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# Henry Steele Commager

## On the American Presidency

THE PRESIDENCY OF THE UNITED STATES may not be the most powerful office in the world—that depends pretty much on who occupies it—but it is clearly the most complicated and difficult. It is complicated because the President is expected to wear half a dozen hats—or perhaps uniforms—at once: he is both a national and international symbol, he is head of State, he is commander-in-chief of the armed forces, he is in charge of the conduct of foreign affairs, he is the ceremonial head of the government, he is the head of his political party, he is expected to represent all the people and all the interests of all the people. By virtue of his power of appointment he participates in the judiciary and in the whole immense arena of administration; by virtue of his veto power—as well as of his role as head of his party—he participates in legislation. Clearly no one can fill all these offices, perform all these duties, effectively. The wonder is that any President manages to perform them at all.

It is not perhaps astonishing that so many men (so far no women) aspire to the Presidency. It is astonishing that so many incumbent Presidents yearn for a second term. Yet the evidence that they do is conclusive; doubtless, as Milton put it, “fame is the spur.” Even if we eliminate those scores of candidates who have no ostentatious qualifications for the office, and no incentive except vanity, there remain nine or ten legitimate candidates whose qualifications are not wholly incongruous to the office.

This year three of these rise above mediocrity: the others, on the whole, give mediocrity a bad name.

Almost a century ago George Bryce, in his classic *American Commonwealth*, asked, “Why Great Men are not elected to the Presidency?” His question, reasonable enough when Grover Cleveland was in the White House (and about to be succeeded

by the forgotten Benjamin Harrison), was nevertheless premature. After all Bryce himself lived to see both Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson in the White House. But clearly the question he asked in 1888 is relevant today; in the last fifty years only one man of world stature has occupied the Presidency.

It is sobering to compare the first six American Presidents with the last six. When the United States was a new nation with from four to ten millions of inhabitants (and at a time when only adult white males had the vote), scattered over an immense territory, with no major cities, no great universities, no national newspapers or journals, and, as Henry James observed, with barely a national name; its voters had the wisdom and the good fortune to elect Washington, John Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and John Quincy Adams to the Presidency. Now when we are a great world power of from 175 to some 225 million peoples, with a dozen major cities, and a genuine world capitol, with scores of great universities and research institutions, the most elaborate system of communications of any nation, and the longest tradition of participatory democracy of any people; we chose Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Ford—estimable men (all but one of them) but not one of world stature.

How explain the decline of the American Presidency?

First, this decline in leadership is not a phenomenon singular to politics: it afflicts almost every segment of our increasingly anonymous society. Where are the national leaders in the military, in banking, industry and transportation, in education and religion? Where, now, are the Grants and the Lees, the Rockefellers and Carnegies, the Morgans and the Harrimans, the Charles William Elliots and the John Deweys, the Theodore Parkers, the Wendell Phillipases, the Margaret Fullers, the Jane Addamses the Reinholdt Niebuhrs and the Martin Luther Kings? Politics, and politicians, reflect the society they represent, and now, more than ever before, they reflect not that society as a whole but those who function as “image-makers.” Increasingly our political leaders have abandoned James Madison for Madison Avenue. Increasingly, we can say of them

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what Emerson said back in the 1840's, that "things are in the saddle and ride mankind." The things are computers and pollsters and advertising and packaging; imagine a Washington, a Jefferson, a Lincoln, submitting to the indignities of an "image-maker" or a "speech writer."

In another respect, too, the absence of great Presidents reflects social, rather than individual, change. There is no decline in the pool of talent. Talent remains the same from generation to generation. In every hundred thousand people there are potentially the same number of scientists, poets, musicians, philosophers and statesmen. The nourishment of these however depends on society. In the early years of the Republic—a republic which for the first time in history was designed to give opportunities to "mute inglorious Miltons" and to "Cromwells, guiltless of their country's blood"—talent generally went into the public arena. What other outlets for talent were there? Few certainly in the military, in the church, in business, in society, in scholarship or the arts. It was politics and public service that offered the most glittering rewards and that attracted therefore the best talent, and the most honorable. But in our own day it is the other way around. It is business, industry, finance, science and the arts, not public service, that initially attracts the ablest talent; and the initial commitment is usually decisive.

Nor can we find an explanation of the decline of leadership in the absence of experience. There is no discernable corollation between political experience and statesmanship in the history of the American Presidency: one is quantitative, the other is qualitative. Washington had no political experience nor, for that matter, had Lincoln. Theodore Roosevelt had brief experience as Governor of New York and Wilson as one-term Governor of New Jersey. Buchanan, Harding, and Nixon, the three most egregious failures in American Presidential history, all had long and varied experience in public life. Experience is no substitute for judgment, or for integrity.

It cannot even be said that the problems of our day are more difficult or baffling than those which challenged earlier Presidents. The notion that the problems we face are of unprece-

dented complexity and intransigence is an expression of private and collective vanity, for it excuses our failures. The task of writing a Constitution and creating a nation which confronted Washington, the task of holding the Union together, and ending slavery which confronted Lincoln, the task of overcoming the greatest of depressions, transforming the nation from a private enterprise to a welfare state, and fighting a global war, which confronted Franklin Roosevelt—these were graver and more difficult than any problems which now confront us. The kind of self-indulgence which ceaselessly bleats about the towering problems which we face is similar to the self-indulgence which persuades millions of amateur psychologists that the problems of love and sex are more profound today than they were when Homer wrote of Penelope or Virgil of Dido or Dante of Beatrice; or that the problems of old age more grievous than when Shakespeare wrote of King Lear or Goethe of Faust or Proust of *Remembrance of Things Past* or Willa Cather of *A Lost Lady*.

The problem of the Presidency today is not a matter of personal talent, or of mounting difficulties; it is a matter of popular attitudes, habits and expectations, of policies, laws, and administration. It can, and should be, remedied by changing the policies, the laws and the administration.

Here are some of the changes that might make the choice of Presidents more democratic and might give us better Presidents.

First, either abolish the cumbrous and illogical Electoral College and provide for election by simple national majorities (or pluralities) or restore the Electoral College to its original character. The first solution would recognize that we are one people, not fifty, with common interests and objectives and that the President is indeed a *national* leader. The second, which, after all, gave us Washington and Adams and (after some complexities) Jefferson, would at least free electors from being robots, and put a premium on electors who had minds of their own.

Second, abolish primaries as we now have them and go back to the system of national party caucuses, which served us pretty well in the early years of the Republic. If that is too “undemocratic” (as if our present system can be called democratic!) we

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might provide for national primaries, all on the same day, or days, so we could avoid the misleading competition for attention which now obtains. The spectacle of far-reaching decisions made by the chance of primaries in a little state like New Hampshire is almost as vulgar as the conduct of those primaries, the amount of money spent on them, and the excessive notoriety they command in television and press.

Third, shorten the election campaign and the election process. The British allow three weeks for the choice of a new government; why should it take us a year or more? There was some excuse for long-drawn-out campaigns in the early years of the Republic, when distances were great, communication slow and candidates often known only regionally. But it is a sardonic commentary on our ability to frustrate the advantages of technology that at a time when television brings every candidate into every household every day, we take three or four times as long to select candidates and conduct campaigns as we did before such technology.

Fourth—perhaps most important of all—eliminate money from Presidential campaigns and elections. This is not in itself a very bold proposal; after all William Jennings Bryan made it back in the 1890s, and Theodore Roosevelt endorsed it when he was President. Yet we still take for granted that it is appropriate for candidates to spend millions getting themselves nominated and elected. Clearly the costs of campaigns and elections are monstrously excessive. Those costs have three pernicious consequences. First, they shift the center of gravity in campaigns from issues to money-raising; second, they put successful candidates in debt, perhaps even in hock, to those who finance their campaigns and thus open the doors to a form of blackmail; third, they discourage those without access to money from entering politics at all. The solution of this problem is elementary: the costs of Presidential Campaigns (and doubtless of Congressional as well) should be strictly regulated, and financed by the Congress. The Congress has, in recent years, made some half-hearted gestures towards controlling campaign expenditures. What is odd is that criticism of Congressional legislation is mostly that it is too restrictive, rather

than that it is not restrictive enough. But, after all, campaigns were not expensive in the nineteenth century; there is no reason why they should cost millions today. The chief expense, now, is for television; the American people own the air and could require that all networks provide free television time to all legitimate candidates. That seems to work in other countries, why should it not work here?

Fifth, we should restore—and rehabilitate—the original character of the Vice President. The Framers assumed that Presidents and Vice Presidents were constitutionally equal. Washington and John Adams, as Justice Story observed in his *Commentaries on the Constitution* “were candidates deemed equally worthy and fit for the Presidency.” But the office of Vice President soon came to be looked upon as an exercise in futility. Parties persist in naming to that exalted office men who are justly forgotten like William Wheeler, or Garret Hobart (or Thomas R. Marshall whose only memorable contribution was his observation that “what this country needs is a good five-cent cigar”), or men we should like to forget like Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew. Considering that eight Vice Presidents have succeeded their Presidents, that office scarcely deserves the insignificance that has been imposed upon it.

Sixth—a political rather than a legal or administrative change—restore the Cabinet to its quondam position as not only a body of advisers to the President, but as effective departmental administrators. We did rather better when Presidents had, and used, strong Cabinets than we have done since Presidents have largely ignored them. We have an economy today more elaborately committed to banking, finance and business than any other nation; why is it impossible for us to find an Alexander Hamilton or an Albert Gallatin to head up the Treasury? We have a government more deeply involved in foreign affairs than at any time in our history; why do we not have a Thomas Jefferson, a James Madison, a John Quincy Adams, to head up the conduct of foreign affairs?

Seventh, much could be done to overcome and remedy the scandal of non-voting and to increase participatory democracy (the two are not quite the same thing). Slightly more than

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half of those entitled to vote in Presidential elections—some-what under half of those entitled to vote in Congressional elections—chose to do so. Voting in Britain, Germany, and Scandinavia generally attracts some eighty to ninety per cent of the electorate: even in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) over ninety percent of potential voters took part in the first national elections. Registration could be simplified and made permanent, absentee voting facilitated and residency requirements (meaningless in national elections) abolished.

Finally—this has to do not with legal or administrative changes, but with intellectual and philosophical—the American people must somehow be brought to a realization that the American Presidency is a world, not just a national, office. Presidents should be selected for their ability to understand world, not just national affairs. Presidents, required to devote most of their attention to global problems (and most of our national problems are merely part of larger global problems) must be relieved of the burden of politics, the burden of day-by-day administrative decisions, the burden of excessive ceremonial activities and gestures (let Vice Presidents perform those or appoint official ceremonial representatives as does the City of New York).

What is called for are just those talents of statesmanship that Americans found and celebrated in Washington and Jefferson. What is called for are leaders who meet those qualifications which Justice Story set forth almost a century and a half ago: A statesman must be master of the past, present and future. He must see what is behind as well as what is before. He must learn to separate the accidental in human experience from that which constitutes the cause or the effect of measures. He must legislate for the future when it is, as yet, but dimly seen, and he must put aside much which might win public favor in order to found systems of solid utility whose results will require ages to develop but . . . are indispensable for the safety, the glory and the happiness of the country.