

## The Presidential Difference

The President is at liberty, both in law and conscience, to be as big a man as he can.

—WOODROW WILSON, 1907

But nowadays he can not be as small as he might like.

—RICHARD E. NEUSTADT, 1960

On April 1, 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower convened the National Security Council (NSC) to consider a matter of war or peace. Communist insurgents had encircled key units of the U.S.-backed French forces in Indochina at Dien Bien Phu in northwest Vietnam. Eisenhower's concern was falling dominoes. If Dien Bien Phu fell, French resistance in Indochina was likely to collapse, and other Southeast Asian nations might come under communist control. After the NSC meeting, Eisenhower confided to an associate that he was thinking about ordering an air strike to relieve the French, an action that could have led to a large-scale American military involvement in Indochina. Instead, he decided on a course of diplomatic action that

culminated in the partition of Vietnam into a communist North and a noncommunist South.

One member of Eisenhower's administration who disagreed with his decision not to take military action was the official next in the line of presidential succession, Vice President Richard M. Nixon. Would Nixon have committed American military power in Indochina if he had been president? That can never be known with certainty, but it is likely that he would have.

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson faced a similar choice. The American-backed South Vietnam government was in danger of falling to the Vietnamese communists. On January 27, Johnson's top advisers presented him with two options: seek negotiations and "salvage what little can be preserved with no major addition to our present military risks" or "use our military power in the Far East to force a change of communist policy." Johnson opted for military power, first ordering the bombing of North Vietnam and then committing a mounting U.S. ground force to combat in Vietnam. By 1968, a half-million American soldiers were mired in Southeast Asia, at which point Johnson announced that he would halt the military buildup, seek negotiations with the communists, and remove himself from the running for a second elected term.

Again the vice president did not agree with the president's decision. Shortly after the bombing began, Hubert H. Humphrey sent Johnson a confidential memorandum warning of the risk of becoming embroiled in an unpopular war in Vietnam, and urging Johnson to apply his political skills to finding a diplomatic solution. Johnson reprimanded Humphrey for venturing an opinion on the matter and excluded him from meetings on Vietnam until he fell in line behind the administration's military effort. Would a President Humphrey have taken a different course of action than Johnson? The answer is unknowable, but it is probable that he would have.<sup>1</sup>

The United States is said to have a government of laws and institutions rather than individuals, but as these examples remind us, it is one in which the matter of who occupies the nation's highest office can have profound repercussions. That is not everywhere the case. In

Great Britain, with its tradition of collective leadership, for example, the rare Winston Churchill, Margaret Thatcher, or Tony Blair is far outnumbered by the many Stanley Baldwins, Harold Wilsons, and John Majors, whose personal impact on governmental actions is at best limited.

If some higher power had set out to design a democracy in which the individual on top mattered, the result might well resemble the American political system. American chief executives have placed their stamp on the nation's policies since the founding of the Republic, but until the 1930s, Congress typically took the lead in policymaking, and the programs of the federal government were of modest importance for the nation and world.

Then came the emergence of what is commonly called the modern presidency. Under the stimulus of the New Deal, World War II, and the entrepreneurial leadership of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, there was a vast expansion of the scope and influence of the federal government. Meanwhile, the United States became a world and then a nuclear power, and the presidency underwent fundamental changes that increase the likelihood that the personal attributes distinguishing one White House incumbent from another will shape political outcomes.

The chief executive became the principal source of policy initiative, proposing much of the legislation considered by Congress. Presidents began to make an increasing amount of policy independent of the legislature, drawing on their sweeping administrative powers in an era of activist government and global leadership. The president became the most visible landmark in the political landscape, virtually standing for the federal government in the minds of many Americans. And the Executive Office of the President was created, providing the president with the organizational support needed to carry out his—and someday her—obligations.\*

The power of modern American presidents manifests itself in its

\*I use the masculine pronoun throughout to avoid gender-free locutions in discussing an office that has had only male incumbents at the time of writing. It is highly unlikely, however, that the presidency will remain a male bastion.

purest form in the global arena, where their actions as commander in chief can determine the fate of the human race. This was most strikingly evident in the extended nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union that followed World War II. However, the president's latitude for independent action is even greater in the unstructured post-cold war world than it was during the cold war, when the threat of mutual destruction concentrated minds and constricted actions.

Presidential power is less potentially apocalyptic at home than abroad, but the occupant of the Oval Office is also of critical domestic importance. The power to nullify legislation gives the chief executive the capacity to thwart the will of Congress, unless his veto is overridden by two-thirds of the Senate and House of Representatives. Presidents have wide discretion over the implementation of laws and allocation of expenditures. The president's ability to command public attention and shape the national policy agenda makes him politically potent whatever his support on Capitol Hill. Even when Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton were under consideration for impeachment, they were far from politically inconsequential. They retained their formal powers; their predicaments preempted normal policymaking; and Clinton even scored significant political victories while Congress deliberated on his removal.

All of this would lead one to expect the qualities that bear on a president's leadership to be subjected to the closest possible attention. That is far from the case. To be sure, every president has been the object of a deluge of prose, first during his presidency, then in the memoirs of his associates, and later in studies based on the declassified records of his administration. Yet, much of that outpouring is directed to the ends the president sought rather than the means he used to advance them, and a large portion of it bears on the merits of his policies rather than the attributes that shaped his leadership.

Two important exceptions are Richard E. Neustadt's *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership*, which was published during Eisenhower's final presidential year, and James David Barber's *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, which

appeared during Nixon's first term. Neustadt's interest is with the president's ability to win the support of other policymakers by revealing himself to be politically skilled and to possess the support of the public. Barber's preoccupation is in distinguishing presidents whose emotional insecurities spill over into their official actions from those who are secure in their psychic moorings and free to channel their energies into productive leadership.<sup>2</sup> The merit of Neustadt's emphasis on political skill is made evident by the difficulties encountered by Jimmy Carter, whose policy aspirations were thwarted by his failure to adhere to the norms of Washington politics. The value of Barber's attention to the presidential psyche is illustrated by Richard Nixon, whose character flaws led to actions that made it necessary for him to resign from the presidency.\*

A president's effectiveness is a function of more than his political prowess and mental health, however, and there is much to be learned by considering the full sweep of the twentieth-century modern presidential experience. My intention is to do precisely that, focusing on the leadership qualities of each of the presidents from FDR to Bill Clinton and their significance for the public and the political community.

I devote a chapter to each of my subjects, providing a concise account of his background, political style, and conduct of the presidency. I consider each chief executive on his own terms, out of a conviction that the modern presidents have been too disparate to be usefully pigeonholed. Nevertheless, I am particularly attentive to six qualities that relate to presidential job performance.

The first, which pertains to the outer face of leadership, is the president's proficiency as a *public communicator*. The second, which relates to the inner workings of the presidency, is the president's *organizational capacity*—his ability to rally his colleagues and structure their activities effectively. The third and fourth bear on the president as political operator—his *political skill* and the extent to which it is har-

\*For a fuller discussions of these books, see section on Further Reading for this chapter.

nessed to a *vision* of public policy. The *fifth* is the *cognitive style* with which the president processes the Niagara of advice and information that comes his way. The *last* is what the German sociologist Max Weber called “the firm taming of the soul” and has come to be referred to as *emotional intelligence*—the president’s ability to manage his emotions and turn them to constructive purposes, rather than being dominated by them and allowing them to diminish his leadership.<sup>3</sup>

I embarked on an extended inquiry into the endlessly fascinating occupants of the modern Oval Office early in 1974, when the presidency of Richard Nixon was on the rocks. Why, I wondered, was that politically gifted chief executive, whose first term had resulted in such dramatic achievements as the opening to China and détente with the Soviet Union, succumbing to what was plainly a self-inflicted political disaster? Rather than confining myself to the enigma of Richard Nixon, I decided to examine presidential political psychology broadly, studying the full array of modern chief executives. In the following years, I immersed myself in the literature on the presidents from FDR to Bill Clinton, mined their unpublished papers, and interviewed large numbers of past and current presidential associates. I also have had informative personal encounters with several of the protagonists of my study, three of which help frame what follows.

In 1977, I led a group of undergraduates in an interview with the recently defeated Gerald Ford. Mindful of the personal toll the presidency had taken on Johnson and Nixon, I asked Ford how he dealt with the pressures of his job. His answer bespoke the even-tempered composure of a stolid son of the Midwest:

I had to have a physical outlet—swimming or some other activity—that burned up those juices that were not normally consumed during the day. . . . But I found that the pressures I had read about were not nearly as severe as I expected, as long as my staff organized them properly.<sup>4</sup>

The second encounter, which was with Jimmy Carter, was marked by anything but equanimity. Carter’s first public appearance after step-

ping down from office in January 1981 was an informal visit to Princeton University during which he met with the students in my presidency course. One of them asked him what he had found most and least rewarding about being president. He replied by excoriating the Democratic party for not rallying behind his policies, mentioning nothing positive about his White House experience.

Another student observed that Carter had initially managed his own White House but had later appointed a chief of staff. Was this, the questioner asked, because he discovered that the demands on a president had become too great for him to administer his own presidency? For reasons that were unclear, Carter took umbrage at the question, denying that he had ever taken the highly publicized action of appointing a chief of staff. By the end of this unexpectedly contentious session, it was not hard to understand why Carter had failed to bond with the rest of the political community.

The third experience was with Bill Clinton, who had barely been in my line of vision until the final months of 1991. My first clear impression of Clinton came via C-Span. In January and February of 1992, Clinton had survived charges of adultery and draft evasion, run a stronger-than-expected race in New Hampshire, swept the southern primaries, and become the front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination.

In March, I happened on a telecast of Clinton addressing an African American church congregation that could scarcely have been more responsive if Martin Luther King had been in the pulpit. Speaking with ease and self-assurance, Clinton issued a call for policies that would enable citizens to lift themselves by their bootstraps rather than relying on government handouts. Explaining that he was making the same proposal to audiences of whites, Clinton called on all Americans to put aside their differences and recognize their common bonds.<sup>5</sup>

It was an electric performance by a man who seemed on his way to a presidency of great accomplishments. Instead, Clinton went on to preside over one of the most ragged first two years in office of any modern president. He only hit his stride after his party lost control of Congress in the 1994 midterm election, when he made effective use of

the veto to seize the political initiative from the Republicans by forcing two government shutdowns.

In the spring of 1996, I had an occasion to observe Clinton in the White House. I had been invited to the signing of the law providing for the line-item veto, an authorization for the president to nullify provisions in appropriation bills. I was ushered into the Oval Office, where I joined a group of good-government advocates chosen to highlight the event. Clinton entered and launched into a prepared statement. At first, he read from cue cards, sounding somewhat mechanical, but within seconds he put the cards down, faced his audience, and addressed it with great fluency and an impressive sense of conviction.<sup>6</sup>

Clinton's remarks were not particularly profound (and the Supreme Court later struck down the line-item veto), but he radiated the aura of a chief executive who had come into his own and was ready to go on to a productive second term. Instead, Clinton went on to a new term marked by modest policy initiatives, the revelation that he had engaged in sexual relations with a White House intern in the presidential office, and a year consumed by his impeachment. In the process, he had provided a reminder that in the absence of emotional intelligence, the presidency is a defective instrument of democratic governance.

The concern of this book is with the leadership of the modern presidents, but it is also impossible not to be impressed by their sheer diversity. One indicator of their variety is their fathers' occupations. Roosevelt's was a Hudson River Valley country gentleman, Truman's a Missouri mule trader, Eisenhower's a Kansas mechanic, Kennedy's a Massachusetts millionaire, Johnson's a Texas politician, Nixon's a California shopkeeper. Ford's stepfather was a Michigan paint manufacturer, Carter's father was a Georgia planter, Reagan's worked in Illinois shoe stores, Bush's was a Wall Street banker and U.S. senator, and Clinton's was an itinerant southern salesman, who died before his son's birth.

A story is told about an airman who escorted Lyndon Johnson across a tarmac in Vietnam, saying, "This is your helicopter, Mr. President." "They are all my helicopters," Johnson replied. When I am

asked which president I admire most, I have come to say, "They are all my presidents." Each of the modern presidents is a source of insight, as much for his weaknesses as his strengths. The variation among them provides intellectual leverage, permitting comparisons and expanding our sense of the possible. The presidency is often described as an office that places superhuman demands on its incumbent. In fact, it is a job for flesh-and-blood human beings, who will be better equipped for their responsibilities if they and those who select them do not begin with a blank slate.