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STUDYING THE PRESIDENCY

Why Presidents Need Political Scientists

Lyn Ragsdale

Political scientists study the presidency, but even before Donald Trump took office presidents generally have not been interested in learning what they have to teach. That's too bad, argues Lyn Ragsdale, because most presidents could learn a great deal. Employing a variety of perspectives and methods, political scientists have uncovered several general patterns in the presidency. Some of these have to do with presidential imagery—for example, "People respond to presidents more through emotions than through rational calculations about the government's performance or presidents' positions on issues." Other generalizations ("Cabinet government does not work") concern the presidential institution. Ragsdale finds that presidents who are ignorant of what political scientists know often make avoidable, sometimes serious mistakes.

American presidents are surrounded by experts. Economists show presidents how to study budgets, inflation figures, and unemployment rates. Domestic policy analysts tell presidents about the details of proposals on civil rights, health

care reform, Social Security, and education. Military, foreign relations, and intelligence experts inform presidents about the capabilities of military hardware, defense strategies, international diplomacy, and covert operations. On occasion, historians remind presidents about what past chief executives have accomplished. After six months in office, President Barack Obama met with a group of nine historians and asked them to reflect on how several of his predecessors had succeeded and failed in tackling key national problems.¹ But political scientists are rarely asked to the White House to instruct presidents about the presidency. Since President Bill Clinton's first term, a team of political scientists has run the White House Transition Project, which offers systematic advice to new presidents' transition teams about specific offices in the White House and the executive departments and what to do and not do when making cabinet and other appointments.² Although incoming administrations typically have embraced the Transition Project, the Trump administration bypassed these experts, preferring to run the transition not in Washington, D.C., but from Trump Tower in New York. No matter how much an incoming administration relies on the Transition Project, once the transition is complete, political scientists are much less known to American presidents. Few presidents seem ever to have taken a course on the presidency; some seem to have failed one. Presidents typically presume that by virtue of being in office they must know the job's ins and outs. Yet political scientists understand the presidency in a way that other experts cannot. Presidents could benefit from studying the presidency.

This chapter considers what political scientists know about the presidency and what presidents themselves should know. First, two central features of the modern office—imagery and institution—are outlined.³ Second, several generalizations about the presidency that are related to its imagery and institution are addressed. These generalizations describe what usually happens in the office and outline regular patterns that are difficult for presidents to avoid and equally difficult for them to modify. Third, several episodes of presidential mistakes are examined that might have been avoided had presidents studied the office more carefully. Finally, the issue of what presidents can learn from how political scientists study the presidency is reexamined.

IMAGERY AND INSTITUTION

The first thing presidents need to know about the presidency is that it has two major dimensions: imagery and institution. The main image of the presidency is of the president, speaking with a clear lone voice, governing the country. The institution is the complex organization of people that surrounds the president, helps to make presidential decisions, and structures relations with other institutions, such as Congress, the media, the bureaucracy, and the courts.

These two features of the presidency appeared around the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴ Image and institution emerged through a philosophical shift from presidential restraint to presidential activism. As proponents of activism, Theodore Roosevelt (1901–1909) and Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921) argued that presidents have the ability to do anything on behalf of the people that does not

directly violate the Constitution. Activism thus relies on two concepts, both of which forge the presidential image. First, presidents can do “anything”—they are to be active policymakers and problem solvers. Second, presidents do so on behalf of the people—they are, in Theodore Roosevelt’s words, “stewards of the people.” The institution is needed to carry out the responsibilities assumed by presidents in the new imagery. The one demands the other.

Neither of these features of the presidency existed in the nineteenth century when presidents operated under notions of restraint—they exercised only those powers specified in the Constitution and existing laws. As a rule, presidents were neither seen nor heard. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, James Polk, and Abraham Lincoln aside, presidents before the twentieth century either did not take active roles in policymaking and public leadership or were unsuccessful when they did so; both arenas were thus left to Congress. For modern presidents the key is to understand more specifically what the image and the institution are like.

On Imagery

The image of the presidency is the single executive image: The president is the most powerful, most important person in the government and in the nation. As the only official elected by the entire country, presidents represent the people. They profess compassion for the average American and passion for the American dream. They are the nation’s principal problem solvers, the ones who identify its most daunting challenges and offer solutions. They press their leadership to ensure that the proposed solutions become law. In times of crisis, they single-handedly protect the nation. The image of the president is thus of a person who is omniscient (able to do all things) and omnipresent (working everywhere).

An image is a simplification. It is one’s mental picture of an object, a product, a situation, or, in this case, a political office. The image usually magnifies certain features while glossing over other relevant details. Reality is typically checked against the image more than the other way around. For example, if you have an image of the perfect cat—big, white, and fluffy—then you are unlikely to enjoy cats who do not match this image. If a scrawny, black, matted feline wanders by, you are much less likely to adopt a new image of the perfect cat to accommodate it. The single executive image is a simplification of both the presidency and American politics. It personalizes the office by embodying all its units, staff, and decisions in one person—the president. In the mind’s eye of the nation, the president is the person who matters most. American politics is presidential politics. Many people’s recollections of American politics are dominated by the day Truman dropped the bomb, the day John Kennedy was shot, the day Richard Nixon resigned, the day Barack Obama announced the killing of Osama Bin Laden, the day after day that Jimmy Carter could not free the hostages in Iran. People often simplify their views of both the presidency and American politics by focusing on the exploits of one person.

To be sure, people are aware that the government is immensely more complex than this—Congress is a powerful and, at times, dominant branch; the bureaucracy seems to do whatever it wants; the Supreme Court announces decisions that

tell the rest of the government what to do. Yet citizens look at this assemblage as if it were the scrawny cat. It does not fit their presidential image of the government. Similarly, when they find that presidents appear to be in over their heads with national economic difficulties, dissension within their own party in Congress, or civil wars abroad, they do not modify the single executive image to fit the harsh (and very typical) presidential circumstance. Instead, they revise their opinions of the incumbent chief executive, who comes out the loser in public opinion polls.

Sources of the Single Executive Image. The single executive image arises from three sources: the public, the press, and presidents themselves. Citizens are keenly interested in political figures as individuals, and presidents are the political figures they know best. The political scientist Fred Greenstein observed that people draw on the president as an important cognitive aid to simplify and ultimately understand politics.⁵ Many Americans pay little attention to politics, but the one person they do know something about is the president. Many can recall the most trivial details about presidents, from their taste in food—whether it is President Obama’s taste for arugula or President Clinton’s affinity for McDonald’s—to the names of the family pets: Fala (Franklin Roosevelt), King Timahoe (Nixon), Millie (George H. W. Bush), Socks the Cat (Clinton), Barney (George W. Bush), and Bo and Sunny (Barack Obama). Several “first pets” have become celebrities in their own right, with Millie “writing” a best-selling book and Bo and Sunny routinely “posting” on their Facebook page. Indeed, when Donald Trump took office a mild controversy ensued because Trump had no dog or cat and was unlikely to get one. This was the first time in more than 100 years that no presidential pet would wander the White House lawn. Thus people simplify the complex operations of government by concentrating on the actions of a single player—the president.

The media help produce the ubiquity of president-watching among the public. The most important national story that the press reports, day in and day out, is about the president. A Pew Research Center study of news coverage during the first 100 days in office for presidents George W. Bush, Clinton, and Obama showed that well over 30 percent of the stories were about their leadership skills and style.⁶ During his first 100 days in office, Donald Trump not only was covered more often than his predecessors but also was the central speaker in 65 percent of White House news stories.⁷ The press then is fascinated with presidents as individuals—what they say, where they go, whom they meet. It is not clear which fascination came first—that of the public or that of the press. Much press coverage has become known as the “body watch.”⁸ Reporters watch the president’s every move just in case, as Ronald Reagan put it, the “awful awful” happens. As one television news executive producer observed, “We cover the president expecting he will die.”⁹ When George W. Bush choked on a pretzel while watching a football game and momentarily passed out, it became international news. The body watch carries with it a vivid irony. Especially since the Kennedy assassination, the press assumes, probably correctly, that people want to know if a president becomes ill, is injured, or is killed. Yet on most days, nothing catastrophic happens. So the body watch captures the ordinary aspects of the president’s life. Otherwise mundane activities, such as taking a morning walk, jogging, playing golf, eating at a restaurant, and

boating, become news as part of the body watch. Sometimes, the White House goes to great lengths to prevent cameras from capturing aspects of the president's routine. Although reporters were allowed to cover Donald Trump dining at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida, they were forbidden from recording the president playing golf there or at his other properties in an attempt to rebuff reports that Trump spent too much time on the golf course.¹⁰ In addition, only when problems arise among members of the White House staff do viewers and readers learn about some of the more than 1,000 people who work within the presidency. Most often the president stands alone in daily press coverage.

This press focus on the president was underscored the evening of President Clinton's fourth State of the Union address on February 4, 1997, the same evening a civil jury returned a verdict against former football star O. J. Simpson in the deaths of Simpson's wife and her friend. The television networks had a major decision to make—whether to follow the president or follow the arguably more sensational and dramatic story about Simpson. Consistent with the emphasis on presidential media, the broadcasters decided to cover the president. As Frank Sesno, the Washington Bureau chief for CNN, stated, "If it comes down to it, we go with the president. We don't interrupt the president of the United States."¹¹

The press focus on the presidency reinforces the image of the president as omnipresent and omniscient. Presidents work to portray particular images of themselves. Many of these images first emerge during the election campaign as the candidates attempt to distinguish themselves from each other and often from the current occupant of the White House. Candidates portray themselves as smart when the predecessor or opponent is depicted as dumb. They portray themselves as energetic, hardworking, and eager for change when the predecessor is shown as lethargic. The personal image of a president also develops while he or she is in office. Some aspects of this image are built quite intentionally by the White House, such as the notion of the smart, calm, family-oriented Barack Obama. Other aspects are shaped more unwittingly through selective media coverage of the president's daily activities, such as Gerald Ford's being typecast as a bumbler after he slipped on ice and hit several errant golf balls. Whether crafted intentionally or occurring accidentally, a president's personal image is measured continually against the single executive image.

How to Study Presidential Imagery. How, then, should presidents study the single executive image so that they can use it most effectively? Presidents may think they know something about imagery from the campaign. It is tempting for them to believe that as long as they stick with what worked then, they will have no problems once in office. But converting campaign imagery into presidential imagery is trickier than many candidates-turned-presidents imagine.

Campaign imagery carries with it a large amount of puffery. Candidates compete to appear as the most convincing omniscient player. They make outlandish promises, such as to wipe out a multi-trillion-dollar deficit, to impose no new taxes, to implement secret plans to end the war in Vietnam, and to reduce dramatically the role of the federal government in American society. Campaigns operate according to their own laws of physics: almost no promise or accusation is

ever too incredible; almost no number of promises or accusations is ever too many. Campaign physics also provides some room for ambiguity and fine-tuning during the exceedingly long election season. Candidates can make sweeping commitments but say that the details have not been fully worked out. Or they can say that a proposal has been misunderstood by the media or misrepresented by the opposition.

Campaign imagery is certainly related to the single executive image and derives many of its features from presidential imagery. But the laws of campaign physics do not apply in office. The media now focus not just on the promises made, but also on the promises kept. Sweeping commitments must be converted into detailed plans. If presidents back away from promises, compromise them, postpone them, or break them, they violate presidential imagery because the single executive image suggests that presidents keep their promises and act in the best interest of the nation in doing so. When George H. W. Bush broke his “read my lips: no new taxes” campaign promise, he later lamented that it was the worst mistake of his presidency. In contrast, when Dwight Eisenhower made good on his campaign pledge to “go to Korea” and bring the warring parties to the peace table, he was heralded as a hero, even though the war ended with the borders unchanged from where they were when the war began three years earlier. Presidents must be constantly aware of the comparison between what was promised during the campaign and what is undertaken in office. As a candidate, Donald Trump confidently promised, “You’re going to have such great health care at a tiny fraction of the cost. And it’s going to be so easy.”¹² In office, he observed that “nobody knew health care could be so complicated” and congressional Republicans were unable to “repeal and replace” the Affordable Care Act passed during the Obama administration.¹³ This campaign-office comparison is only one part of the much larger comparison between presidents’ personal images and the single executive image. Throughout their terms, all presidents endure a gap between the two images that can never be fully closed. The size of the gap depends on how well presidents present themselves as living up to the single executive image. Part of the gap involves the extent to which campaign promises are kept. But other dimensions include demonstrations of power, success, and American pride.

The wider the image gap, the more the media will depict the president as omnipresent but not omniscient. As one example, the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961—a CIA-directed attempt by Cuban exiles to oust the Communist government of Fidel Castro—opened President Kennedy, whose administration approved the attempt, to charges of reckless youth, arrogance, and incompetent decision making. Yet the closer a president’s personal image comes to the omniscience and omnipresence expected in the single executive image, the less likely the president will end up looking like the scrawny cat. During the Cuban missile crisis in October 1961, when the Soviet Union tried to install missiles in Cuba that were pointed at the United States, Kennedy was praised for his acumen in invoking a naval blockade of the island, as well as for the tough yet calm manner in which he did so. Similarly, after George W. Bush, wearing a full pilot suit and helmet, landed in a navy fighter plane on the aircraft carrier *USS Lincoln* on May 2, 2003, he tried to embody the single executive image of a leader by boldly proclaiming that the military effort in Iraq had ended while a banner in the background proclaimed

“Mission Accomplished.” As the war and U.S. involvement continued for another five years, people frequently recalled the aircraft carrier moment. Consequently, the gap between Bush’s image and the single executive image loomed large. In contrast, immediately after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Bush made a trip to Ground Zero in New York City to visit the search and rescue teams working at the World Trade Center site. Standing alongside firemen and the American flag, Bush told those assembled that “America today is on bended knee, in prayer for the people whose lives were lost here, for the workers who work here, for the families who mourn.”¹⁴ Bush was touted as being caring, sensitive, and bold—all the things required by the single executive image. Thus presidents can study the dimensions of the single executive image to recognize how their personal images will be evaluated by journalists, politicians, and the public.

On the Institution

Although the public, the press, and presidents are at least somewhat familiar with presidential imagery, none of them, not even presidents, are well acquainted with the presidential institution. During the campaign, candidates do not think much about the presidency as an institution; instead, it is a prize to win. They are most likely to invoke imagery that defies the institution: they will do numerous things single-handedly, they will succeed with Congress and the bureaucracy where their predecessors have failed, and they will bring peace to the world and prosperity to the nation. When he took office, Donald Trump may have been surprised to learn the full extent of what he had inherited: a complex organization consisting of forty-two separate offices, more than 1,800 employees, and an annual budget of more than \$600 million, officially named the Executive Office of the President (EOP). Outgoing president Barack Obama was undoubtedly more familiar with the organization and also more aware of his limited abilities to change its size and shape. Despite the declared intentions of Presidents Reagan, Clinton, and George W. Bush to streamline the EOP, none had any real success. The number of employees and the budget of the EOP during Clinton’s first term looked remarkably similar to those observed during both Bush administrations. The total executive staff averaged 1,727 people under George H. W. Bush, 1,620 under Clinton, and 1,704 during George W. Bush’s term. It crept up by roughly 100 people under Obama to 1,870 employees.¹⁵ The first Trump budget offered a similarly sized EOP.

An institution is an organization of people established to carry out a set of functions. Institutions include schools, corporations, police departments, legislatures, and courts. A peculiar characteristic of an institution is that it acts independently of the people within it. An institution establishes regular patterns of behavior for its members to follow, including divisions of labor (specialization) and standard operating procedures (rules about how things are done). These patterns are followed regardless of who holds positions in the institution, even at the very top.

The contemporary presidency is an institution. It is an organization of people who carry out an array of policy, public, and political functions for which the president is responsible. The presidential institution is no small family business. It operates with a division of labor—offices within the White House specialize in

foreign, domestic, and economic policy; the budget; press relations; public appearances; congressional liaison; and group affairs. Through the years the institution has developed standard operating procedures to devise budgets, write and reject legislation, and invoke vetoes. These procedures change only modestly from one president to another. The presidential institution makes many decisions on behalf of the president that the president knows little about.

Not only is the presidential institution elaborate, it is also decentralized. The decentralization means that there is a proliferation of offices, many of which have roughly equal status and the ability to direct, if not determine, presidential decisions. There is less top-down authority in the presidency than one might expect. It is difficult for the president or his senior staff to effectively monitor or even establish the direction for all the work that is done on his behalf. The political scientist Alfred de Grazia remarked, “On a normal issue that comes before the ‘President’ some dozens of persons are involved. It might be presumptuous to say that more of a collectivity is engaged than when the same type of issue would come before the Congress; but it would be equally presumptuous to say that fewer persons were taken up with the matter.”¹⁶

Institutional Responsibilities. Regardless of who is president, the presidential institution exists to handle three sets of responsibilities: policy issues, political targets, and the daily workload. First, units in the EOP handle three broad policy domains: national security, the economy, and domestic affairs. Because each category is so encompassing, several units, each with slightly different jurisdictions, share responsibility for each domain and often compete to exercise their expertise and their control of presidents’ ultimate decisions. To make matters even more complicated for presidents, many of the units that have the greatest authority over a particular policy area are not within the EOP but instead are in the departments and agencies of the federal bureaucracy. For example, the National Security Council, the national security adviser, the National Security Council staff, the secretaries of state and defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and in some cases the secretary of Homeland Security all participate in making national security decisions. Only the first three are in the EOP.

Second, units in the EOP target political players and other political institutions for presidential persuasion. The job of these units is to convince their targets that what the president wants is what they should want. For example, the Office of Legislative Affairs targets Congress and is the focal point for White House lobbying activities on Capitol Hill. In addition, the White House Press Office targets the press through, among other things, the daily briefing by the press secretary. The Office of Public Liaison and Intergovernmental Affairs targets interest groups, at times pressuring them to support the president’s proposals and at other times organizing their support as part of a larger White House lobbying campaign.

Third, key units in the White House—the Office of Administration and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB)—are assigned certain high-volume tasks to ease the presidential workload. The Office of Administration follows routine, computerized procedures for hiring White House and other personnel. The OMB is the largest, and arguably the most active, presidential office; it is involved

in the preparation of presidents' budgets, sending legislation to Congress, determining whether presidents should sign or veto bills passed by Congress, and reviewing thousands of administrative regulations. The OMB's procedures purposely remove presidents from, rather than involve them in, as much daily presidential business as possible.

How to Study the Institution. On entering office, many presidents delight in announcing bold plans to rearrange many of the units within the presidential institution—subtract some, add others. Other presidents proclaim that they will dramatically cut the size and budget of the institution. They do so believing that the presidential institution is a personal organization—one that each president can shape and reshape. To some extent, they are right. Presidents do cut units from the EOP, usually under the guise of getting rid of a holdover from the previous administration. These cuts are more than offset by additions that place the president's own stamp on the EOP. Most of the changes presidents make are at the edges of the presidential institution. For example, George W. Bush ended three EOP offices that Bill Clinton had started: the President's Council on Sustainable Development, the Office of Women's Initiatives and Outreach, and the President's Critical Infrastructure Protection Board. But he replaced them with specialty offices of his own: the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, the Office of Strategic Initiatives, the Office of Homeland Security, USA Freedom Corps, the Office of Global Communications, and the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board. Upon taking office, Barack Obama expanded the EOP to include the new Council on Women and Girls. In 2017, Donald Trump created the White House National Trade Council to highlight U.S. trade negotiations and industrial capabilities, distinct from the Office of the United States Trade Representative, a part of the EOP since 1963. Still in the first year of the Trump presidency, the Trade Council has not been particularly important on trade policy.¹⁷

In addition, at the beginning of each president's term there is a grand arrival of new people who scramble for office space following the mass exodus of the previous administration. This rapid turnover leads some observers to suggest that there is no institution at all—instead, just a large staff personally serving a president. But the institution does not grind to a halt every four to eight years. Perhaps nothing better underscores the continuity of the institution than a story about President Nixon's last day in office. On the afternoon that Nixon was to announce his resignation, a congressional staffer phoned the White House and inquired whether several minor pieces of legislation were “in accordance with the president's program.”¹⁸ There was no functioning president, nor was there a presidential program that afternoon, but the presidential institution continued to operate—the staffer got an answer. The institution has a fair number of employees who are career civil servants, especially in the OMB, and who thus stay on from one president to the next. In addition, the vast array of White House procedures concerning budgeting, legislation, and personnel remain intact. At best, then, the presidential institution is only a quasi-personal organization.

It is also a quasi-formal one. Incoming presidents have less ability to change the size and shape of the institution than they might think. The size, structures, and

procedures of the White House breed continuity that is difficult to end. Presidents cannot do without the functions that the EOP provides. Only one president in the twentieth century was able to reduce significantly the number of White House employees. In the aftermath of Watergate, Gerald Ford decreased the EOP by 67 percent—from 5,751 employees in 1974 to 1,910 employees in 1975—by eliminating some offices and councils that had been established during the Nixon years. But he reduced the size of neither the White House Office (the unit closest to the president) nor the OMB. Indeed, both increased slightly. In addition, Ford's personnel cutbacks in 1975 were countered by large increases in expenditures during 1975 and 1976 especially for the White House Office and the OMB. Although Ronald Reagan touted his desire to shrink the size of the federal government, the EOP diminished by little more than 100 people in his first term and by only 76 people in his second term. The overall size crept back up during the George H. W. Bush years. Thus presidents who study the size and shape of the institution learn that the presidency has a life of its own that is quite independent of the people within it, even the president. At a luncheon with former presidents Carter, George H. W. Bush, and Clinton designed to welcome Barack Obama to the Oval Office, George W. Bush reflected that "all of us who have served in this office understand that the office itself transcends the individual."¹⁹

GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT PRESIDENTIAL IMAGERY

What can political scientists tell presidents about image and institution?

Principles of Image Making

Political scientists offer four empirical generalizations about presidential image making.

1. Through their speeches, presidents present themselves as representatives of the people and as moral and religious leaders. Their own words typically portray them as nonpartisan leaders who work alone in the government without the aid of staff, members of Congress, or other executive officials.²⁰
2. Public opinion polls show that the public most consistently expects presidents to place the country's interest ahead of politics, be intelligent, exercise sound judgment in a crisis, take firm stands on issues, get the job done, and be concerned about the average citizen.²¹
3. In addition, public opinion polls indicate that people respond to presidents more through emotions than through rational calculations about the government's performance or presidents' positions on issues.²²

4. Early press coverage, which deals with family stories and future policy plans, is more favorable than subsequent press coverage.²³

Taken together, these generalizations suggest that the single executive image endures in presidents' own words, public impressions, and press coverage. In their speeches, presidents offer the country the single executive image. They sponsor the dual notions of presidential omnicompetence and omnipresence. They suggest that they alone are linked to the American people, above politics, beyond party, and touched by God. Gerald Ford revealed his connection to the American people on assuming office:

I will be the President of black, brown, red, and white Americans, of old and young, of women's liberationists and male chauvinists and all the rest of us in-between, of the poor and the rich, of native sons and new refugees, of those who work at lathes or at desks or in mines or in the fields, of Christians, Jews, Moslems, Buddhists, and atheists, if there really are any atheists after what we have all been through.²⁴

Similarly, the public judges presidents according to the single executive image. As a Nixon aide wrote, "Presidents are measured against an ideal that's a combination of leading man, God, father, hero, pope, king. . . . They want him to be . . . someone to be held up to their children as a model; someone to be cherished by themselves as a revered member of the family."²⁵

Early press coverage also reinforces the single executive image by depicting the president as a person of the people (complete with family, furniture, and daily routines) with bold new plans to lead the nation forward. Political scientists Michael Grossman and Martha Kumar found in a study of newspaper, television, and magazine coverage of presidents from 1953 to 1978 that, during the early part of the term, reporters are most attentive to human interest stories about the president. Indeed, a Ford White House official predicted that the first stories about the incoming Carter administration would be personality stories about the president: "First, who is Jimmy Carter? What is his personality? Does he get mad? Does he golf? Does he fish in a pond? How do you find out who somebody is? You look at his friends, his habits, his manner, his character, his personality."²⁶

Taking the generalizations together, political scientists reveal two features of the presidential imagery. First, the single executive image rests on symbolism—the president symbolizes the nation, its people, and its government. There is a symbolic equivalence between the president and the public, with the two blurring together as one in presidents' speeches and in media coverage of the office. Presidents frequently use the pronoun *we* to refer to themselves and the American people.²⁷ As noted previously, human interest news reports depict the president as one of the people. The symbolism is emotionally, not rationally, based. Ordinary citizens, who are often inattentive to government and politically unorganized, find it difficult to obtain tangible benefits from a president, unlike a major industry requesting relief from a regulation or an interest group seeking legislation. Instead, people seek "quiescence" in politics—reassurance that everything is all right or at least that someone is in charge.

People, then, may well be less concerned about what presidents do than how they make them feel. These emotions help to explain the otherwise ironic situations in which presidential failure garners public support. As one example, Kennedy's popularity rose ten points after the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961. Had people judged the decision rationally, based on costs and benefits, their response would have been to disapprove of the president's performance. Instead the president benefited in the short term, because people sought quiescence that the "bad guys" were being challenged, no matter what the outcome of the challenge was.

Without studying the presidency, presidents may neglect this emotionally based symbolic connection and expect the American public to evaluate their proposals and achievements on their policy merits. In so doing they confuse objective accomplishment with perceived triumph. Bill Clinton was frustrated, for example, that his numerous legislative successes in 1993 were not accompanied by high public approval ratings. By 1995 Clinton recognized that presidential success is in the eyes of the beholders. In the aftermath of the 1994 midterm congressional elections, in which Republicans gained majorities in both houses of Congress for the first time in forty years, Clinton and the Republican leadership played a tumultuous game of brinkmanship by failing to reach a budget agreement and ultimately shutting down the government for several weeks. Although such deadlock could hardly be deemed an objective success, Clinton gained the upper hand by casting the Republicans as the culprits. His perceived victory boosted his popularity ratings. Following the single executive image, presidents must shape a visceral political experience through telling folksy stories, witnessing human tragedies and triumphs, and offering examples of old-fashioned American values. Presidents who try to behave differently will find the public otherwise engaged.

Second, the single executive image is false. Although the image is a very real part of the American body politic, it is an exaggeration and distortion of grand proportions. The president does not single-handedly lead the people and govern the country. The president may be the single most powerful individual in the country, but Congress as a body is at least as powerful as the president. Presidents surely hold a unique position in the government, but they are not alone, either in the presidential institution or in the larger government. Barack Obama was reminded of the power of Congress when in summer 2011, nearing a historic debt and spending deal with Speaker of the House John Boehner, Obama attempted to pressure Boehner for more tax increases, but Boehner, livid that Obama would push him further, refused to return the president's phone call and the deal collapsed.²⁸

In two ways the falsehood of the single executive image may perplex presidents who have not adequately studied the presidency. Some presidents fail to see the falsehood. Instead, they act as though they are singularly powerful, flouting regular consultation with Congress and defying laws that prevent unilateral presidential action. In an interview with David Frost after resigning the presidency, Richard Nixon was asked about a president's breaking the law in the best interests of the nation. Nixon responded, "Well, when the President does it, that means that it is not illegal."²⁹ This was a contorted extension of the single executive image into a claim that the president can do no wrong.

Other presidents who know the image to be false risk pointing out the falsehood at their own peril. Jimmy Carter tried on several occasions to downplay people's expectations by suggesting that he was only one man and could not do it all. Although he was right, the public did not recognize that their expectations were unrealistic. Instead, they judged Carter a failure for not living up to them. Presidents must both recognize the falsehood and live with it, just as they must recognize the symbolic connection between the president and the public and do what they can to capitalize on both.

Closing the Image Gap

What can presidents do to capitalize on the single executive image? Political scientists offer four generalizations. (The numbering of these statements continues in sequence from the earlier discussion.)

5. Short successful wars, sudden international crises, and significant diplomatic efforts temporarily improve the president's public approval rating.³⁰
6. Major nationally televised addresses also temporarily improve public approval.³¹
7. Protracted wars, domestic riots, public protests and demonstrations, and declining economic conditions diminish public approval.³²
8. During the course of their terms, presidents face a decline in public approval.³³

The size of the image gap that presidents endure between their personal images and the single executive image bears directly on presidents' public support—the wider the gap, the lower the public approval rating. Political scientists have recognized two aspects of the image gap: (1) the short-term events, activities, and circumstances that narrow or widen it; and (2) the long-term pattern of public approval during a president's term as it relates to the gap.

In the Short Term. Presidents have a fair degree of control over some ventures that work to their advantage in closing the image gap, such as emergency military interventions, dramatic diplomatic efforts, and well-timed major television addresses. Presidents also face some circumstances beyond their control, such as international crises like the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, which may work to their advantage. Whether presidents have control or not, a rally of national support typically takes place. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, George W. Bush's approval rating soared from 51 percent to 85 percent and peaked at 89 percent. Barack Obama's approval rating increased ten percentage points in a single month after the killing of Osama Bin Laden, rising from 46 percent in April 2011 to 57 percent in May 2011. Consistent with the emotional basis of public approval, presidents receive all but unconditional support for actions that place the United States in a clear-cut good-versus-evil, us-against-them position or that envelop the actions or positions of the administration in patriotic trappings.

But other sudden and unforeseen events or conditions at home—such as urban riots, skyrocketing consumer prices, or plummeting job prospects—may leave the public wondering what the president will do. Many of these exigencies will tarnish the president’s reputation in relation to the single executive image. The single executive image suggests that presidents are responsible even for things that they cannot predict and over which they have no immediate control. Yet for the very reason that presidents can neither predict nor control what will happen, they are unable to capitalize on these events and conditions. The us-against-them focus changes; it is no longer the United States as a whole against foreign foes. Instead, it is more likely that presidents portray their side as “us” and the opposition as “them,” thereby ensuring domestic controversy rather than a popular mandate about how the issues should be handled. George W. Bush’s approval rating dropped nearly ten percentage points overnight, from 48 percent to 39 percent, following Hurricane Katrina because many Americans felt the government’s response to the calamity was inadequate.

Generalizations 5, 6, and 7 taken together—the mix of the controlled and the uncontrollable, the presidential rallying of public support, and the public questioning of presidential action—imply that presidents must engage in domestic, foreign, and economic policymaking. The single executive image demands attention to all three policy spheres. Although presidents are likely to get less credit in domestic than in foreign affairs because the public rally feature is absent, they may come up short politically if they emphasize foreign over domestic initiatives. For example, because President George W. Bush limited his domestic agenda in order to focus on Iraq, he left himself open to charges of not caring sufficiently about the consequences of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans. The opposite is also true: it is unwise for presidents to develop high-profile domestic agendas and make short shrift of foreign policy. By doing so, they defy the symbolic importance of acting as the leader of the nation to the world and do not show skills of crisis management, both of which are expected parts of the single executive image. President Clinton initially appeared hesitant in foreign and military affairs, but when criticism about the perceived hesitation mounted, he began to act more decisively. Finally, although economic bad news widens the image gap, economic good news closes it. Even though presidents have limited control over what happens in the economy, they are credited with being economic wizards if the economy is robust. As President Carter observed, “When things go bad you get entirely too much blame. And I have to admit that when things go good, you get entirely too much credit.”³⁴

In the Long Run. Political scientists have also observed an overall pattern to the shifts in public approval across presidents’ terms: approval starts high in the first year, slides during the second and third years, and then rebounds slightly in the fourth year. This pattern denotes three distinct phases to public approval across the term: a honeymoon in some portion of the first year; a period of disillusionment in the middle of the term, when the image gap is at its widest; and a phase of forgiveness at the term’s end, when people recognize to some degree that the image is just that and that the president was not so bad after all.

This long-term pattern is one that seems to be an inviolate canon of the office: what starts high must decline. The three phases vary considerably in intensity and duration by president, but the overall pattern is obvious. From Franklin Roosevelt, who was president when public opinion polling first began, to Ronald Reagan, only one president—Dwight Eisenhower—escaped the pattern. Eisenhower's first-term popularity started high and stayed high, although the pattern of decline did occur in his second term. Even presidents who were typically viewed as popular presidents, such as Roosevelt and Reagan, nonetheless witnessed the downward pattern during their times in office. George W. Bush also experienced a classic, if precipitous, decline in approval. Despite surging in the aftermath of 9/11 Bush's approval rating dropped throughout his first term and continued to do so during his second term, reaching a historic low of 25 percent during much of 2008. As unpopular as Bush was, even he experienced the forgiveness phase: his approval rating rose from 25 percent at the time of the November elections to 34 percent as he left office. The cycle began anew with Barack Obama, who entered office with a 68 percent approval rating. By September 2011, his approval was at an all-time low of 37 percent, but rebounded to nearly 50 percent during the 2012 reelection period.

Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton appear as exceptions to the overall pattern of decline. Neither followed the three phases of support, and it is unclear that future presidents will return to them. Instead, the elder Bush and Clinton faced sharp peaks and valleys in their popularity timed to specific events and presidential actions with little, if any, trend across their terms. Bush's approval started relatively high, soared, and then plummeted. He began office with 69 percent of the American public approving of his job in office. His popularity peaked at 89 percent in February 1991 during the Persian Gulf War, the highest ever recorded for any president. During the war, he had effectively moved his personal image toward the single executive image, getting high marks for exercising good judgment in a crisis and engaging in a large, short, successful military encounter. After the war, there was an expectation on Capitol Hill, in the media, and among many Americans that the president would convert this wave of public support into public deeds, notably with regard to the sluggish economy. Instead, longtime Bush strategist and secretary of state James Baker snapped to reporters, "When you're at 90 percent, you can do what you damn well please." Bush left the impression that he was not willing to do anything about the weak economy or to try to understand the average American's plight. As the economy continued to sour, Bush's image gap widened. His approval sunk to 29 percent by the summer of 1992, a free fall of sixty percentage points in sixteen months. George H. W. Bush not only achieved the highest approval rating of any president but also incurred the sharpest drop in approval of any president in the shortest period of time.

Clinton's first-term approval started modestly, dropped immediately on taking office, and then rose steadily after the midterm, something no other president has achieved. Clinton began office with 58 percent of Americans approving of his performance in office, but this rating fell sharply to 37 percent by June 1993. Just six months into Clinton's term, his approval ratings had dropped by just over twenty percentage points after bruising battles with Congress over gays in the military, health care reform, and the budget. His ratings remained in the low

40-percent range throughout 1994 and did not break 50 percent again until April 1995. Thereafter, Clinton's approval ratings rose consistently, hitting 60 percent by the end of his first term. During this time, the president appeared to successfully act as the nation's problem solver, consistent with the single executive image, as the White House struck deals with the new Republican-controlled Congress over the budget and welfare reform.

Clinton's second term was marked by still higher ratings in the midst of an impeachment proceeding in the House and a trial in the Senate on charges related to his affair with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Clinton's approval rating peaked at 73 percent in December 1998 just after the House voted to impeach him. His ratings remained high during the Senate trial and then, in the months after the Senate failed to convict him, declined somewhat to an average of 60 percent. The public, apparently dismayed by the highly partisan nature of the impeachment process, expressed support for Clinton with strong approval ratings, which then returned to more normal levels as the president returned to more normal business.

Donald Trump also began his presidency without the typical honeymoon phase. At eight months in office, only 36 percent of Americans approved of his performance in office.³⁵ The historic level of early public disapproval was rooted in Americans' concerns about Trump's character—his temperament and inexperience.³⁶ By contrast, the average job approval rating at the eight-month mark for presidents from Truman through Obama was 62 percent. Only Gerald Ford had ratings similar to Trump at the eight-month mark—38 percent of Americans approved of Ford's job performance after he pardoned Richard Nixon and the American-backed government of South Vietnam fell to communist North Vietnam after more than a decade of war.

In general, three factors appear to be pushing presidents into a new era of volatile relations with the public in which quick swings in approval may occur within the honeymoon–disillusionment–forgiveness sequence. First, the frequency of public opinion polls has increased dramatically. Although American politics has run on public opinion polls for decades, the sheer number of polls and the number of organizations conducting them has never been higher. Polling organizations that used to poll once a month now poll once a week. During periods of presidential crisis, whether related to wars, sex scandals, or critical mistakes, pollsters conduct surveys two to three times a week. On any given news day, several polls may be released by different polling companies and news organizations. In a critical period of the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal in August 1998 when Lewinsky testified before independent counsel Kenneth Starr's grand jury about the nature of her relationship with Clinton, the Gallup Organization conducted separate surveys on August 7, 10, 18, 20, and 21 to monitor any moment-to-moment Clinton approval shifts, which began at 64 percent in the August 7 poll, peaked at 66 percent in the August 18 poll, and dropped slightly to 62 percent by the August 21 poll. The frequency of polling places inordinate attention on *any* approval shift. Even though many of these changes are likely to be within the margin of error of the survey, they are not reported this way.³⁷ Instead, it appears that the wind has shifted, even if only slightly.

Second, presidents and their advisers have expressly developed political and policy strategies with these omnipresent polls in mind. Although presidents have kept

an eye on the polls since the early days of opinion polling, the extent to which presidents have become pollsters is notably more vivid and intense. Dick Morris, one-time polling adviser to President Clinton, commented, “The icons of the past relied on political instinct. Now presidents can use scientific polls and focus groups.” Of equal importance, Morris contended that the polls enable a president to take positions that maintain his popularity because “an elected executive—whether president, governor, or mayor—needs a popular majority every day in his term. When [his ratings dip] below 50 percent, he is functionally out of office.”³⁸

Third, presidential news is more instantaneous and comprehensive than in the past. Presidents have long been the single most covered news figure in American politics, but the growth of the twenty-four-hour news day through CNN, the Internet, and social media has greatly accelerated this visibility. This moment-to-moment monitoring of presidential actions and reactions means that presidential failures and successes receive far more microscopic treatment than they once did. Not only the failures and successes but also the depth and length of the treatment become a part of what shifts public approval with swifter reactions and sharper peaks and valleys. All-encompassing presidential news became even more dramatic with Donald Trump, who touted his frequent use of Twitter as a way to communicate directly with the public, bypassing the press. Trump tweeted: “My use of social media is not Presidential—it’s MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL” (emphasis in the original).³⁹ The tweets became important pieces of presidential news as White House staff, other politicians, and political commentators offered interpretations of the 280-character content. These three factors—more polls taken faster, presidents as pollsters, and all-day news—set up a cycle of presidential action–news–polls–presidential action with a pace that is much faster than when Harry Truman said, “I don’t read the polls because they don’t mean much.” The new metric used to judge a president’s job in office may well be how effectively the administration responds to these crises. If presidents encounter a major problem that goes unaddressed, then popularity ratings may be in free fall. If they move effectively to deal with the crisis, they should expect significant increases in approval. Presidents must play the crises with the single executive image in full view or risk appearing ineffectual.

GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT THE PRESIDENTIAL INSTITUTION

In addition to image, political scientists have examined the presidential institution. They have done so by looking inward to the makeup of the organization and outward to the relations that the presidency has with other institutions, especially Congress, the media, and departments and agencies in the federal bureaucracy.

Inside the Institution

Political scientists offer three generalizations about the internal workings of the presidential institution.

1. Hierarchical staff systems with a single chief of staff are generally more successful than more collegial systems in which every top adviser reports directly to the president.⁴⁰
2. Presidents' own rhetoric to the contrary, cabinet government does not work.⁴¹
3. Presidents are not solely in charge of the 1,800 people who are employed in the EOP.⁴²

In the early weeks after the election, many presidents-elect attempt to wrap their fledgling administrations in democratic expectations. They promise that, unlike past administrations, theirs will be run with great openness. As a symbol of such openness, presidents often promise to take great personal care in the daily running of the White House by granting access to divergent staff voices. As another symbol, presidents announce that the cabinet will meet frequently as a source of information, inspiration, and advice. Neither promise is kept for long.

Why are the promises so quickly abandoned? Political scientists observe that the presidential institution is too large for any of them to be kept. Several recent presidents have learned the hard way that collegial staff configurations lead to presidential overload. To give numerous staff members direct access to the president places a considerable burden on the president to keep abreast of the many major and minor issues being monitored by staff members, not to mention the task of resolving numerous major and minor personality and turf clashes within the staff.

For example, President Ford began his administration with a collegial staff system of nine people reporting directly to him, a spokes-of-the-wheel arrangement with advisers at the rim of the wheel and the president at its hub. Ford soon became bogged down in the collegiality and turned to a hierarchical arrangement, naming Donald Rumsfeld as his chief of staff. Other staff members then filtered information and advice through Rumsfeld rather than going directly to Ford. Dick Cheney, then Ford's second chief of staff and later George W. Bush's vice president, was reminded of the collegial approach at a White House staff party. He received a bicycle wheel mounted on a board with each of its spokes mangled and twisted. A plaque below read, "The spokes of the wheel: a rare form of management artistry as conceived by Don Rumsfeld and modified by Dick Cheney." Cheney left the wheel and a note on his desk as a gift to the incoming adviser to Jimmy Carter, Hamilton Jordan. The note read, "Dear Ham. Beware the spokes of the wheel."⁴³ But the Carter administration replayed the Ford administration's mistake. It, too, adopted a collegial staff system, which it later abandoned in favor of a more hierarchical one. In Cheney's words, "Someone has to be in charge."⁴⁴ The hierarchical approach places a chief of staff between the president and other staff members so that the president will be less overwhelmed by policy and personnel details. Adopting the hierarchical approach does not give presidents any more control over the entire White House apparatus, which remains large and unwieldy, but it does give them more control over the top echelon of the organization, to which they have immediate access. Presidents since Carter have all invested in the hierarchical model. Upon taking office, Donald Trump announced that his chief

of staff, Reince Priebus, would have co-equal status with chief strategist and senior counselor Stephen Bannon. This sharing of leadership quickly devolved into a faction-riddled White House. After just seven months in the post, Priebus resigned and was replaced by retired General John Kelly, who insisted on having sole control over staff time, energy, and access to the president. Soon Bannon was fired and the hierarchical model returned.

Presidents also find cabinet government to be unworkable. It is cumbersome and unproductive to meet with the cabinet as a whole, let alone to rely on its collective judgment. The cabinet is a body of unequals—some cabinet members enjoy considerably greater access to presidents than do others. In addition, many members of the cabinet are chosen for political reasons—to be a cross-section of the American populace—rather than for their policy expertise. Finally, cabinet members frequently adopt departmental outlooks rather than the more global outlook that might make cabinet government possible. Presidents soon realize that the cabinet is one of the few organizations of government for which the whole is less than the sum of the parts.

The need for coordination at the top and the limited role of the cabinet are symptoms of the internal complexity that marks the presidential institution. Political scientists have uncovered considerable evidence of that complexity as the presidential institution acts independently of the president or the president acts as only one of many players in the institution. For example, although President Kennedy was involved in the decision that gave American approval to the plot by the South Vietnamese military to overthrow President Diem in 1963, the American ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, had considerable control over the matter.⁴⁵ Institutional complexity also permits presidents to hide in the labyrinth of the presidential institution and deny their involvement in schemes that may have backfired, gone awry, or skirted the law. The evidence now suggests that President Reagan knew of the arms-for-hostages agreement with Iran and the channeling of money to the Nicaraguan contra rebels that constituted the Iran-contra affair, but he safely hid his involvement through the “plausible deniability” afforded him by the presidential institution. His national security advisers, first Robert McFarlane and then Adm. John Poindexter, and National Security Council staff members, including Oliver North, acted as screens for the president. They suggested that they had made the decisions without the president’s full knowledge, thereby allowing the president to deny any involvement.⁴⁶

Interinstitutional Relations

Political scientists offer presidents generalizations about White House relations with other institutions. The first generalization pertains to what is known about relations between the White House and the departments and agencies of the executive branch; the others describe relations between the White House and Congress.

1. Efforts to politicize the bureaucracy and bureaucratize the White House have only a limited effect on presidents’ success in policy implementation.⁴⁷

2. Presidents who establish their legislative agendas early—in the first three to six months of their terms—are more successful at getting specific agenda items passed than are those who wait.⁴⁸
3. The higher presidents' level of legislative activity (that is, the more pieces of legislation on which they take positions), the lower the legislative success. Conversely, the lower the activity, the more successful is the president.⁴⁹
4. Presidential addresses and public approval increase presidents' success in Congress. In turn, presidential success in Congress improves public approval.⁵⁰

Bureaucratic Relations. Many presidents and many citizens are under the misguided impression that the president is the chief executive—the head of the departments and agencies of the executive branch. Nothing could be further from the truth. As Harry Truman complained, “I thought I was the president, but when it comes to these bureaucrats, I can’t do a damn thing.” In many ways, presidents are satellites of the executive branch. They and their administrations do not share in the values of the various departments and agencies, they operate under different timetables, and they do not know or serve as advocates for clients of the bureaucracy, whether farmers, welfare mothers, or some other group.

In that realization, presidents have attempted three strategies to win the hearts and minds of 3 million bureaucrats. Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Nixon adopted one strategy—namely, to bring as many decisions about policy implementation as possible into the White House. The Johnson administration created the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) in the White House to fight the War on Poverty. The result was a disaster. OEO failed to coordinate community-based poverty programs adequately, leaving many without supervision and leaving the War on Poverty as a whole to flounder. The Nixon administration brought a variety of implementation functions into the White House. Yet the resulting increase in the White House staff was not sufficient to alter bureaucratic patterns of thinking and procedures, especially in the areas of health, welfare, and poverty, over which Nixon sought the greatest control.

President Reagan promoted a second strategy: to groom people for positions in the bureaucracy who espoused the president’s philosophy. This strategy met with early success, but as Reagan’s term waned so did the strategy. After a year or two, many Reagan recruits returned to the private sector to make more money. In addition, when President George H. W. Bush arrived at the White House with a less firmly defined ideological outlook than Reagan’s, hiring people who fit the presidential outlook became difficult. The approach returned with George W. Bush, especially at the Justice Department, where seven U.S. attorneys who were considered to be insufficiently interested in pursuing cases against Democrats were dismissed. In a January 2005 memo to Attorney General John Ashcroft, Kyle Sampson, the Department of Justice’s counsel, described the U.S. attorneys who would not be fired: “The vast majority of U.S. Attorneys, 80–85 percent, are doing a great job, are loyal Bushies.”⁵¹

A third strategy, known as administrative clearance, began during the Nixon administration, greatly expanded under Carter, and was heavily relied on by the Reagan White House. It involved the OMB's approval of the rules and regulations proposed by departments and agencies. During the Reagan years, the clearance process had a significant effect on the proposed regulations of several agencies, notably the Environmental Protection Agency and the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Education, and Energy, all of which Reagan disliked. Some agencies refused even to submit certain regulations to the OMB for fear they would be shot down. Similarly, many regulations that the OMB rejected were never resubmitted.⁵²

Administrative clearance shows the greatest promise for putting the presidency into the executive branch loop. It is the first institutionalized effort presidents have made to rein in the bureaucracy. By comparison, the other two strategies were decidedly ad hoc. The OMB has established procedures to investigate administrative rules and regulations and acts as a watchdog for the rest of the government. It determines whether rules proposed by a department or an agency in the executive branch are consistent with White House criteria. If they are, the rules are designated as "consistent without change." If they are not, the rules are returned to the agency in one of two ways. First, the OMB may issue a "prompt letter" designating the rules as "consistent with change." This requires the agency that has proposed the rule to act on the specific modifications requested by the OMB in the prompt letter. Second, the OMB may issue a "return letter," which asserts that the rule has failed to meet OMB standards. More than 70 percent of agency rules submitted during the George W. Bush administration were deemed "consistent with change" and required modifications based on OMB instructions.⁵³ As might be expected, because of the institutional nature of the clearance process, presidents have little personal involvement and essentially trust the OMB to do what the presidents want.

Congressional Relations. Political scientists have uncovered important lessons for presidents working with Congress. First, presidents must not clutter the legislative agenda with lots of big issues or even lots of small ones. Nor must presidents meet Congress on its own terms, because its agenda is always burdened with large and small issues. Instead, presidents benefit by presenting Congress with a small list of big-ticket items that spell out what the president wants.

Second, presidents must adjust to two kinds of presidential time that dictate many of their most important legislative strategies: electoral time and organizational time. Electoral time is a highly compressed four-year cycle that is geared toward the upcoming election. The electoral clock ticks fast and loudly. As one White House aide put it, "You should subtract one year for the reelection campaign, another six months for the midterms, six months for the start-up, six months for the closing, and another month or two for an occasional vacation. That leaves you with a two-year presidential term."⁵⁴ In contrast, many Washington politicians—those elected, those appointed, and those hired—have long time frames for action. Their clocks tick slowly. They have careers—at least a decade but most likely two—in which to finish what they start. Many members of Congress, although they must

look toward the next election, enjoy safe seats that ensure their political longevity. Most people in Washington are there to stay. Presidents come and go. The contrast between the two contrasting political time clocks was made clear after the failure of Republican efforts to pass health care legislation in the summer of 2017. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) chided Trump for having “excessive expectations about how quickly things happen in the democratic process” and “setting too many artificial deadlines unrelated to the reality of the legislature.”⁵⁵ Trump angrily responded in a tweet: “Mitch, get back to work and put Repeal and Replace, Tax Reform & Cuts and a great infrastructure Bill on my desk for signing. You can do it!”⁵⁶ Organizational time is the slower pace at which the White House apparatus gathers information, follows existing procedures, and makes decisions. It reflects the start-up-and-slow-down rhythm of the presidency. Organizational time is at its slowest early in the term, when staff members are just beginning to understand their jobs. It may speed up later in the term as people, including the president, learn the ropes.

Although electoral and organizational time run at opposite speeds, they are linked closely in two ways. In one way, electoral time helps to create the slower organizational time. Because electoral time forces presidents to act in a hurry and to keep acting, it creates a need for a large presidential institution to carry on the action. In such a compressed time frame, it is impossible for presidents and just a few close advisers to develop agendas, see them through Congress, and have the executive branch implement them. They must draw on a presidential institution that operates on its own slow time schedule, made even slower by the coming and going of presidents every four or eight years.

In another way, the joining of electoral and organizational time poses a dilemma for presidents. What is the best time for presidents to put forward their legislative agenda during their terms? Electoral time says the best time to act is early in the term. Organizational time urges presidents to act later, when people are more settled into their jobs. Most presidents and their staffs acknowledge that electoral time takes precedence over organizational time. The organization must try to catch up with demands in the political arena. Electoral time allows presidents to use the single executive image most dramatically if they “hit the ground running” by presenting major policy initiatives to Congress with great public fanfare in the first months of the first year of their terms. “It’s definitely a race,” stated a Carter aide. “The first months are the starting line. If you don’t get off the blocks fast, you’ll lose the race.”⁵⁷ Yet hitting the ground running is neither easy nor fun. Presidents often stumble in their first months in office and delay their legislative goals. The presidential institution may not be ready to go. Like any large organization, it needs time to work properly. It may even need more organizational time than many institutions because its flow of operation is interrupted every four to eight years by the arrival of a new president and new staff members. The Nixon administration fell into such a trap postponing the announcement of a welfare reform plan. A Nixon aide lamented, “We gave our opponents a great deal of time to fight the Family Assistance Plan. They had at least six months to prepare before the initial announcement. Then, because we were late, the program bogged down in congressional committee. We gave them too many chances to hit us.”⁵⁸

In addition, if a president has already encountered volatile public reactions (as discussed previously), then hitting the ground running may not be possible for political as well as organizational reasons. In the absence of a honeymoon period early in the president's term, there is little reason to expect that a major controversial policy initiative is going to sail through Congress.

Finally, the presidential image and the presidential institution intertwine in the legislative process. Presidential addresses and public approval increase presidents' success in Congress on passing various pieces of proposed legislation. Obama used presidential addresses, campaign-style trips across the country, and public support to win a protracted legislative fight over his health care reform bill. In turn, presidential success in Congress increases public approval. These relationships take place within a larger political-economic context. Presidential success in Congress is shaped by the size of the president's party, the year in the term (the later in the term, the less likely the president's position is to prevail), economic circumstances, and international conflicts.⁵⁹

PRESIDENTIAL MISTAKES

The fifteen generalizations about imagery and institution embody much of what political scientists know about the presidency. Presidents, like everyone else, make mistakes. But many of them could be avoided if presidents carefully observed these generalizations and the broader discussions of imagery and institution from which they derive.

Presidents' mistakes can be defined as situations in which presidents adopt courses of action that bring about the opposite of what they want or significantly less than what they want. To be sure, mistakes are not always clear-cut. For example, when President Truman fired Gen. Douglas MacArthur for insubordination at the height of an offensive against the Chinese during the Korean War, Truman incurred tremendous political opposition, especially when MacArthur returned to the United States to a hero's welcome. But the decision was not necessarily a military mistake because MacArthur was pushing for a much wider war with China. Truman replaced MacArthur with Gen. Matthew Ridgway, who was able to correct some of MacArthur's tactical excesses. There are, however, numerous instances in which mistakes are not subject to multiple interpretations. Presidents make mistakes on imagery, on institutional relations, and on the combination of the two.

Mistaken Images

Image mistakes involve the president's failure to live up to some central aspect of the single executive image. Many of these mistakes relate to the president as a person. They often involve small things, such as haircuts, walks on the beach, pets, and trips to the grocery store, because the single executive image depends on the symbolic connection between the president and the American public. People understand the connection best when it is based on activities in daily life that they

share with the president. Everyone gets a haircut; everyone goes to the grocery store. As planes reportedly waited on nearby runways at Los Angeles International Airport, President Clinton paid \$200 for a haircut by a Beverly Hills stylist aboard *Air Force One*. In a grocery store, President George H. W. Bush was revealed as being unaware of how price scanners worked, indicating that he had not done his own shopping in many years. President Nixon walked on the beach near his home in San Clemente, California, in a tie and dress shoes, looking stiff and uncomfortable. President Johnson played with his pet beagles, Him and Her, by pulling them up by their long floppy ears, outraging dog lovers. Because such image mistakes typically leave the president looking out of touch with average citizens, the gap between the personal image and the single executive image grows. But these mistakes can also center on much larger issues. In his first months in office, Donald Trump haphazardly tampered with the single executive image. With the lowest approval rating of any president since polling began, he has made no effort to improve those poll numbers by appealing to the entire nation through the single executive image. He has eschewed non-controversial, feel-good public appearances in favor of campaign rallies and fundraisers. One of the most vivid clashes between his approach and the single executive image came when he spoke in the aftermath of a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017, which left one counter protestor dead and many injured. Trump stated that there was “blame on both sides.”⁶⁰ This led to a firestorm of criticism against Trump for implicitly siding with the neo-Nazis. The single executive image asserts moral values as a part of presidential leadership, while Trump’s statement seemed to put on an even plane white supremacists and those opposed to them. Image mistakes may also involve the president as a policymaker—breaking a promise, not doing what the single executive image demands under certain policy circumstances, or attempting to revise the image itself. President George W. Bush made image mistakes when he repeatedly suggested not only that Saddam Hussein was aiding Al Qaeda and thus was linked to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, but also that Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. No evidence supported either claim. This not only weakened Bush’s credibility and thus created significant image problems for him, but also had major policy consequences in defining the impetus for the Iraq War.

As may be imagined, the second type of image mistake is more likely than the first to harm presidents. Although the personal mistakes cause momentary embarrassment and for a time draw considerable press attention, the press and the public soon tire of the topic and move on to something else. The policy mistakes tend to have longer-range consequences and thus are more apt to characterize the failures of an administration.

Institutional Mistakes

Presidents are also prone to mistakes when they fail to address various institutional constraints adequately. Such mistakes involve relations in the White House and relations between the White House and other institutions, such as Congress, the Supreme Court, or a department or an agency in the executive bureaucracy.

Within the institution, presidents frequently fail to acknowledge tensions between units that share similar jurisdictions. Several presidents have let animosity fester between the national security adviser and the secretary of state on matters of diplomacy.⁶¹ Information leaks are common occurrences as units within the White House compete with each other to make decisions to their own advantage. In-house scandals or embarrassments also erupt because too many people are going in too many directions to be monitored adequately by the chief of staff or other staff members, let alone the president. Indeed, many of these instances have involved the chiefs of staff themselves, ranging from charges against Eisenhower's chief of staff, Sherman Adams, that he improperly accepted gifts, to those leveled against George H. W. Bush's chief of staff, John Sununu, for using government planes and cars for personal use. Many internal institutional mistakes prompt the question, "Who is minding the store?" And the answer often is, "No one." The mistakes are reflections of the complexity of the presidential institution and the limits to presidents' control over it.

Presidents also make mistakes in relations between the presidency and other institutions. At the base of many of these mistakes is the recent presidential tendency to run against Congress. Presidents charge that Congress is unwieldy, irresponsible, and unable to do what the country needs. Although this tactic may play well with the folks back home, it does not play well with the people on Capitol Hill who will support or oppose presidential legislative priorities. President Reagan's ill-fated nomination of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court in 1987 revealed several dimensions of interinstitutional mistakes. Although the Reagan administration had been in office for six years, it violated several basic principles of the presidential institution during the nomination battle that lasted for three and one-half months and ended with the Senate's defeat of Bork by the largest margin in history—forty-two to fifty-eight. The Reagan people disregarded fundamental institutional constraints surrounding the nomination of Bork, an activist conservative: the Senate was solidly Democratic; it was late in Reagan's term; his popularity had slipped; Congress had been angered by the disclosures of the Iran-contra scandal; and several senators, notably Senate Judiciary Committee chair Joseph Biden, were running for president. Institutional miscalculations continued when the Reagan strategists pinned their hopes for victory on southern Democratic senators but did not conduct an aggressive lobbying campaign—either publicly or privately—for Bork until well after the swing senators had been pressured by their constituents not to back Bork. They also gave up a critical timing advantage when Reagan announced the nomination in July. The Senate adjourned for its summer recess in July, and Biden did not call for hearings on the nomination until September. Had the Reagan people anticipated Biden's move, they could have delayed the president's own announcement of the nomination until after the Senate reconvened. This would have prevented Bork's opponents from mobilizing during July and August. Interinstitutional mistakes occur with Congress when presidents fail to take into account its composition, the link between presidential success and public approval, and the idea of timing issues in such a way as to gain the upper hand.

Image–Institution Mistakes

Presidents also make mistakes that join lapses in imagery with those in institutional relations. Presidents may choose a course of action that widens their image gap. The gap then leaves space for other institutions to gain strategic advantages. President Clinton's attempt to end the forty-eight-year-old ban on gay men and lesbians in the military in 1993 is an example of this kind of image–institution mistake.

Clinton made a campaign promise to end the ban and reiterated the pledge as president-elect. At first glance, one might argue that Clinton did exactly what the single executive image demands. At the earliest possible opportunity—even before being sworn in—he announced that he would issue an executive order lifting the ban. Surely this is the kind of swift, bold action the single executive image requires.

But the single executive image also dictates boundaries within which such swift actions must be taken. They must be done with average Americans in mind and in such a way that citizens either will not be aroused or will be unified. Instead, Clinton chose a highly controversial issue that tapped, among other things, homophobic prejudice both in and out of the military. In doing so, he pushed away his own main agenda item, summarized in his campaign headquarters as “it’s the economy, stupid.” Nor did the Clinton team lay any rhetorical or public opinion groundwork for the decision. The apt comparison between lifting the gay ban and Truman’s executive order desegregating the military was left to several members of Congress and gay rights leaders to make. Furthermore, Clinton announced the decision at a time when few other administration decisions were being made. Indeed, this was the Clinton strategy. The president would look strong lifting the ban early with one stroke of the pen while more intricate plans were being developed for the economic programs at the core of Clinton’s agenda. Yet the absence of other presidential news allowed the press to focus intense coverage on the matter of gays in the military rather than on the more typical stories of the new First Family moving into the White House and the president’s plans for the future. As a result, a public uproar ensued and Clinton lost much of his honeymoon support.

In an attempt to ameliorate the issue, Secretary of Defense Les Aspin announced that he would review the ban and make recommendations to the president in six months. The Clinton people hoped this would be a cooling-off period during which the controversy would diminish. Yet their timing decision set off a series of institutional machinations. Members of the armed forces and members of Congress, especially the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Senate Armed Services Committee chair Sam Nunn, now had a full opportunity to organize against Clinton’s proposal. The Joint Chiefs had threatened in November to resign en masse if an executive order not to their liking was forthcoming. Nunn held hearings and visited a submarine to dramatize the close quarters in which sailors, in particular, lived. The Joint Chiefs and Nunn were able to define the issue around their own alternatives. A compromise policy—“Don’t ask, don’t tell”—was ultimately worked out that permitted gay men and lesbians to serve in the military but not openly to acknowledge their sexual orientation. The ban had been modified but not lifted. Thus Clinton began his term with a wide image gap and also allowed two competing institutions—the

military and Congress—to define an issue in such a way that the president had to acquiesce to them rather than the other way around.

It is not always the case that presidential mistakes permit other institutions to achieve their goals at the expense of the president. President Clinton's mistakes during the Lewinsky scandal created an immense image gap—he was deceptive when addressing the American people about the affair, he offered a tortured defense of his actions based on a narrow definition of sexual relations, and he did not offer an unequivocal apology for his actions until quite late. These actions were well out of sync with the single executive image, which would expect presidents to be family oriented, honest, and contrite. But two factors saved Clinton from his own mistakes. First, the American public viewed the mistakes as personal in nature. And the public believed they already knew a good deal about this personal side of Clinton, given that rumors about his sexual exploits flew as early as the 1992 campaign. The public knew this in 1992 when they elected Clinton, and they knew it in 1996 when they reelected him, indicating that these matters were not as important as policy matters in defining the importance and visibility of the single executive image. On policy matters, Clinton scored high marks and little gap appeared to exist between his presidential image and the single executive image. The economy was booming, the deficit was gone, Social Security was saved, and welfare reform was in place.

Second, the prosecution of Clinton by independent counsel Kenneth Starr and the impeachment proceedings in the House appeared to be highly partisan. The House, in particular, seemed heedlessly out of step with public opinion. The closer the House moved toward impeachment, the higher went Clinton's approval ratings. In a rather loud statement of dissent to the House, the public indicated in an array of polls that Clinton's transgressions were of a personal nature and did not warrant removal from office. House Republicans created an image gap of their own, appearing to go after the president for their own political gains. Thus, not all mistakes are equal. Even sensational ones may not spell presidential failure if the presidential missteps are not policy related and other institutions make their own even more heedless miscalculations.

President George W. Bush made significant image and institutional mistakes in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. On August 29, 2005, the day the hurricane made its second, more devastating landfall, Bush interrupted his vacation at his Texas ranch to fly to Arizona for a small birthday party for Republican senator John McCain. The next day he flew on to San Diego to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of V-J Day, marking the end of the war against Japan in World War II. For those two days, he appeared to be preoccupied not with the storm and its impact, but with other ceremonial and political duties. On August 31, with 80 percent of New Orleans flooded from levees broken by the storm surge, Bush finally cut his vacation short. En route to Washington, he flew over the flooded area of the Gulf coast but did not land. This decision compounded the initial image problem. After first appearing not to care about the situation, he then appeared to avoid direct involvement in its solution.

Not until September 2, five days after the hurricane hit, did Bush visit the region. When he did so, he praised Federal Emergency Management Agency head

Michael Brown: “Brownie, you are doing one heck of a job.” But it was clear to many Americans watching around-the-clock coverage of the devastation in New Orleans that Brown’s management of the recovery effort was seriously flawed. Brown himself did not know for two days that people were stranded at the New Orleans Convention Center, even though it had been reported on all the major news networks. Numerous mix-ups occurred among federal, state, and local agencies, and 47 percent of Americans blamed President Bush directly for the failures of aid and assistance. Institutional breakdowns, then, seemed just as apparent as the image problems. Not only was there a wide image gap as Bush tended to other business while thousands died in the hurricane’s wake, but also there were significant institutional failures with little coordination from the White House. Mindful of these mistakes, President Obama made a concerted effort to offer a caring image and also used the White House to cut through bureaucratic red tape in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, which devastated the New Jersey and New York coastlines in 2012. The picture of a concerned president meeting with Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey was widely reported, as was Christie’s comment that “it’s been very good working with the president and his administration. It’s been wonderful.”⁶²

CONCLUSION: PRESIDENTS AND POLITICAL SCIENTISTS

Is it possible that, if President Clinton had a political scientist position in the White House Office or even the cabinet advising him on the nature of the presidency, the issue of gays in the military would have been resolved in a manner more in keeping with what the White House wanted? Could the Reagan administration have saved the Bork nomination? Could President George H. W. Bush have translated public support into domestic policies after the Persian Gulf War? Political scientists are no more omniscient than presidents or their primary advisers. They would not get it right all of the time. But they have knowledge quite different from that offered by presidents’ other advisers, knowledge that is pertinent to every decision that presidents make—namely, how the presidency operates.

Presidents have three main types of advisers. Policy advisers lay out various domestic and international policy problems that presidents may wish to address or may have to address. They also develop positions and programs for presidents to offer as solutions. Economic advisers spell out various options on how to keep the economy robust, how to make the good times return, and how to cut or add to the federal budget. Political advisers consider the politics of a decision—how it will play with the public, how the press will cast the issue, and how other politicians will respond. Political advisers then devise strategies to sell presidents’ decisions with these political considerations in mind.

Missing are advisers skilled in telling presidents about the office they hold. Although each type of adviser teaches presidents a good deal about what they need to know to work in the White House, none of them is an expert on the presidency.

The generalizations from political science research are not lessons that the other advisers would fully know. Even political advisers, who may be aware of some of the generalizations, such as those on public opinion, are typically not schooled in the presidency per se. Because many political advisers began their stint with the president during the campaign, they often have an electoral framework in mind that is much narrower than that offered by political scientists.

What presidents need is a fourth set of advisers—presidency advisers. Nor will it do to hire only those political scientists who view the presidency from a single perspective or advocate but one method. The generalizations about imagery and institution are a mix of qualitative and quantitative findings. Conclusions about different types of White House staff systems, cabinet government, and the limits to presidents' control of the EOP and the bureaucracy are drawn largely from qualitative accounts. Conclusions about presidential success in Congress, presidential approval, and presidential speeches are drawn primarily from quantitative studies.

The generalizations also reveal the perspectives that political scientists adopt. Studies of presidential dealings with Congress and the public typically adopt the perspective of presidential power. Presidents must persuade members of Congress and the public to give them what they want. Accounts of the relations between presidents and their advisers, cabinet members, and the bureaucracy incorporate historical descriptions, interpretations of the power of presidents, and institutional analyses.

Thus political scientists' understanding of the presidency rests on an accumulation of knowledge that cuts across methods and perspectives. Effective presidency advisers must have studied the office from several perspectives and must be knowledgeable about work using qualitative and quantitative methods. This permits them to understand the full scope of the office and its two central dimensions of imagery and institution. How presidents can succeed at using imagery and the institution is one of the main lessons political scientists offer in studying the presidency.

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