in 1980. He promised to restore faith in the office and to boost the morale of the nation after the malaise of the 1970s. However, the Vietnam syndrome was hard to eradicate, intervention overseas was limited and questions about Reagan's domestic agenda meant that the restoration of presidential power was limited in both its scope and duration.

Summary

- The growth in the powers of the presidency in the 1960s resulted in the period being seen as the era of the 'imperial presidency'.
- Watergate and Vietnam produced a shift in the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches of government, with Congress placing constraints on presidential power.
- Under Reagan there was increased confidence in the presidency, which resulted in talk of a 'resurgent presidency'.
- Clinton's personal conduct led many to argue that he had severely damaged the presidency as an institution, producing an 'imperilled presidency'.
- The 2000 presidential election initially produced a 'disputed presidency', but have the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 resulted in 'the imperial presidency reborn'?



The American presidency: imperial or imperilled?

Useful terminology

Imperial presidency

A term popularised by Arthur M. Schlesinger through his text *The Imperial Presidency* (Deutsch, 1974). Schlesinger argued that a concentration of power in the presidential office, often a result of involvement in war, endangered the separation of powers and undermined the American political system.

Bifurcated presidency

A belief that the presidency can be viewed as two components fused into one. Essentially, the president has a set of powers at his disposal abroad and is constrained by a different set of forces at home. It is generally thought that he has more latitude to act in the foreign policy environment.

Presidential malaise

In the late 1970s, following Watergate, Vietnam, the energy crisis and the Iranian hostage crisis, the presidency seemed to lack confidence and authority. President Carter appeared to epitomise the troubles faced by the office. Reagan claimed he would restore hope and trust in the office and the nation and played heavily upon the malaise factor in the 1980 election.

State of the Union address

An annual speech given by the president to the Congress, in which he announces his policy goals and ambitions for the upcoming legislative session. It is commonly used as a platform through which to set the president's agenda.

President George Bush Senior enjoyed success overseas but suffered at home because of an economic recession. This typified the bifurcated presidency, in which two spheres of influence appeared to shape the presidential office, a domestic sphere and a foreign one. During the Gulf War in 1991, for example, Bush received enormous credit for his foreign policy exploits, attaining record job approval ratings, yet his domestic support crumbled as tax problems and unemployment alienated traditional Republican voters. In the 1992 presidential election he was defeated by Democrat Bill Clinton, a candidate with a questionable private life and a mixed professional track record. However, Clinton's relative youth and

identification with the baby-boomer generation suggested that his vitality and enthusiasm might rejuvenate the presidential office.

The Clinton quandary

Clinton can certainly not be accused of enhancing the powers of the presidential office and making it 'imperial'. On the contrary, in the eyes of his Republican critics he undermined the credibility of the office and created crises which negatively influenced both elite and popular perceptions of the presidency.

(1) A presidential success

Clinton was a popular president, who appealed to a wide cross-section of America. He won two presidential elections by comfortable margins and helped the United States to several years of impressive economic growth. The economy proved as significant in elevating Clinton's standing as it had proved instrumental in undermining that of George Bush Senior. Low unemployment, low inflation and the eradication of the deficit contributed to an impression that Clinton deserved credit for the improved economic environment, particularly during his second term.

In foreign policy, Clinton presided over a period of stability and relative peace. Aside from periodic skirmishes with Saddam Hussein, Clinton avoided military action of significant note and engaged in efforts to promote peace in the Middle East and Northern Ireland. Presidential power was not exercised at the expense of the other branches of government.

(2) An imperilled office

Although his policy record was admirable, Clinton undermined the credibility of the presidential office through his personal conduct. During the 1992 presidential campaign he was both accused of betraying his wife and questioned about whether he had taken drugs or had avoided the draft during the Vietnam war. Nevertheless, he easily defeated George Bush Senior.

In 1994 he was accused by Paula Jones of sexual harassment and, when in office, was forced, as a consequence of a Supreme Court decision, to defend himself. Ongoing investigations uncovered a secret affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. It was not the affair itself that caused Clinton problems or threatened the presidential office, but rather whether the president had lied about it under oath and whether this was acceptable behaviour.



The American presidency: imperial or imperilled?

Candidate	Bush	Gore
Electoral college votes	271	267
Popular vote	50,432,517	50,902,900

Table 1 A disputed presidency, the election of 2000

After congressional hearings Clinton was impeached by the House of Representatives and faced a trial in the Senate. He was only the second American president in history to suffer the indignity of impeachment (Andrew Johnson was the other in 1868); his position and the authority of the presidency were in question. Although he survived the Senate trial, he was looked upon as untrustworthy and evasive; yet polls showed that there was little popular support for the removal of Clinton (only about a third of those questioned expressed any desire to see him ousted from office).

Clinton's mixed record

Clinton's personal activity threatened the standing of the presidency. His opponents charged him with disrespect for the presidency, for exploiting his authority and for bringing disrepute upon the office he held. However, in many respects it seemed that the American people had separated Clinton the man from Clinton the president. While his personal activity was frowned upon, opinion poll statistics showed that he was given considerable credit for his policy decisions and his economic management.

2000 election: a disputed presidency

The 2000 presidential election, contested between Democrat candidate Gore and Republican candidate Bush, proved to be one of the closest in American history. The election result hinged upon the outcome

of the vote in Florida. As a result of rulings by the Supreme Court, Bush was declared the winner.

Nationally, Gore received more votes than Bush; however, the electoral college system ensured that Bush was the eventual winner (Table 1). This was very much a disputed election, in which the winner had received a minority of the votes cast.

As a consequence, Bush entered the presidential office with a lack of popular credibility and with questions about his legitimacy. Following on from Clinton's scandal experience, this was an unwanted and unfortunate development, which again cast aspersions upon the presidency and ensured that the new occupant was immediately surrounded by controversy.

Bush: the imperial presidency reborn?

Terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 changed the face of American politics overnight. They offered Bush an opportunity to establish his political credibility, to reassert presidential leadership and to defend the interests of the United States. Several factors combined at this time to enhance Bush's political standing.

(1) Rally round the flag

In crisis scenarios it is commonplace for the American people to support the policy position held by the president. This is known as the 'rally round the flag effect' and is observable through opinion polls. As Table 2 illustrates, in early September 2001 Bush had a job approval rating of 51%. This jumped by 35% following the attacks.

(2) Commander-in-chief

The crisis gave Bush the chance to exercise his constitutional power as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. He received the approval of the Congress for military action in his war against terrorism, coordinated the creation of an international coalition and worked to ensure that American military operations ran smoothly. In all of these actions he received the overwhelming support of Democrats and Republicans alike, and from a broad cross-section of the American people.

(3) Agenda setting

The terrorist attacks gave Bush the opportunity to set a foreign policy

Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president?	Approve Disapprove Don't know		
	24-26 Aug 2001	55	36
7-10 Sept 2001	51	39	10
14-15 Sept 2001	86	10	4
21-22 Sept 2001	90	6	4

Source: Gallup Polls

Table 2 Terrorist attacks and the rally effect



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As far as people in charge of running the White House are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

	January 1999	January 2000	January 2001	January 2002
	%	%	%	%
A great deal of confidence	22	21	21	50

Source: Harris Polls

Table 3 A restoration of confidence in the presidency?

agenda reflective of his administration's aims and aspirations. In his 2002 State of the Union address he declared his opposition to the governments of Iraq, Iran and North Korea and suggested that he would seek to take action against them as part of his war on terrorism. In many respects, this demonstrated that America's foreign policy agenda would be set by Bush, and that the presidency was the dominant political driving force in this area.

increase his power at the expense of any other political institution.

References and further reading

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Conclusions: imperial or imperilled?

The presidency has endured several crises in recent years, which have prompted debate about the credibility and standing of the office. Clinton's personal activities, impeachment and the disputed 2000 presidential election suggested that the presidency might lack the full confidence of the American people and that debate and dispute over the office might adversely affect its credibility.

Websites

- The White House <http://www.whitehouse.gov/>
- Gallup Opinion Polls <http://www.gallup.com/>

A resurgence of confidence in both President Bush and the presidential office followed the terrorist attacks of 2001. Foreign policy issues have allowed Bush to exercise his power and to set an expansive agenda. However, this has not produced a new imperial presidency. Bush's actions have been endorsed by the Congress and, thus far, he has not attempted to

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