

Neustadt's Powerful President: Does Clinton Fit the Mold?

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In the 37 years since Richard Neustadt first penned the work Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents, immense changes have befallen both the Presidency and the nation at large. Is his work still an "operational Bible for the Chief Executive"? How would Neustadt have judged Mr. Clinton's performance thus far? Are there other theories which serve to better explain the phenomenon of the Presidency in 1997?

THE NEUSTADIAN PRESIDENT — CHARACTERISTICS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In order to examine how well Neustadian analysis can be applied to the Clinton Presidency, it is necessary to examine the major points in Neustadt's work, and to define the terms by which he suggests Presidents be examined. Primarily, one must distinguish between the presidency as an institution and the presidency in general. The "presidency as an institution" comprises the authority and status vested in the president by the Constitution and social convention. The "presidency" is composed of authority and status, but also of the personal abilities of persuasion, personal reputation, and public prestige associated with each individual who holds the office. Any study of the executive branch should focus not on the presidency as an institution but rather on the president as a politician who has the authority, status, reputation, persuasive technique, and public prestige necessary to influence the world around him. The president "has extraordinary status...[but] despite his status he does not get action without argument. Presidential power is the power to persuade" (Neustadt 11).

In addition to bargaining to accomplish his goals, the President has the ability to issue commands to those around him. However, it is only in rare cases that those orders have all of the necessary qualities of self-execution needed to make those orders effective. To issue such a command, his involvement must be unambiguous, the command must be made public, there must be no doubt of the President's authority to carry out his directive, and his words specifically must be clearly understood (Neustadt 18). "Presidential 'powers' may be inconclusive when a President commands, but always remains relevant as he persuades" (30). Hence, powerful executives will use their powers of persuasion before issuing commands.

The effective president carefully amasses and protects his "power stakes"—overall ability to influence outcomes—via various means. He guards his reputation among the Washington community; how other members of the governing coalitions view the President has much to do with his effectiveness as a bargainer. The people whom the president is attempting to persuade comprise the "Washington community." It is, after all, members of this community—members of Congress, executive officers, bureaucrats, lobbyists, the media, diplomats—who possess the wherewithal to produce results the President wishes to see. The interchange between the President and the Washington community hinges on Friedrich's law of anticipated reactions. Members of the Washington community must attempt to discern—without verbal communication—

crimes—what the presidential response to their actions will be, and vice versa. "What such men think may or may not be true, but it is the reality on which they act..." (Neustadt 51). It is in the minds of these Washingtonians that the president's reputation is formed.

Indeed, "a President's own choices are the only means in his own hands of guarding his own prospects for effective influence" (Neustadt 49). Professional reputation weighs heavily in each calculation made by the President. But the Washington community, and indeed the President himself, are affected by the perceptions of people outside Washington. They are affected by the President's public prestige.

Neustadt explains that, "Prestige, like reputation, is a subjective factor, a matter of judgment...the Washingtonians do the judging. In the case of reputation they anticipate reactions from the president. In the instance of prestige they anticipate reactions from the public..." (Neustadt 73). Powerful presidents must cater to an increasingly diverse constituency by carefully managing events. Because he must be noticed in order to garner prestige, events are obligatory: "No matter how cooperative the press, a President needs quiet from competitive events if what he does is to be noticed..." (Neustadt 86). That is, the President must be the center of attention; he should strive to become an event himself. He also must act as a teacher to the populace. Simply put, "the enemy of prestige is unreality...only as they teach effectively will they ward off the threats to their prestige" (Neustadt 89).

A President tries to increase his power stakes—the ability to guard his actions and options. The ability to exploit choices is related to a President's resiliency. A necessity for any powerful president is the quality of extrication. According to Neustadt, "Roosevelt [a powerful Neustadian president]...shunned fixed positions...[he] kept fire-exits open" (Neustadt 149). If his policies fail, can he get himself out of tight spots? The President must be an artful dodger; he must, like FDR, leave fire-exits available.

A President affects the level of power he conveys via the choices he makes and the events he manages. If he chooses wisely, and exploits opportunities when necessary, while reaching for useful information to aid him in making his choices, he may wield enormous amounts of influence. He will then be able to persuade others that what he wants them to do is what they ought to do on their own volition. In other words, "[the President's] power is the product of his vantage points in government, together with his reputation in the Washington community and his prestige outside" (Neustadt 150). It takes a consummate politician to perform these tasks well and maintain his level of power.

A NEUSTADIAN REPORT CARD- IS BILL CLINTON AN AMATEUR?

Is Bill Clinton an amateur? Neustadt's work yields several insights into the Clinton presidency. During Mr. Clinton's first five years in office, it seems that he has not exercised extraordinary power. If the key to presidential power is the power to persuade, then for Mr. Clinton to have been judged a powerful president, his major policies should have been enacted with the cooperation of the Washington community. They were not.

In his first year in office, U.S. troops were involved in a conflict in Somalia, which they were quickly withdrawn as popular support dwindled. Mr. Clinton secured the passage soon thereafter of NAFTA, but was unable to swing the necessary votes to get it passed without a fight. A President "must be able to minimize the

insecurities of possible support," and Mr. Clinton could not do that effectively (Neustadt 55). More importantly, Mr. Clinton attempted to push through Congress his health care reform package. Mr. Clinton performed a power stakes calculation before deciding the time and method for his health care reform plan. However, Clinton completely misread the Washington community's possible response on the issue and his proposal was defeated.

Mr. Clinton failed to take into account the responses of a major group in the Washington community: the "special publics." Neustadt claims, "Presidential influence becomes, in part, a matter of direct relationships with special-purpose publics, and the members of a special public...are often swayed by what they think the general public thinks of him" (77). The lobbying groups opposed to Mr. Clinton's health care initiative were effective in rousing support against the proposals. Had Mr. Clinton been truly masterful at using his power, he would have been able to bargain with groups like the American Medical Association in order to get his proposals passed without much opposition. Mr. Clinton appeared to have been a failure at using Presidential power early on, as he miscalculated the opposition to a program in which he put the majority of his effort during his first year in office.

During the 1994 midterm elections, as the GOP was propelled into power in both chambers of Congress, Mr. Clinton came to epitomize the President who would be least powerful according to Neustadian analysis. Mr. Gingrich, touting his "Contract With America," became the main teacher of the public. Neustadt explains, "Since 1960 a consequence of each midterm congressional election...has been elimination...of prospects for some policy...wanted by the White House" (Neustadt 77). The White House was forced to postpone most of its major policy objectives. However, as the public grew tired of partisan squabbling inside the Congress, Mr. Clinton seized the opportunity to shift the responsibility for such gridlock back to the GOP leadership in both houses. By doing this, Mr. Clinton was able to accumulate some of the lost public prestige; the members of the Washington community sensed this shift, and they too began to distance themselves from Mr. Gingrich.

Coupled with the strengthening economy and other factors, the reclaiming of his public prestige and the strengthening of his professional reputation enabled Mr. Clinton to win reelection in 1996. A far cry from 1994 when Mr. Clinton was forced to publicly declare that the "presidency is not irrelevant," Mr. Clinton has been in a much more comfortable role of late. That is not to say that Neustadt would find Mr. Clinton to be a "powerful" president. His public image has not been exceptional ever since his 1992 campaign. Instead of being viewed by the public as trustworthy and moral, Mr. Clinton has been dubbed "Slick Willy," conjuring up images of the typical corrupt politician.

Furthermore, his recent moves toward policy objectives have been thwarted by the GOP majority in Congress. For example, his nominee for Ambassador to Mexico, Bill Weld, was forced to withdraw from the procedures in the face of heavily partisan opposition. He was unable to negotiate a continued peace in the Middle East and was criticized for committing U.S. troops to the Bosnian theater under the UN banner. If "[the power of persuasion] is familiar to everyone who watches foreign policy," Mr. Clinton's failure to negotiate effectively for his main objectives demonstrates failure (Neustadt 33). Thus, his power to persuade others in Washington and to get foreign capitals to go along with his policies has been somewhat lacking in Neustadtian terms. Even a recent proposal, a speech in which he called for a nationally mandated standardized test for students, was met with swift criticism from the public and the Washington community. Recall that "the men he would persuade must be convinced

their own minds that he has skill and will enough to use his advantages [for bargaining]...they might think that what he might do in theory, he would not dare to do in fact" (Neustadt 50-1). As it seems Mr. Clinton has not been able to convince them of his skill and will in his objectives, the President has failed one of Neustadt's major criteria.

Nonetheless, the President has been able to extricate himself from sticky scandals throughout his five years in office. He has proved to be resilient, and he has been able to negotiate with Congress and other Washington insiders over many of his objectives. Like FDR, Mr. Clinton left open his routes of escape: he shook up his staff in an effort to rescue his reputation and prestige. Again, "a President can change his reputation" (Neustadt 69). Mr. Clinton sought to do this after his main priority failed. And he was successful, but only for a short while. He attempted to garner the reputation of being an effective diplomat, leading the world as any man in his position must do. Even during the height of the largest crisis yet to face the Clinton Administration, the President's popularity continued to rise as he focused the public's attention on issues at hand rather than sex scandals.

Even if one takes into account his remarkable resiliency and extricative ability, as "presidential power is the power to persuade," Mr. Clinton has not been a remarkably powerful Neustadian President (Neustadt 10). However, even these minor points of success are not enough to give Mr. Clinton a definitive notch in Neustadt's "win" column. After all, his major policy reforms were left by the wayside because Mr. Clinton failed to possess adequate persuasive powers to get them passed. Almost all of Mr. Clinton's major acts as President have been accomplished not in terms he would have preferred but rather in terms he was forced to accept.

ALTERNATE THEORIES

After examining Neustadt's theory and examining Mr. Clinton in that light, one is forced to wonder whether there are more effective ways of judging his presidency than in Neustadian terms. Neustadian analysis paints a grim picture of the Clinton Presidency not necessarily because Mr. Clinton was especially weak but more so because Neustadian analysis does not go far enough into explaining the constraints a president has upon him in making choices and guarding power. Systemic constraints present in 1997 were not found in 1960. Due to these factors, other methods of analyzing Mr. Clinton are more relevant.

Richard Rose, in his work, *The Postmodern President*, builds upon Neustadian analysis by analyzing the fact that while a President must still guard his power vis-a-vis his reputation and prestige among Washingtonians, he must also be extraordinarily concerned with uniquely post-modern characteristics of the office. Rose, "the President's major responsibilities are imperatives [and] he is forced to make choices in favorable as well as unfavorable circumstances" (Rose 45). The link to Neustadt is obvious here. The President controls his own situation via the choices he makes. However, "a postmodern President's standing is influenced as much by what happens in the international system as what happens at home. Foreign governments, foreign banks, and events abroad affect his standing in ways that the White House cannot be sure of controlling" (Rose 47).

This method of looking at President Clinton is far more applicable than the forward Neustadian analysis. Whereas Neustadt would cite the President's weaknesses in his inability to influence foreign governments, in today's system, where

"the United States is not the only elephant in the international system," it may be impossible to affect sovereign states in a way in which the President wants. Mr. Clinton's failures in Bosnia, Somalia, and the Middle East are best explained by this analysis. Indeed, a "Postmodern President remains subject to domestic political constraints, but his actions are even more subject to international constraints" (Rose 54). Neustadt cannot fully account for this phenomenon, as his work predates the emergence of any such "postmodern president." Rose builds upon the Neustadian axiom of power through persuasion by extending that persuasion to foreign nations as well. After all, "on every continent, political groups are trying to make the United States do what they want" (Rose 72). The job of the postmodern president is thus much more difficult than that of the modern president. While Mr. Clinton was certainly constrained by these factors, I doubt if Rose would have called him an overwhelming success in this area, as the President has been able to make little if any major, lasting headway in foreign diplomacy.

Unlike the Parliamentary system, "the American system is characterized by party indiscipline" (Rose 65). Mr. Clinton would therefore have to influence Republican members of Congress to break party rank and vote with him. This is a task monumental in nature, and poses difficulties beyond the scope of which are found in Neustadt. Unless party indiscipline is present on an issue, a minority party President's plans will certainly fail. That is a reality of the system as Rose sees it, regardless of who sits in office. Mr. Clinton has experienced this with many of his major program initiatives.

Finally, Rosian analysis is best suited to understanding Mr. Clinton's inability to persuade subgovernments and special interests to follow his proposals. According to Rose, "The President does not have in his own hands the authority to override preferences of subgovernments in the name of broader national interests...When White House officials try to exert pressure upon a particular subgovernment, they learn why these groups are often called 'iron triangles'" (Rose 71). Once again, the realities of the system faced by Postmodern Presidents like Mr. Clinton are such that he is not able to effectively use his powers of persuasion—no matter how good they seem to be—on the bureaucracy and interest groups. Unlike the Presidents of even 35 years ago, who might have been able to influence the groups because their collective resistance was not so strong, today "they show strong resistance against the White House interfering in the arena of the subgovernment" (Rose 71). While Neustadt would have cited Clinton's inability to work with the "special public" in getting his health care package, passed, this was merely another example of a systemic constraint upon a President's ability to achieve policy goals. In the light of the postmodern presidency, one must reexamine the characteristics of weak presidents. Though many of the systemic constraints of the 1990's were present in the 1950's, Neustadt was wrong to call Truman a weak president without taking into account the importance of the system itself.

CONCLUSION

Thus, on the 37th anniversary of Richard Neustadt's ground-breaking work, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, I have attempted to demonstrate whether the text is still as relevant to the presidency as it was when it was first published. After examining the main points made by Neustadt, we attempted to apply them to the Clinton Presidency and to see if they could provide an adequate explanation and critique of the past five years. While Neustadt would certainly praise Mr.

Clinton's resiliency and ability to extricate himself, he would certainly have faulted the President on his lack of persuasiveness in Washington. While Neustadian analysis still has some relevance to presidents in 1997, it is no longer an "operational Bible." Other theories, namely those of Rose, are more applicable to the presidency of today, as they most adequately deal with systemic constraints on the President upon which he has little control. Unlike previous periods, the constituencies of the postmodern president have expanded so rapidly as to create new levels of difficulty for any leader. Foreign nations, no longer subject to domination by the United States, are demonstrating increasing influence over U.S. policy. Unfortunately for Neustadt, and also Mr. Clinton, the systems in which the Presidents find themselves often times do have limiting effects on how much they can do.

REFERENCES

- Neustadt, Richard. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*. New York: The Free Press, 1960.
- Rose, Richard. *The Postmodern President*. New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, 1991.