Chapter 11 Personalizing the Presidency

John F. Kennedy
Jimmy Carter

In his influential book *Presidential Power,* first published in 1960, political scientist Richard E. Neustadt, a former aide in the Truman White House, declared that "the same conditions that promote [the modern president's] leadership in form preclude a guarantee of leadership in fact."[1] Neustadt's study reaffirmed Woodrow Wilson's argument at the beginning of the twentieth century that the president is responsible for leading the United States to a higher level of political discourse and national action. But Neustadt cautioned that at midcentury this obligation fell upon the president with no assurance of "an influence commensurate with services performed." In fact, the modern president could count only on being a "clerk" whose help would be demanded but not always reciprocated by others.[2]

Neustadt's solution to the dilemma of the modern presidency was for each president to struggle to overcome the political obstacles that fetter the office. It was the president's job to resurrect the aggressive and skillful style of leadership that Franklin D. Roosevelt had displayed, so that congressional leaders, cabinet officers, party officials, and others would "feel obliged" to do what the president "wants done."[3] Neustadt regarded the relatively restrained approach to the office that Dwight D. Eisenhower had taken as a sure path to political stagnation.

John F. Kennedy read Neustadt's book—indeed, some pundits believed at the time that it was the blueprint for the vigorous style of leadership that animated his presidency. But, as Fred I. Greenstein has noted, *Presidential Power* mostly clarified and defended the theory of good presidential leadership that already was current—namely, "that of an informal, Rooseveltian conduct of the presidency that contrasted with current perceptions of Eisenhower's operating manner."[4] Not surprisingly, then, the effort to expand the powers of the modern executive characterized not only

the Kennedy administration, but also the administrations of his two successors, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon.

In the early 1970s serious doubts arose about how compatible unrestrained executive power was with the public interest. Developments during the Johnson and, especially, the Nixon era kindled the belief that a return to the traditional separation of powers was needed to restore constitutional government to its proper moorings. Nixon's successors, Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter, inherited a much-tarnished and somewhat diminished office.

John F. Kennedy and the Rise of the "Personal Presidency"

Kennedy was elected president in 1960 to "get this country moving again" by lifting the United States out of the complacency that seemed to have settled on it during the Eisenhower years.[5] The combination of a sluggish economy, a simmering civil rights movement, and the Soviet threat had created doubts about the nation's future that led a slim plurality of the voters back to the Democratic Party. In addition, the still-popular Eisenhower, who disapproved of the Twenty-Second Amendment, was forbidden to run again—an ironic consequence of the Republican-inspired two-term constitutional limit.[6]

Running against Vice President Richard Nixon, Kennedy campaigned on a theme of change, tying that theme to the presidency itself. The United States, he declared, could no longer afford a president "who is praised primarily for what he did not do, the disasters he prevented, the bills he vetoed—a President wishing his subordinates would produce more missiles or build more schools." Instead, the nation "needs a Chief Executive who is the vital center of action in our whole scheme of government." The president must be "willing and able to summon his national constituency to its finest hour—to alert the people to our dangers and our opportunities—to demand of them the sacrifices that will be necessary."[7]

On November 22, 1963, less than three years after he took the oath as president, Kennedy was assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas, Texas. His death traumatized the nation. All of the presidents who died in office had been deeply mourned, but only Abraham Lincoln's death evoked as profound a sense of unfulfilled promise as Kennedy's. Forty-three years old at the time of his inauguration, Kennedy was the youngest person ever elected as president. The striking down of such a vital, attractive leader in the prime of life, leaving behind his stoic young widow and two small children, left Americans with an extraordinary sense of personal loss.[8] Yet despite his truncated term, or perhaps because of it, Kennedy enjoys a lasting place in American culture. Much like the warrior Achilles in ancient Greece, Kennedy is "part not of history but of myth."[9]

Long after his assassination, national surveys continued to show that Americans regarded Kennedy as the finest of the modern presidents. Remarkably, Kennedy edged out FDR in a 1987 Harris poll as the "best" president in domestic affairs, a result that measured the outsized Kennedy mystique more than the modest Kennedy record.[10] In 2013, a half-century after he was murdered, Kennedy had a higher approval rating than any of his successors: 90 percent.[11] Kennedy's popularity persisted not only because of his tragic death but also because of certain qualities that he displayed as president. "Beyond question," historian Carl M. Brauer has written, "Kennedy was inspirational in a way that few presidents have been."[12] Franklin Roosevelt's great achievement as a moral leader was to bring the United States through the dark days of the Great Depression and World War II. In a like manner, Kennedy sought to inspire the nation to meet the challenges of the postwar era. Roosevelt's New Deal, Kennedy said in his acceptance speech at the 1960 Democratic convention, had "promised security and succor to those in need." But more prosperous times called for a New Frontier that was "not a set of promises" but "a set of challenges." The New Frontier "sums up not what I intend to offer the American people, but what I intend to ask of them," he declared. "It appeals to their pride, not their pocketbook—it holds out the promise of more sacrifice instead of security."[13]

Kennedy's inaugural address placed this challenge before the nation. Uplifting and optimistic in tone, it articulated a vision that greatly augmented the fragile basis of support he had received from the extremely close election (Kennedy's margin of victory was only 120,000 popular votes out of the nearly 69 million cast). Both liberals and conservatives found something to applaud in the new president's celebration of sacrifice and mission. The best-remembered passages from the address emphasized these themes:

> In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hours of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility—I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and those who serve it—and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.
>
> And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.[14]

Kennedy's call for personal sacrifice and national glory resonated with the historical experience of postwar America. The giftedness, or charisma, of the young president matched America's feeling that it could solve the world's problems and break through the ancient barriers that previously had limited humankind—even, as Kennedy pledged, "landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the Earth . . . in this decade."[15]

The First Television President

It was not just Kennedy's words that stirred the public but also the vibrant and reassuring image he conveyed when delivering them. His administration marked a revolutionary advance in the use of television in politics. Although Eisenhower was the first president to appear on television

regularly, "it was under and because of Kennedy that television became an essential determinant— probably the essential determinant—of a president's ability to lead the nation."[16] As political scientist Bruce Miroff has written, throughout his presidency Kennedy and other members of his administration staged widely publicized "spectacles," or message-laden symbolic displays, that "projected youth, vigor, and novelty, that recast the [presidency] itself as a headquarters for intelligence and masterful will."[17]

Kennedy's televised speeches were but one element of his strategy of public communication. After his inauguration, the president went before the cameras only nine times to deliver prepared addresses. Convinced that viewers would tire quickly of formal speech making, he relied instead on the press conference as his principal forum for reaching the public. Kennedy was the first president to allow press conferences to be televised without restriction, recognizing that live broadcasts of his give-and-take with reporters would display his wit, intellectual sure-footedness, and physical attractiveness to best effect. Eisenhower's press conferences had been televised, but they were taped, and the White House retained the right to edit them for broadcast. Ike's press secretary, James C. Hagerty, believed that live television was dangerous because the president might misspeak on a sensitive matter, jeopardizing national security. Kennedy, who had benefited greatly from his televised debates with Nixon in 1960, regarded television as an ally.

Previous presidents, especially FDR, had used press conferences to encourage reporters to convey their messages to the American people. But the live, televised press conference relegated reporters to the role of supporting actors. Under Kennedy's auspices, the press conference became the functional equivalent of the fireside chat. It gave the president a relatively informal and personal way to reach the public directly, over the heads of Congress and the proprietors of the media.

The public saw and heard more of Kennedy through press conferences than in any other way. Yet he held only sixty-four of them, fewer per month than Roosevelt, Truman, or Eisenhower. "He realized the dangers as well as the

possibilities of television," historian James N. Giglio has written. "Overexposure became his major concern."[18]

Kennedy's adept and well-timed television appearances made a positive impression on the American people. Opinion surveys revealed a 91 percent public approval rating of his performance in press conferences. The keys to his success were careful preparation and an ability to appear relaxed and in command before the cameras.[19] Kennedy's pleasing personality, quick wit, and impressive knowledge of government set a standard that his successors have struggled to meet.[20]

The Personal Presidency

Woodrow Wilson believed that the "extraordinary isolation" of the presidency, if used effectively, allowed the president both to inspire and to benefit from public opinion. Wilson himself, and later FDR, did much to advance the president's relationship with the people. But with Kennedy and the advent of television, what political scientist Theodore J. Lowi has called the "personal presidency" came into its own.[21]

Kennedy's effective use of television was part of his personalization of the office. His presidential campaign and his governing style also established significant precedents.

All of Kennedy's campaigns for office, including his run for the presidency, were highly personal undertakings. Indeed, they were managed by members of his family, usually his brother Robert. The success of Kennedy's organization, the "Kennedy Machine" as it was called, diminished the importance of the regular party organization. In winning the Democratic nomination for president in 1960, Kennedy outmaneuvered most of the established leaders of the party, whose initial attitude toward his candidacy had been skeptical, if not hostile, mostly because no Roman Catholic had ever been elected president. To thwart them, he went outside normal party channels, using political amateurs to round up votes in the state primaries and, after succeeding in that arena, virtually forcing the convention to accept him as its nominee. Kennedy's triumph changed presidential politics.

Henceforth, campaigns for president would be directed by the candidates' personal advisers and strategists. Coordination and liaison with the party apparatus would be of secondary importance.[22]

The Kennedy organization also made its mark on the government. Kennedy appointed most members of his campaign staff to similar positions in the White House Office, which further contributed to the personalization of the presidency. To reinforce this development, Kennedy concentrated more responsibility for policy making in the White House than was the practice in past administrations. The once-anonymous staff, now highly visible in the media and assigned to oversee the activities of the departments and agencies, began to develop into a government unto itself. For example, Kennedy's assistant for national security, McGeorge Bundy, carried out many duties traditionally reserved for the secretary of state.[23] According to Robert F. Kennedy, JFK "felt at the end that the ten or twelve people in the White House who worked under his direction with Mac Bundy . . . really performed all the functions of the State Department."[24] Operations that were too big to be run out of the White House Office, such as the Peace Corps, were housed in independent agencies, where they would be free of standard bureaucratic routine. As political scientists Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg have written, "the Kennedy administration foreshadowed a new anti-bureaucratic consensus" that would enable each president to more readily put his or her stamp on the executive branch, but at the risk of sacrificing valuable political experience and policy expertise.[25]

The Kennedy Legacy

Although Kennedy was very popular during his brief stay in the White House, many aspects of his presidency were unsuccessful. His administration was responsible for the disastrous invasion of Cuba on April 17, 1961, by a brigade of fourteen hundred exiles from the communist regime of Fidel Castro. The rebels were crushed three days after landing in Zapata Swamp at Cuba's Bay of Pigs. Their failure to overthrow Castro was a humiliating defeat for Kennedy, who had been in office less than one hundred days.

The Bay of Pigs was not Kennedy's final attempt to overthrow Castro. The president's militant anticommunism and strong animus against Cuba's ruler led to a series of failed plots to assassinate him. "Although the defenders of the president have asserted that these schemes went forward without his knowledge," historian Lewis L. Gould has written, "it is clear that John and Robert Kennedy created a climate in the White House where such covert ventures received implicit sanction at the highest levels." Moreover, reliance on covert action advanced the dangerous creed that, on matters of national security, presidents could work outside the law to accomplish their foreign policy objectives.[26]

Kennedy also can be faulted for accelerating the deployment of nuclear missiles to fulfill a campaign promise to close the "missile gap" with the Soviet Union. The nuclear buildup was carried out even though an intelligence analysis conducted soon after Kennedy took office revealed that the missile gap was a myth. In truth, Soviet missile development lagged far behind that of the United States. Yet once the Soviets responded to Kennedy's buildup with a buildup of their own, the United States was forced into a spiraling nuclear arms race.[27]

Finally, the Kennedy administration initiated the ill-fated American involvement in Vietnam. Intense pressure to intervene in Southeast Asia had been brought to bear on President Eisenhower by the military when the French colonial government collapsed in July 1954. But Eisenhower had decided to stay out of the region, certain that victory on the battlefield was impossible. Kennedy also doubted the wisdom of direct involvement in Vietnam, but he sent more than sixteen thousand military advisers to assist the South Vietnamese army in counterinsurgency warfare. He later encouraged a military coup against the government of Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon. Diem's resulting death profoundly destabilized South Vietnam. In the view of Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, it also obligated the United States to support any subsequent regime. "Though [Kennedy] privately thought the United States 'overcommitted' in Southeast Asia," Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., a historian who served on Kennedy's staff, has written, "he permitted the commitment to grow. It was the fatal error of his presidency."[28]

Yet Kennedy did not lack for significant accomplishments as president. During the Cuban missile crisis, in particular, he led brilliantly under the most difficult circumstances. For several days in October 1962 after the United States discovered Soviet missiles in Cuba, the world was poised on the brink of a nuclear war. Kennedy and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev engaged in what Secretary of State Dean Rusk later called an "eyeball to eyeball" confrontation. The impasse was resolved only when, in response to an American naval quarantine of Cuba, the Soviets agreed to dismantle their newly installed missiles. In return, the United States pledged not to attack Cuba. Kennedy also assured Khrushchev privately that he would remove American nuclear missiles from Turkey, which shared a border with the Soviet Union. Throughout the crisis, Kennedy combined firmness with restraint, a course that allowed Khrushchev to yield to the president's demands without being publicly humiliated. As Carl Brauer has written of Kennedy's conduct, "He looked at things from the Soviet side, compromised on secondary issues, did not play politics, and when he succeeded in getting the missiles removed, did not gloat or boast."[29]

Kennedy's triumph in the missile crisis demonstrated that he had matured considerably since the Bay of Pigs fiasco. His growth in office also was apparent when he took steps to make another such crisis less likely. Speaking at American University on June 10, 1963, Kennedy called for a nuclear test ban treaty that would reduce tensions with the Soviets. Both the United States and the Soviet Union, he argued, had a mutual interest in halting the arms race and seeking an eventual end to the cold war: "For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal. . . . Let us reexamine our attitude toward the cold war, remembering that we are not engaged in a debate, seeking to pile up debating points."[30]

On August 5, 1963, the United States and the Soviet Union signed a nuclear test ban treaty, their first bilateral arms control agreement. The treaty was only a small step forward—for example, it did not ban underground tests. But it did lay the groundwork for more substantial progress in the future.

For supporters of the president, the missile crisis triumph and the test ban treaty were signs of developing greatness. But Kennedy's destiny, as journalist Theodore H. White observed, was to be "cut off at the promise, not after the performance."[31] One of the most frequent criticisms of Kennedy, both when he was president and after his death, was that he pledged much more in the way of domestic reform than he delivered. In particular, JFK was faulted for his failures as a legislative leader. His New Frontier program embodied the high expectations he had articulated in his inaugural address. In advocating medical insurance for the elderly (Medicare) and federal aid to education, Kennedy sought to extend the accomplishments of Roosevelt and Truman, his most recent Democratic predecessors. In other ways, however, he sought to reshape his party's liberal tradition by offering initiatives, notably the Peace Corps, that reflected the theme of national service he had injected into the 1960 presidential campaign. Some of Kennedy's legislative initiatives, including the Peace Corps, became law. But most of his important bills were spurned by Congress.[32]

Kennedy's relations with legislators were extraordinarily difficult throughout his abbreviated presidency. The Democrats had a 65–35 majority in the Senate and a 263–174 advantage in the House. But twenty-one of the Democratic senators and ninety-nine of the Democratic representatives were southerners, and most of them voted with the Republicans against Kennedy's liberal agenda.

Kennedy's precarious position in Congress was revealed within days of his becoming president. The administration, with Speaker Sam Rayburn's support, moved to take control of the House Rules Committee, the conservative coalition's principal legislative stronghold. In the previous Congress the Rules Committee, which had the power to prevent legislation from reaching the floor for debate, had eight Democratic and four Republican members. But two of the Democrats were southern conservatives, who joined with Republicans to block reform legislation. At the outset of the Kennedy administration, Rayburn proposed adding three new members, two of them administration loyalists, which would provide an 8–7 majority for most of Kennedy's bills. Yet even with the new

president's open and active support and with Rayburn drawing on his considerable store of influence and goodwill, the administration won the House vote to expand the committee by only a narrow majority, 217–212. As Kennedy told one of his aides, the outcome was not so much a show of strength as a measure of "what we are up against."[33]

Not wanting to alienate the southern wing of his party any more than was necessary, Kennedy approached the issue of civil rights warily. He and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, did their best for more than two years to shun serious action. But the president was finally goaded to act by a persistent campaign and an immediate event.

The persistent campaign was the civil rights movement, which under the leadership of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and others, had been staging a series of real-life morality plays throughout the South. In Birmingham and elsewhere, nonviolent, hymn-singing demonstrators stood up for justice against virulently segregationist southern "law enforcement" officials who ruthlessly deployed overwhelming force. What the Kennedys hated most about these spectacles were the images of whites beating blacks that appeared in newspapers all over the world—particularly in the dozens of newly independent African and Asian nations that had become the main Cold War battleground between the United States and the Soviet Union. Communists offered these scenes as living disproof of America's claim to stand for the principle that all individuals are created equal.

The immediate event occurred on June 11, 1963, when Alabama Governor George C. Wallace, surrounded by network television cameras, theatrically defied and then yielded to federal officials who came to Tuscaloosa to enroll two black students in the previously all-white University of Alabama. That night, a fed-up Kennedy delivered a stirring prime-time address in which he told the nation that he would ask Congress to act on a civil rights bill, "to make a commitment it has not fully made in [the twentieth] century to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law." Eight days later he sent the legislation to Capitol Hill, triggering vows by southern Democratic senators to wage a filibuster against it.[34]

Kennedy's troubles in persuading Congress to enact his domestic program were not just a matter of stubborn legislative resistance to change. Although he was superb at planning and running a presidential campaign, Kennedy was just as bored and impatient with congressional politics during his presidency as he had been while serving in the House for six years and the Senate for eight years. "The very qualities of appearance, style and cast of mind that won [Kennedy] the admiration of the intellectual and diplomatic worlds somehow marked him as an outsider in his dealings with the Congress," noted James Reston.[35] Kennedy was far from indifferent to the legislative process, however. The one area where he expanded on the staff organization of the Eisenhower administration was in congressional relations. Under Lawrence O'Brien, the Office of Congressional Relations was joined to a network of legislative liaison specialists in the executive agencies and departments that greatly increased its visibility and effectiveness on Capitol Hill. Yet some members of Congress complained that Kennedy's congressional relations staff lacked respect for the legislative process. By late 1963 the president's program was in deep trouble.[36] Several measures that Kennedy sought, particularly Medicare, federal aid to education, and civil rights, remained in legislative limbo at the time of his death.

Before he went to Dallas on November 22, 1963, JFK was looking forward to the 1964 election, which he hoped would bring enough new liberal Democrats into Congress to move the New Frontier forward. It is impossible to know whether Kennedy would have accomplished his domestic goals and avoided the travail of Vietnam if he had lived, but the inability to deliver on promises has been a recurring problem of the modern presidency.

Partly because of Kennedy, the evolution of the executive gave rise to a more powerful, prominent, and yet politically isolated president. Indeed, the modern presidency was transformed into an elaborate and far-reaching institution with considerable autonomous power. At the same time, however, most modern presidents have distanced themselves from their party and Congress, making it more difficult to satisfy public demands by enacting lasting reforms. Kennedy did not create most of these conditions.

But his legacy to his successors was a significant personalization of the presidency that greatly accentuated its separation from the other centers of political power in the United States.

During Kennedy's one thousand days in office, the great promise of the personal presidency was widely celebrated. But developments within a few years of his death—the escalation of the Vietnam War and the divisions it opened in American society, the growing tendency of both liberals and conservatives to distrust government, and the popular disillusionment with presidential power—revealed the less desirable consequences of the Kennedy administration's innovations.

Lyndon B. Johnson and Presidential Government

The tragedy in Dallas placed the presidency in the hands of Lyndon Johnson, a Texan whom Kennedy had selected as his vice-presidential running mate in 1960 to balance the ticket geographically. LBJ's effective campaigning in the South, especially in Texas and Louisiana, was crucial to the Democrats' narrow victory against Nixon. Before becoming vice president, Johnson was known as a consummate political operator in the Senate, where as majority leader he exercised enormous influence during the Eisenhower years.[37] It remained to be seen, however, whether the quintessential legislative insider could adapt successfully to the requirements of the presidency.

Johnson's challenges as a successor president were compounded by the bitterness that many liberals felt about a southern power broker taking the place of their fallen leader. Johnson himself observed that African Americans, whose hopes for equality and justice had been raised by Kennedy, were disconcerted to awake "one morning to discover that their future was in the hands of a President born in the South."[38] After all, it was southern Democrats in Congress who had blocked Kennedy's civil rights legislation. From the moment Johnson became president, the press stressed that he was the first southerner in a century to occupy the White House