

# Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents

by, Richard Neustadt

review by, Leif Ellington

Presidential Power. By Richard Neustadt (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.)

Most Americans view the president as the all-powerful authoritative man who governs the country as he pleases from his oval office. The existing situation regarding the presidency and his power is actually on the contrary according to Richard Neustadt, which he illustrates in his book *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*. Neustadt bases all his theories on past presidential events, every idea he has on presidential power can be traced back to his analysis of presidential actions and its repercussions or lack thereof. According to Neustadt, a president derives his power not only from constitutional authority, but also from his reputation and prestige in Washington, the country and abroad. The presidential authority as defined by article II of the constitution, does not guarantee that the other members of the governmental bureaucracy will help the president achieve his goals of legislation. The president is then required to influence those around him with political persuasion to achieve his political agenda. The president can't simply wave his hand and demand changes in public policy and expect the governmental infrastructure to automatically adhere to it. The separation of powers places the power to influence legislation in a large and varied bureaucracy. With the separation of powers it is impossible for a president's agenda to blindly weave its way through and get passed. The president must use his knowledge of persuasiveness and prestige to adhere to the ideologies of others, to get his way.

Neustadt focuses on three distinctive traits that the president must possess to succeed in the white house, the power to persuade, his professional reputation and his public prestige. All three of these traits aid in the passing and success of the presidents policies.

The **power to persuade** is perhaps the most important aspect of the presidency that Neustadt writes about. The power of the United States government is vastly dispersed; the president cannot simply command and receive. Its much more complicated than that. Other levels of government have different constituencies and different sources of power and interest. The president is one man and needs others to get things done. The president must bargain and persuade others that what he wants is in their best interest. President Truman once said of President Eisenhower upon his election, "He'll sit there all day saying do this, do that, and nothing will happen. Poor Ike, it wont be a bit like the military. He'll find it very frustrating." Neustadt refers to the president in this respect, as a "clerk", in which the president must balance differing interests. Just because the president wants something done does not mean that the others who also possess the power and authority will carry out his wishes. " The presidents advantages are checked by the advantages of others. Relationships will pull in both directions. These are relationships of mutual dependence. The president depends upon the persons that he would persuade; he has to reckon with their need or fear of them (Neustadt 31)." The president must interpret to his colleagues how his policy will benefit them as well.

Neustadt illustrates an example of such a need for power of persuasion with a case study regarding presidential action or lack of it. Failed integration of African American students into a central high school in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957 triggered a meeting with president Eisenhower and governor of Arkansas Orval Faubus. The Supreme Court decided in the case of *Brown vs. The Board of Education* that African American students must be allowed to integrate into schools in the Little Rock area. The school board planned on initiating the plan for the school year. Contrary to the Supreme Court decision, governor Faubus commanded that the National Guard surround the school on the first day and prevent any African American students from entering the school. His reasoning stated that their acceptance to the school would cause a "violent citizen reaction." When Eisenhower

met with governor Faubus concerning the Supreme Courts decision, Eisenhower failed to persuade Faubus about the integration by not stating any of its advantages and how it would be for his benefit and the state's. The meeting was pointless because Eisenhower did not use his persuasive power. Anyone can see how the Supreme Court decision was of no concern to governor Faubus or the state of Arkansas. The president as stated by the constitution, is required to execute all laws. Actual presidential strategy to achieve this goes beyond the constitution, and Eisenhower's failure to persuade can be seen here in this situations failure.

Another aspect of political power is the **president's professional reputation** in Washington and abroad. The idea of the president's reputation concerns how the Washingtonians as Neustadt refers to them, view the president. Some Washingtonians for example are governors, military leaders, leading politicians, foreign ambassadors and Congress. The president's reputation comes into play by how reliant the government's infrastructure has on the president to carry out his legislation. The better the reputation of the president, the easier it will be to facilitate negotiations to implement policy. There are individuals in agencies and departments that have an incredible amount of power and can be a real force to reckon with for the president. There is an example that Neustadt illustrates to show a presidents reputation being questioned. Eisenhower's secretary of treasury George Humphrey publicly questioned the integrity of some of Eisenhower's changes to the budget for that year of 1957. The very public scrutiny by Humphrey, caused a national questioning of the budget and coarsely the reputation of Eisenhower. Although Humphrey's allegations may not have been justified, Eisenhower's reputation was scarred nonetheless. The president must act always keeping in mind the interests of those powerful enough to publicly bludgeon or scrutinize his policies to maintain his reputation.

The last token of presidential power that Neustadt delves into is **public prestige**. Public prestige is basically **how the public views the president**. Even though the public has no direct associations with policymaking, the public's view of the president affects how legislation moves through the web of American government. Public prestige is also seen in the private sector as well. If a private organization looks highly upon the president, the easier it will be to execute the president's politics. "Prestige counts in power by establishing some checks upon resistance from the men engaged in governing (Neustadt 77)." The public sentiment of the president tends to be congruent with Congress since Congress represents the population and most likely will reflect their constituency's opinions. A good opinion on the constituency's part will help the president's policy move through congress. What it all comes down to is depending on the public's conviction of the president; it will most likely represent how organizations view the president and how they will act on his policy agendas. Public prestige and professional reputation, as stated by Neustadt, have a lot in common. The public's view affects his reputation and his reputation affects the public opinion of the president.

Neustadt also implies that **a president should think and act prospectively**, so the decisions he makes today will aid his ability to persuade tomorrow. The president must utilize all his knowledge of politics and policy to aid in his decisions so he may maintain a high reputation among Washingtonians and his prestige with the public. Neustadt said, **"The presidency is not a place for amateurs. The sort of expertise can hardly be acquired without deep experience in political office. The presidency is a place for men of politics, but by no means is it a place for every politician (Neustadt 152)."** The presidency is not what the public is brought up to believe it is. The president is not the omnipotent leader governing all actions of the United States. Everything he does is carefully planned to conform to his colleagues in the government for the sole purpose of possible execution. It is an arduous process with its tools to carry it out only available from extensive experience in political office. There is more to executing the job of the presidency than there seems. Rather than the president acting as a dictator, he must use his power to persuade in order to command.

All around I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. Neustadt and his theories are held in the high respects in the political world. I have heard that Nixon's chief of staff supposedly made this book the required reading for the entire white house staff! Many not only view this book as an extensive opinioned essay, but rather as a handbook for presidents seeking power in the executive. This book opened my eyes to new political realities that I can now see in modern presidents and their actions. Neustadt is however dated in his case studies concerning whom he studies. The original copy of this book was published in 1960 and covered the administrations of only Truman, Eisenhower and FDR. Through time Neustadt added chapters to reassure his readers of his prior opinions based on his new analysis of the new presidents. Even though Neustadt has updated the book, it is difficult for the

young person to make that qualitative connection with his examples given that they happened before our time. He does although do a good job of assessing the past presidential examples to help the reader understand the connection to presidential persuasion and prestige. I recommend this book because it opens your eyes to a reality in politics not apparent to the casual observer.

In Don K. Price's review of Neustadt's book, he calls the act of policy making an art as well as a science. I completely agree with Price on that note in lieu of what I read in Neustadt's book. Getting policy enacted takes talent as well as knowledge, which are aspects of both art and science collectively. I enjoyed that Price brought up some of Neustadt's background. It made me realize that Neustadt may have shown favoritism in choice of case studies based on which presidents he was directly connected with. I do believe that Price should have gone into deeper detail about what Neustadt's main thesis was. It is difficult reading his review to thoroughly understand what Neustadt was trying to say. I also agree with Price when he said that a further study of all the examples he brought up in the book would be longer than the book itself. Maybe in each situation we are only getting the aspects of the case studies that directly associate with Neustadt's opinion and further scrutiny into his examples may contradict his conclusions. Although this book is not after dinner reading, it is a good read in the political sight of things.

[Price's Review](#)