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The Weakening White House

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The US presidency has been progressively weakened over the past three decades – to the point where it is probably weaker today than at almost any time in the preceding century. The formal powers of the office have been trimmed. Congress, in the absence of Cold War and domestic emergency, has reasserted itself on all scores. The modern revolution in communications has diminished the President's ability to convey his message to his people. Not least, the White House is grossly overstaffed. As a result of these developments, the presidency more resembles Franklin D. Roosevelt's second term, in its worst months, than either his first term or his third, and is weaker than were those of any of his Cold War successors.

For most subjects of the British monarch, the presidency of the United States is a familiar office – especially in even numbered years, when some disaster strikes or when a scandal plasters the incumbent's face on British television screens. As contemporary residents of the United Kingdom go through life, they are almost sure to find their past, present and future bound up with, affected by some of the judgements emanating from the US White House. More's the pity, perhaps, but that, for good or ill, is how it seems to be. As an American living much of each year in England, I rather deplore the fact but am helpless to change it.

So it is natural, I think – and hope – that the British people should take an interest in the institutional setting for presidential judgements and the institutional prospect that they will, or will not, be given full effect. I proceed on that assumption.

Presumably, your interest like my own, is compounded out of expectations, hopes and fears about each sitting president inside the presidency. Comparable expectations press in from all parts of the United States, as well as from many other portions of the globe. Paradoxically, all those expectations, flowing in, enormously exceed the amount of assured support that any president can claim from the political system around him. To that extent the presidency is a weak reed, and almost always has been, with rare and transient exceptions.

The present is not among the exceptions. On the contrary, in recent years the office has grown noticeably weaker. That is my starting point. It has been growing weaker for at least four reasons. First, the formal powers of the presidential office have been trimmed, cumulatively, by statute, by congressional behaviour and by judicial opinion, to the greatest degree ever since the 1880s. Secondly, in the absence of a widely perceived foreign adversary or home emergency, the separations in our system gain full sway, and the innate

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aggressiveness of Congress is unleashed against the president. That should not surprise anyone. It always was implicit in our constitutional design. Thirdly, the president's capacity to boost his own effectiveness by rallying public opinion has now been dimmed and vastly complicated, through the accelerating revolution in communications. And fourthly, the presidency is overstaffed, at policy levels, by too many youthful loyalists with too much adrenalin flowing for their own good or the president's.

There is, besides, another reason for contemporary weakness in the presidency: the lessening public respect and growing cynicism occasioned by successive 'credibility gaps' since Lyndon Johnson's over Vietnam and, most recently, Bill Clinton's over Monica Lewinsky. But this phenomenon is so well known in Britain that I need not elaborate it here.

Let me take the other four reasons in turn. Regarding formal powers, after Watergate the Democratic Congress, with misplaced self-righteousness, combed the statute books to locate and repeal all discretionary powers vested in the president upon his declaration of a national emergency. Most of these dated from the preparedness period in Woodrow Wilson's first term, or from the outbreak of war in 1917. They had been a godsend to President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) in the year and a half before Pearl Harbor and had underpinned his pre-war economic mobilization, among other things. Presidents Truman and Johnson used them in similar ways. Twenty-odd years ago, those discretionary powers ceased to exist. So did the reorganization powers, subject to legislative veto, won by FDR in 1939 and used for two generations after. The Supreme Court eventually outlawed comparable vetoes, and presidents ceased seeking renewal of these.[1]

Contemporary presidents have no authority to alter organizational arrangements in the so-called 'executive branch'. Nor do they any longer have the freedom to 'impound' – thus saving – funds appropriated by Congress to departments. President Nixon had rashly expanded this traditional practice. Once he was disgraced, Congress forbade it, substituting a more restrictive process of congressionally approved recissions.[2] In a related action, Congress established and staffed a congressional budget process, parallel to the president's, making joint what had been singular: the preparation of the budget on which Congress acts.

Not only has Congress sought by statute to trim bits and pieces out of presidential powers, but it also has done so by alterations in its own behaviour. The president's appointive power has been weakened by progressive encroachments of 'senatorial courtesy', which now allows a single member's 'hold', conveyed in secret, to block confirmation of a given appointee. Filibuster threats routinely stifle senatorial action on all controversial bills that fail to muster a

[1] Periodic renewal of the Reorganization Act of 1939, each time more restrictive in its grant of organizational initiative to the president, ceased to be requested in the later years of President Carter's term. The Supreme Court case referred to is *Immigration and Naturalization Service* v. *Chadha*, 462, U.S. 919 (1983).

[2] See Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act, 1974, P.L. 93–344.

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three-fifths majority vote for cloture. Committee chairmen, who once authoritatively represented the committee's majority – and could be bargained with accordingly – now represent mostly only themselves. Rarely if ever can they command the subcommittee chairs that proliferate under their nominal charge into a whole new layer for legislating, complete with staffs and rife with autonomy. When I was a young aide to the Director of the Budget, immediately after the Second World War, legislating in each House of Congress was a three-stage affair: committee, floor and conference. Now it is four, inserting the subcommittees and notably slowing the process, while individual entrepreneurship makes a mockery of old-style negotiating with the president.

In trimming the presidency at its edges, the Supreme Court has been as active as Congress. I exempt the famous Watergate case, *U.S.* v. *Nixon*, for, while it put judicial discretion as regards defendants' rights above a president's claim of executive privilege, it did, for the first time, accept that claim and so imbed the privilege in the Constitution.[3] Presidents since have the undoubted right, first forcefully asserted in 1885, to keep papers conveying advice to them out of the hands of Congress. Grover Cleveland would have been delighted. No, the trimming I refer to is more recent.

For one thing, in the *Buckley* case, the Court, by equating campaigning with 'speech', made every first-term president, in common with all other elected officers, subject to challenge, if running for re-election, by anyone with a sufficient private fortune to mount a campaign against him on his own.[4] Money gives candidates access to the airwaves, and to campaign consultants, whether they have a party behind them or not. You may think Ross Perot a joke, of sorts, but what of the next ambitious billionaire as wealthly as Bill Gates?

For another thing, in the Paula Jones case, the Court made the sitting president subject to civil suit for acts preceding his incumbency.[5] The consequences for the ordered conduct of White House business need not be described: they have just been lived through!

For a third thing, in the *Lopez* case the Court narrowed federal jurisdiction as against the States in such a way as to reopen issues of states' rights long since thought virtually closed.[6] That seems to threaten the Presidency and Congress both with unaccustomed limits on their exercise of powers – limits last seriously respected in the administration of Herbert Hoover and last seriously invoked at law in FDR's first term.

This calls for a short digression. Before 1937 and the *Jones and Laughlin* case that sanctioned federal regulation of labour-management relations – the famous 'switch in time that saved nine', when the Supreme Court ceased overturning New Deal legislation – Washington had interfered but little in the economic and social arrangements of the states (aside from slavery).[7] The Constitution's

[3] *U.S.* v. *Nixon*, 418 U.S. 683 (1974).
[4] *Buckley* v. *Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1 (1976).
[5] *Clinton* v. *Jones*, 520 U.S. 681 (1997).
[6] *Lopez et al.* v. *Monterey County et al.*, 97–1396 (1999).
[7] *National Labor Relations Board* v. *Jones and Laughlin Steel Corp.*, 301 U.S. 1 (1937).

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clause on interstate commerce as a federal function had been interpreted rather narrowly. The 'Feds' administered the customs and the postal service, doctored sick merchant seamen, manned lighthouses, dredged rivers and harbours at least nominally in interstate use, regulated interstate railroads and contributed funds towards a highway network across state lines – pretty plain and obvious.

In 1931, Hoover, not at all a passive president in face of the Great Depression – not passive at least by his lights – vetoed the Wagner–Peyser bill establishing a national employment service. He did so on the grounds that seeking and finding jobs was a predominantly intra-state activity, subject to regulation or facilitation, if at all, by state, not federal government. Hoover felt the same way about provision of direct relief to the indigent. If there had to be a 'dole', in British terms, transferring cash, let it be provided by communities, backed by their states.[8]

But after the New Deal, 'interstate commerce' came to be interpreted so broadly that anything that moved became subject to federal action. Along with the tax power, which had been used to justify federal old age insurance and federally-funded unemployment compensation, the lid came off the use of federal funds for socio-economic purposes. It is not too much to say that in the 1930s the states, as governmental entities with their own revenues collapsed, were saved from bankruptcy by federal dollars. Federal regulation went along, of course. By the 1960s Lyndon Johnson's administration was establishing 300-odd new grant-in-aid programs, with nary a question of their constitutionality. By the 1990s, Congress found it quite proper to pass a law forbidding gun sales in the close proximity of public schools.

Yet precisely that law was the subject of the *Lopez* case, and in a five-to-four decision it was declared unconstitutional. Guns, to be sure, were traded across state lines. But the nearness of their marketing to schools involved police powers and education, decidedly state functions, and as such predominant.

Obviously, all those years, while most authorities had thought 'dual federalism' ended and 'co-operative federalism' enthroned – to voice the terms in use when I was young and distinguishing pre-Roosevelt from post-Roosevelt – there were dissenters yearning to restore traditional Hoover-style distinctions. And among them, evidently, was Chief Justice Renquist, as he now is, along with some, at least, of his four supporters in the *Lopez* case. Whether it, and a few precursors, are merely warning shots across the congressional bow, or whether they foreshadow an attempt to restore federal–state relations to something like their traditional status seventy years ago, we may find out quite soon. Several relevant cases are said to be on the Court's current docket.[9]

Even speculative possibilities raise the stakes in the wake of the election

[8] This remains the bias in American provision of 'direct relief', or 'welfare' for that matter, with the New Deal proviso that federal dollars through the states is an acceptable financial mechanism.

[9] Unfortunately, the Court's holdings thus far recently do not suggest a consistent pattern. See, for example, the following preliminary decisions: *United States* v. *Locke, Governor of Washington*, 98–1701 (2000); *Rice* v. *Cayetano, Governor of Hawaii*, 98–818 (2000); and *Hunt-Wesson, Inc.* v. *Franchise Tax Board of California*, 98–2043 (2000).

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campaign: 'five-to-four' points towards prospective vacancies thereafter, on the Court – and to the president who fills them.

Returning to the presidency and its diminution in recent decades, it must be said that none of the reductions in its formal powers eliminate those of the greatest consequence. Such powers still include command of the armed forces, which in time of declared war becomes the plenitude of prerogative power that Abraham Lincoln invented: 'the war power'.[10] Alongside is the right to send ambassadors abroad and – as the embodiment of sovereignty – to receive them at home, hence to conduct foreign relations. Consequential powers still include the right to recommend and veto legislation, the duty to present an annual budget, the right to appoint all higher officers of state and the duty 'to take care that the laws be faithfully executed' – thus 'chief executive', whatever that may mean. 'The peace of the United States' is also in the president's charge, as the Supreme Court ruled more than a century ago, in the bizarre *Neagle* case.[11] Of this we were dramatically reminded in the years of civil rights disturbances, from the time of President Dwight D. Eisenhower (Ike) and John F. Kennedy to that of Lyndon Baines Johnson, who all had to resort to federal troops, as state policing failed or was withheld.

All these formal powers are subject, of course, to equally formal checks and balances. The armed forces depend on Congress for authority and funds, and for declarations of war (without which that prerogative, the 'war power', does not apply, as the Court ruled in 1952, in the *Youngstown* case).[12] Vetoes can be overridden. Appointments and negotiated treaties have to be submitted to the Senate. Everything is subject to congressional oversight. Executive regulations, as well as laws, are subject to judicial review. Citizens and corporations are protected by the Bill of Rights. State sovereignty has some meaning: the Court now suggests more and more. And little gets accomplished at any level except by and through bureaucrats, or through the private sector, or through allies overseas.

All that remains substantially unchanged. So does eternal competition with Congress, the concomitant of checks and balances. Yet I dare say that in the United States most people older than 30 think the presidency to be weaker in that competition than they recall it once was – not just in the peripheral terms I described at the start, but also, overall, in terms of its most consequential parts. If you think that, you have good cause to do so. For early in this decade something *did* change profoundly, *not* the powers in themselves, *nor* the checks *per se*, but rather the external context for their use.

This brings me to my next point. My old boss, for whom I worked during his second term, President Truman, said to me soon after he left office: 'Hell, that wasn't Truman's foreign policy; that was Stalin's foreign policy. I never could

[10] For a brief but authoritative exposition of Lincoln's 'invention' see Edward S. Corwin, *The President: Office and Powers, 1787–1957* (New York: New York University Press, 1957), pp. 227–34.

[11] *In re Neagle*, 135 U.S. 1 (1890).

[12] *Youngstown Sheet & Tube Co.* v. *Sawyer*, 343 U.S. 579 (1952).

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have got those things through Congress if it hadn't been for Stalin.'[13] What were 'those things'? Aid to Greece and Turkey, the Marshall Plan, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), United Nations' support in 1950 against North Korea: the very things for which Truman is now revered. Later aspects of the Cold War were more self-induced, dangers more nearly self-engendered. And unquestionably, in its later stages, that war was propped up by American misreading of the Soviet economy, which in turn was strained beyond repair by the communications revolution, to say nothing of Reagan's 'Star Wars'. But I have to agree with Truman. Had Stalin better grasped American psychology and felt able to bend with it a little, our side of the Cold War would have been slow to start and harder, by far, to sustain.

This does not mean that when the Cold War did occur dissent from presidential actions and proposals in the foreign field was altogether superseded. Far from it. Congressional bi-partisanship in foreign policy for the most part extended only to Europe and Japan, not to the world at large, especially not to China. Even with respect to Europe, congressional deference was limited. Recall the opposition to troops for NATO led by Senator Robert Taft. Recall the Bricker Amendment, named for its sponsor, another Midwestern Republican, which purported to give the states vetoes in foreign affairs.[14]

Even so, throughout the Cold War era there were periodic rumblings of warfare to remind all and sundry of the strongest powers in the presidential arsenal, those of commander-in-chief, and of everyone's dependence on his judgement in their exercise. Consider the Berlin blockade of 1948–49, the Korean War of 1950–53, Chinese attacks on Quemoy and Matsu in 1957–58, the burgeoning involvement in Vietnam from 1959 to 1975 and above all, for drama, the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. As late as 1979, Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was seen as an attack on Washington's world interests, rather than, pathetically, an imitation of American involvement in Vietnam. Congress and the country were frequently reminded that the president alone could authorize the use of nuclear weapons, especially as mutual assured destruction came to be a manifest reality in the course of the 1970s.

Without the Cold War – and I would add the hot war that preceded it – current presidential weakness would certainly *not* seem a new phenomenon. The *pre-war* years of FDR's second term say otherwise. What he gained with the Second World War, and all his successors after him, until the Cold War's close, was a degree of national focus on foreign affairs, and a concern and seriousness about them, which did limit somewhat congressional aggressive-

[13] A remark in the course of conversation at the Truman Library while I was doing research for the original edition of *Presidential Power*. For a recent edition, see Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

[14] Senator Taft's views were expounded at length in the Senate's so-called 'Great Debate' of 1951. Senator Bricker's draft amendment 'would have emasculated the President's power to make executive arrangements and convert the treaty power, already difficult in the constitutional arrangement, into the most cumbersome in the world' (Louis W. Koenig, *The Chief Executive*, 5th edn (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1986) p. 158).

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ness toward the presidency as an institution and even toward presidents in person.

By contrast, during 1938 and early 1939, FDR was a man beset on every side of policy and politics. Most of his measures in Congress were stalled, most of his purges in politics failed, most of his foreign hopes were dashed. He dared not seek health insurance, he could not get the funds to fortify Guam, he could not even get repeal of the Neutrality Act until the war in Europe actually began. Even after that, he only just managed to keep conscripts in the army for a second successive year. Six weeks before Pearl Harbor, that was carried through the House of Representatives by a single vote.

Does all that sound a bit like Clinton's second term, setting aside Monica Lewinsky and impeachment? It should. For in the exercise of those key presidential powers, not checked and balanced with a Stalin on the immediate scene, not even a Brezhnev, Clinton's frustrations have more in common with FDR's than with those of most of the presidents in-between. I allow for the fact that Clinton presided over burgeoning prosperity, while Roosevelt, circa 1939, was the man who could not cure unemployment. But Roosevelt had a war and a fresh presidency ahead of him; Clinton in 2000 did not. Frustrations can never be wholly the same: context intrudes.

Still, comparing Roosevelt with Clinton is a fitting way to introduce the *third* aspect of disparity I wish to stress between the expectations bearing in upon the presidency and its capacity for adequate response. This touches on the office as a 'bully pulpit', Theodore Roosevelt's phrase, which his fifth cousin, Franklin, brought to its highest point of practical application in the past century. He did so by adroit use of his marvellous voice on radio, by carefully timed 'fireside chats' in evening hours when he 'pre-empted' (borrowed) all the radio networks for the purpose at no cost to himself – not by law but by discretion of the private managers – so the entire audience accustomed to that medium had no choice but to hear *him* or turn off the set. And he did this rather rarely, in relation to events that helped him make his point and gave incentives not to turn off but to listen. The radio networks had built up a truly national audience; well-timed pre-emption procured it for the president. His voice did the rest.

FDR guarded that asset. He dreaded overexposure. Lacking the right events, or in danger of competing with himself, he kept off the air. So he did for long stretches of his troubled second term.

Comparatively speaking, Clinton was unquestionably worse off than was Roosevelt in these terms, for contemporary television is a far less assured pulpit than was radio sixty years ago, and contemporary radio cannot make up the lack. Moreover, contemporary journalism will not let any president stay off the air even if he wished to, which Clinton assuredly did not. To fill out the comparison, let me quote briefly from the chapter on 'Reflections' in a recently published book of mine. If I can crib from anybody, it should be myself.

Traditional network news is now the primary news source for less than 50% of the country. Specialized news networks, local programs, radio at commuting times,

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compete to increasing effect … Sports networks, as well as counterparts for civics, nature, art, and movies, to say nothing of talk shows and their hosts, radio included, contribute mites of news, or what passes as such, which are apparently enough to meet the meager needs of many.

The traditional networks are now parts of larger commercial enterprises. Network news programs are now profit centers, perforce under increasing pressure. In the absence of sex, war, insurrection, bloody terrorism … presidential 'fireside chats' … are unlikely to be granted free network TV time. In 1995, President Clinton's requests for preemption were refused on at least two occasions. To rouse public support for his side of the argument that winter, when his Republican congressional opponents threatened to close the federal government, Clinton had to resort to paid television ads, as though his quarrel with Congress were the same thing as political campaigning.

Titillating sex aside, this may have been the only way that Clinton (and his successors?) could have sought or hoped to find a helpful national public. Short of the encompassing emergency or scandal … cable and satellites, now joined by the Internet, produce 'narrowcasting' effects which chip 'the' public into disconnected segments.[15]

This is not just a matter of recalcitrant media under private ownership. It is the matter, also, of what could well be a disappearing audience: the one Roosevelt once had, for free.

Now for my fourth and final point, the overstaffing of the presidency and what it may contribute to the gap between expectations and performance. Before and during the Second World War, FDR had in the White House proper – on its payroll, regularly employed there as distinct from in the Executive Office generally – up to a dozen civilian aides, entitled something-or-other 'to the President', along with their immediate assistants, whose duties brought them regularly into aspects of public policy. This leaves aside clerical and technical staff and also the household help. The comparable figure for Clinton has been nearly a hundred, which was reached before him as early as Nixon's time, and never dropped below some thirty-five in the presidencies between them. (That low came in the time of Gerald Ford.)[16]

It is not recorded that the policy dilemmas Roosevelt faced in the late 1930s were less complicated or less intellectually challenging to their contemporaries than are those confronting Clinton now, or Bush before him, and on back to Nixon. So what do these extra White House people actually do? Among other things, they compete for the president's eye and ear, bemusing him in the process. They scramble to be closest to the throne, elbowing out the Cabinet members who once did much of their work. They meet incessantly with one another and with departmental counterparts called into being mostly to meet with *them*. They screen outside opinion, sometimes with heavy editing, as it flows towards the president, and send outsiders presidential signals, mostly of their own devising. Being vigorous, opinionated and experienced campaigners,

[15] See my *Report to JFK: The Skybolt Crisis in Perspective* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 157–8.

[16] These and succeeding numbers are my estimates after enquiry.

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they press upon him quantities of second-level business, infused with *their* opinions – and they press upon outsiders *their* opinions dressed as his. Sometimes their passions make them more holy than the Pope. You will recall that Watergate began with a burglary Nixon himself called 'dumb'.

How did all this come about? Some of the staff growth is due to technology: there are more communications specialists than there used to be. Part of it is due to the vastly enlarged press corps and to its vastly increased appetite for White House services, now that so many members of the media become celebrities in their own right. President Truman had three professional-level people in his press office. Clinton has had some forty doing the enlarged equivalents of what those three did. In other offices, staffers have been added piecemeal, one-by-one, with every staff assistant sure that he needs an assistant of his own – as he very well may.

But if the topmost three or five aides have only two helpers apiece, while those, in turn, have only one apiece, the numbers still amount to thirty – added to the forty-odd engaged with the media – before one even gets down to the third layer of White House titles. Immediately below the chief of staff are assistants to the president, next come deputy assistants, then come special assistants, then deputy special assistants, then administrative assistants, all of them political appointees, and so down to equally appointive special assistants in the White House Office; those are formally civil servants, but without security of tenure. How easily they all accumulate into a body one hundred strong! How hard, once it has happened, to keep it from happening again – and again.

For every White House aide does things that some outside the White House will approve of, find beneficial in their own work. Thus every aide attracts a clientele. And when he or she leaves, for whatever reason, the clients will press for a replacement. Busy, harassed seniors usually will find it easier to say 'yes' than 'no'. Unless the president, himself, crusades consistently to cut the numbers, it will not happen. That has not occurred since the times of Gerald Ford and the early Jimmy Carter.

Besides, in the contemporary presidency, all presidents soon come to feel beleaguered. The press corps is so large and so intrusive. Congress is so feisty. Special interests are so demanding. Foreign governments and radical factions abroad, including terrorists, are so readily capable of causing trouble. Amidst all that, who can he (someday she) count on to think of and to help him (or her)? Not congressmen and their staffs, nor department heads and all their civil servants, who by definition are answerable as much to Congress as to him. And at least one House of Congress is usually organized by 'them', the other party. He counts only on people whom he himself appoints and can dismiss, who work 'exclusively' for him. So he will come to feel – or so, at least, all presidents since Nixon entered office have come to feel, even Gerald Ford. Thus, even at a personal level, the cards are stacked against reducing staff.

And this is reinforced for each new president during the eleven weeks between election and inauguration, the so-called 'transition period', because his campaign managers point out to him dozens of deserving campaigners, along

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with the transition funds available to pay their salaries before Inauguration Day, and all the White House vacancies which under modern practice will become available from noon of that day on.

What does one do with vacancies, when one is new, untried and conscious of one's debt to one's campaigners? One fills them!

How did it happen that there were – and are – the physical facilities to house staffs so much larger than in Franklin Roosevelt's time? The two wings of the White House Office, West and East, do not look notably larger now than then. That is the ultimate question. I will give you the ultimate answer. In 1959 the Eisenhower administration decided to tear down the soot-black, Victorian-gothic pile next to the White House, built in the 1870s for the State, War, and Navy Departments. By Ike's time, the building housed the presidential Budget Bureau and some special-purpose staffs, along with a fringe of White House spill overs from the West Wing itself. Ike's aides meant to move them all to a new executive office building to be built just north, on Jackson Place, and to extend the White House grounds to 17th Street, as in Lincoln's time. But two of President Kennedy's incoming aides, motivated by aesthetics and by history, fought to preserve 'Old State', and they won.

With French techniques, they had it cleaned and spiffed it up, and got it guarded like the West Wing. But they neglected to cancel the new building! When it was built, Budget's civil servants were moved over (much against their will), which left a lot of room for White House aides in the *old* building. Lacking a sufficiency of White House personnel in Johnson's time to fill that space, Nixon promptly created more. A Parkinson-like Law explains it all: warm bodies expand in number to fill every room available!

Of the four limitations upon presidential capability that I have put before you, this aspect of the last is the least perplexing, though perhaps the most annoying. But I include it for a reason. When I was in London not long ago, I read in the *Daily Telegraph* a piece about young persons fresh from Millbank and their irritation with the physical cramp of 10 Downing Street. They had made offices of every broom-closet, they had spilled over into Cabinet Office, yet they still had but a rabbit-warren in a private house and not at all a proper office building. So they were mobilizing to fix that and to retire Number 10 as a museum.

When I read this, I had visions of Great George Street, with the back side of the Treasury torn down – you recall that the last government spoke of converting it to a hotel – and in its place a shiny tower block, uglier, perhaps, than even the new parliamentary offices. And all of it inhabited by layer upon layer of the Millbank young! Oh no, I muttered to myself, poor Tony Blair! Poor Britain! I am told that story has since been denied. But I am aware from American experience how persistent young, ambitious aides can be. So count on no denials. Take nothing for granted. Treat the White House as a bad example! I thought I ought to warn you.

Finally, to sum up: the *presidency* has grown weaker. Congress and Supreme Court both contribute, so do external events, so does communications

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technology, also White House staffing – all without reference to credibility gaps or to the presidents in person.

Bill Clinton, to be sure, has contributed something too. Actually, at least two things. For one, he has presided over eight years of burgeoning prosperity, and in fact helped it along, to the extent that a president can, which *raises* everybody's expectations about what *all* presidents *should* do, thus weakening the office still further, if and when events disclose that a future president *cannot*. (That is almost sure to come.) For another thing, Clinton's misadventure with Lewinsky caused him two years of almost total immobility as president, which should not affect the office, as distinct from him, but which may, depending on what lessons the participants in politics and media read into it and take away for future reference.

So where does this leave the next president? More weakly placed, to start with, than was Bush after Reagan or even Clinton after Bush. Will that change in the next person's time? Answers depend partly on events, especially economic and international events, partly on the Supreme Court and its next appointees, partly on communications technology, partly on the quality of staffs – and only in contingent ways on the capacities and ideas of the actual incumbent as he interacts with the rest.

Does that seem surprising after an election year? After all the speeches of both candidates in the painfully long campaign before November 2000? Perhaps. But institutions together with events should prove more compelling than will the new president in setting the conditions for the presidential judgements to be made in coming years. The quality of judgement is, of course, another matter. There, institutions and events yield primacy, perforce, to personalities and, as Harry Truman showed, to character – and, as Ronald Reagan showed, to fixed ideas. But never underplay institutions!

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