



Bipartisan Policy Center

The Twenty-First-Century Presidency

TWO HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Edited by Tevi Troy, Ph.D., Bipartisan Policy Center
Featuring Essays by Amity Shlaes and Larry Haas

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EDITOR

Tevi Troy, Ph.D.

Bipartisan Policy Center

AUTHORS

Amity Shlaes

Bestselling Author and
Chair, Calvin Coolidge
Presidential Foundation

Larry Haas

Historian and
Former Bill Clinton Aide

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Introduction: Historical Comparisons

The very concept of a 21st-century presidency implies that it differs from earlier presidencies. With that in mind, two presidential historians explored the question of how earlier presidents might have viewed the new presidency that has emerged in the 21st century. Calvin Coolidge scholar Amity Shlaes undertook this effort from the perspective of the last peacetime president who actually reduced the size of the federal government. For a perspective on Democratic presidents, historian and former Bill Clinton aide Lawrence Haas looked at the question from the perspective of the Kennedy brothers, three of whom sought—and one of whom actually attained—the office of the presidency. These two essays differ from the other papers that focus on specific aspects of the emerging 21st-century presidency, but they help place this new and expanded presidency in historical context, and they do so from bipartisan perspectives.

Chapter 1:

Calvin Coolidge's Vision of the Presidency Compared to Today

By Amity Shlaes

One August day in 1927, a sculptor named Gutzon Borglum sought to blast the notion of a monumental presidency into the American consciousness. Borglum, already well-known, had chosen the Black Hills of South Dakota for his most ambitious project: dynamiting, hacking, and carving thousands of feet of granite to transform the face of the mountain into giant profiles of four American presidents: Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and, a particular favorite of Borglum's, Theodore Roosevelt. Now, on the day he formally began work on Mount Rushmore—which was not completed until 1941—the sculptor aimed to show not only the 1,500 citizens gathered to watch but also, it seemed, posterity and the very universe, the Olympian nature of America's first office. As Borglum later summed up: "Let us place there, carved high, as close to heaven as we can, the words of our leaders, their faces, to show what manner of men they were." With concerted effort, Borglum, a living combo of artist and P.T. Barnum, managed to draw to the August ceremony the ultimate guest: a sitting president, Calvin Coolidge himself.

President Coolidge indeed ascended the hills and spoke at Rushmore. Coolidge also accepted an assignment from Borglum: to compose a short text on U.S. history to be etched into the rock in three-foot-tall letters.¹ Finally, Coolidge signed off on a federal appropriation to support the project's early stages, saying that "money spent for such a purpose is certain of adequate returns in the nature of increased public welfare." These concessions, coming as they did from not only a president but a popular one, moved Borglum to improvise a stunning declaration: "I may yet live long enough to put the bust of Coolidge alongside those of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Roosevelt."²

Yet Borglum's enthusiasm was not matched by that of the chief executive. Film footage of Borglum's 1927 Rushmore ceremony reveals a distanced president

¹ "The Entablature Idea—Mount Rushmore National Memorial (U.S. National Park Service)," NPS.gov, April 2, 2020. Available at: <https://www.nps.gov/moru/learn/historyculture/the-entablature-idea.htm>.

² Rex Alan Smith, *The Carving of Mount Rushmore* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1985), 153.

going through the motions rather than embracing the Rushmore campaign, which took 14 years to complete. The difference between the pair was partly one of temperament: the Borglum bravado and the modesty of Silent Cal clashed. Borglum's hopes for collaboration—not to mention any thought of Coolidge's profile on Rushmore—came to naught. The tension between the artist on the one hand and the statesman on the other would shortly erupt into a very public tiff. After leaving office in 1929 and returning to Northampton, MA, Coolidge, a meticulous author, submitted his 500-word history for the Black Hills wall. Borglum dared to edit Coolidge's writing and, more offensive yet to the proud Coolidge, published the altered version in the papers. "Borglum Shows Coolidge How," crowed the newsmen. Coolidge withdrew from the project—and any contact with Rushmore's Barnum. Later, the former president asked a visitor to his Northampton home how many miles distance lay between Northampton and Borglum in his Black Hills studio. About 1,500 miles, the man allowed. "Well," Coolidge shot back, "that's about as close to Mr. Borglum as I care to be."

For the Coolidge-Borglum difference was more than one of personal style. Despite his acquiescence to one small appropriation of \$250,000 for this purpose in 1929, Coolidge was a fierce budgeteer. Scrutiny of his remarks at Rushmore reveals that nowhere did he suggest funds for the giant Rushmore endeavor would all come from Washington; indeed, the president emphasized that the state of South Dakota was "taking the lead" on the project. Just half a year before he attended Borglum's ceremony, Coolidge had composed—and published, presumably without interference—a blistering 11,000-word veto of McNary-Haugen, an agricultural subsidy bill bound to cost, down the decades, multiples of Rushmore and very popular in South Dakota. The appropriation for Borglum's sculpture Coolidge likely classed in the category of good will, a lesser evil than wider federal subsidies. But if the grandeur of Rushmore drew much more in federal funds—and it would—the joke would be on Coolidge. Coolidge doubtless recognized that possibility.

Another gap between Borglum and Coolidge though was as wide as Western canyons, which Coolidge also inspected that summer of 1927. As presidents go, Coolidge was less Roosevelt and more Washington. Borglum craved "gigantic." Coolidge disdained the Olympian presidency. He regarded such a concept as American blasphemy. Like Washington, who doubtless would have squirmed at the Rushmore display, Coolidge believed that if anyone in America was royalty, it was citizens themselves: "American citizenship is a high estate," he had said at Arlington National Cemetery a few years before. "He who holds it is the peer of kings."³ From the moment Coolidge became president in 1923 after the death of Warren Harding, through his own election as president in 1924, and to his departure from Washington in 1929, Coolidge strove to lower the profile of

³ Calvin Coolidge, "Memorial Day Address at Arlington National Cemetery," The American Presidency Project, University of California-Santa Barbara, May 30, 1924. Available at: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/memorial-day-address-arlington-national-cemetery-1>.

the chief executive in American daily life, not elevate it. As Washington had, Coolidge believed a president should preside, not rule. “It is a great advantage to a president,” Coolidge wrote several years later, “and a major source of safety to the country, for him to know he is not a great man.”

Perhaps most disturbing to Coolidge was the feature of presidential aggrandizement that is also the most relevant today. He had come to the presidency almost automatically, upon the tragic death of President Warren Harding following a heart attack, without bidding for public support. The very constitutional automaticity of the transition pleased him; all he need do as president was serve and deliver. Presidents who to gain popularity promise to deliver “great”—as Theodore Roosevelt did, Franklin Roosevelt would, and Franklin Roosevelt did, and Donald Trump and Joe Biden have in recent years—find themselves obligated to undertake great ventures—expansions in government or foreign wars. A “great” presidency tends to eclipse traditional institutions. To Coolidge, “The Reign of Law,” the title he gave a book of his speeches, mattered more than any individual politician. To Coolidge, cautious, conservative government mattered. Though the flamboyant Borglum was more nativist than progressive, the Borglum vision of the presidency was so capacious it practically guaranteed license for some future president’s expansion of the federal government. The central drive of the Coolidge presidency had been, in fact, to halt the seemingly inexorable expansion of the federal government. This Coolidge did manage. Indeed, Coolidge’s most remarkable feat was that he left the federal government with a smaller budget than he inherited when he acceded to the presidency. But at Rushmore and after, he suspected—with good reason—a strong successor could reverse his reversal. If there was a ghost from the future at Rushmore who spooked Coolidge, it was not Borglum but Franklin Roosevelt, who indeed would undo all Coolidge had done with his New Deal. To Coolidge, therefore, the very irreversibility that Rushmore symbolized—the great visages permanent in granite—promised hazard.

To underscore the distinction among the philosophies of American presidents, Coolidge took his own dramatic action during that summer of 1927. Turning his back on another seeming inevitable, his own second elected term, the 30th president pulled a Washington and unexpectedly announced he would leave office when this term, his only elected term, ended. Coolidge’s fellow Republicans, who had counted on riding his coattails, reacted with incomprehension and then fury. But Coolidge stood firm. “When a man begins to feel he is the only one who can lead in this republic he is guilty of treason to the spirit of our institutions.” It was better for America, he said, when presidents rotated in and out of the post “after a moderate length of time.”

To trace Coolidge’s career is to understand the scale of both Coolidge’s restraint and his achievement—and their utility for our own times. In the second decade of the 20th century, while Coolidge was still a state legislator in Massachusetts, progressivism, heretofore largely a policy confined to the states, gained its

first great purchase on the federal government. And what a purchase it was. Congress passed into law the federal income tax, initially setting the top tax rate at a modest 7%, only to hike that rate to 73% within a decade. The Federal Reserve, created in December 1913 as a compromise to manage inflation, permitted a violent price rise in the years after it was created. President Woodrow Wilson, who aspired to greatness, had pulled the United States into a costly world war that justified such shifts. On the pretext of the war, Wilson permitted further incursions, including the nationalization of the principal means of transport, the railroads.

As today, post-crisis recovery proved difficult. As today, federal debt generated by the crisis—in that case World War I—burdened the nation. As today, an enfeebled federal government seemed incapable of cutting spending. As today, progressives maintained that the crisis fundamentally altered the country, requiring federal intervention post-crisis. And as today, there was every sign that the electorate increasingly shared that conviction. After all, overseas, even Great Britain was turning to social democracy. Why should America not follow the trend in Europe? At home, the Democrats' platform committed to "the fundamental progressive principles of social, economic and industrial justice and advance."⁴ So did many Republicans: Successors to the old Bull Moose segment seemed ready to split the Grand Old Party again with a new party—what would become the Progressive Party. The sudden popularity of the Ku Klux Klan and militant labor unions suggested that unless concessions were made, the country was in for a rough decade.

Confronted with this trend, the old Republicans could have compromised as modern Republicans seem to do. Instead, they set about building a strong bulwark. In the 1920 platform and elsewhere, the GOP assailed Wilson's high taxes—"the burden of taxation imposed on the American people is staggering," admonished the platform—and called for a regime of lower taxes that would end any tendency to "mulct the consumer or needlessly repress enterprise and thrift." The 1920 platform deplored the Wilson administration's "policy of inflation" and charged—accurately enough—that the young Fed had already proven itself to be "frankly dominated by the convenience of the Treasury."⁵ Under the gold standard system of the day, Republicans warned, the United States had to cut inflation and reduce spending, or gold—and with it money—would flow to other lands, forcing recession in the United States.

The Old Republicans of 1920 also proudly pointed to their record of support for returning authority and assets to the private sector, "to unlock for the public good the great pent-up resources of this country." The Republican ticket—Warren Harding of Ohio and Calvin Coolidge of Massachusetts—called for a return to "normalcy," by which they meant a return to the pre-progressive norm.

⁴ 1920 Democratic Party Platform, The American Presidency Project. Available at: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273205>.

⁵ Republican Party Platform of 1920, The American Presidency Project. Available at: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273373>.

The essence of the normalcy wager was that a healthy return to a freer economy would generate a prosperity that would obviate the need for new progressive laws or benefits. To ensure its constituents—and maybe some newcomers—got the message, the party blanketed the land with copies of the Republican Campaign Textbook of 1920. Harding and Coolidge graced the cover, but it was the inch-thick volume of text detailing the how and why of the Republican counterrevolution that mattered.

After victory in November 1920, Harding indeed led Congress in the passage of a strong budget reform: the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921. The act gave the executive the power to oversee and cut the budget. Harding also commenced hacking away at the tax burden, and with Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon, saw through passage of a rate cut, reducing the top rate to 58% and promising yet further drops. In addition, Harding rejected a progressive demand for the creation of what we would today term an entitlement, pensions for veterans, proffering instead a generous commitment to build hospitals to care for the war's disabled. And the president sought to return national resources to private hands, leasing oil reserves to private parties.

The counterrevolution, however, appeared to abort in the summer of 1923, when President Harding died. The press rated Coolidge a lame duck; after all, the 1924 election was only 15 months away, and the progressive Bob LaFollette was building a new third party to challenge Coolidge and the traditional Republicans. The accidental president's authority only seemed to weaken when, following Harding's death, the full extent of several scandals came to light. The executives who built veteran hospitals took kickbacks, thereby undermining Harding's promise that this smaller concession to veterans was worthier than clean pension payments. Harding's attempt at privatization, the farming out to private company of oil leases, had served markets less than friends of the Harding circle, who received the better contracts. The second scandal, which came to be known as "Teapot Dome," after a formation of rock over the oil reserves, rendered risible Republicans' claims that privatization benefited the average citizen.

Yet in office, Coolidge proved to be no lame duck. He curtailed the scandals' damage by appointing special prosecutors from both parties, men who could and did win convictions of guilty parties. More important, Coolidge refocused the nation on the party's platform and vowed to complete the campaign promises, not just partially but "to perfection." Budgeting with rigor, Coolidge managed to restrain spending year over year. In 1924, Coolidge wrenched a second tax cut from Congress—albeit only after conceding to the era's class warriors a creepy rule known as the Peeping Tom Provision. This concession to populists required that the tax obligations of wealthier citizens be listed beside their names on the wall at town post offices, thereby providing fodder to muckrakers in the press. Coolidge also refused to apologize for private business. While the chief ideal of the American people would always be idealism, as he would tell newspapermen, "The chief business of the American people is business."

Americans came to agree. As the 1920s passed, and businesses grew, prosperity returned. Americans got their first cars, Model Ts and then Model As, and their first radios. Electric household appliances changed women's lives, cutting housework time by half. Jobs proved plentiful, especially for the skilled, easing many vets' troubles. The Ku Klux Klan and strikers faded, as did labor unions and their class war campaign. Investment flowed to the United States, which offered more opportunity than a Europe in upheaval. Strong U.S. employment provided a stark contrast to the job situation in Britain, where heavy spending and the Dole, an expensive unemployment program, disincentivized work and fostered heavy unemployment. As Britain stumbled, America climbed. The cold abstraction of productivity gains, a Republican goal, reached every American family when employers found they were able to cut the standard workweek from six days to five.

And who would not vote for Saturdays off? Come November 1924, Coolidge won more popular votes than the new Progressive Party and the Democrats combined. This powerful mandate enabled Coolidge to push through a third tax cut—one in which he lowered the top marginal rate to 25%, lower even than Ronald Reagan's storied 28% rate. Also important, Coolidge was able to repeal the Peeping Tom Provision. As the years passed, budget cuts became tougher to find—the country was growing after all—yet Coolidge persisted, likening his work to cheese paring at his father's small cheese factory. With great courage, the 30th president also vetoed what we would term entitlements—the farm spending and those pensions for veterans. When Coolidge did leave office after 67 months as president, the federal budget was actually lower than when he came in, an exceptional achievement for a peacetime president. The federal debt was also down by one-third. Following Coolidge's decision not to run, the flummoxed GOP eventually nominated Herbert Hoover—but only with a Hoover commitment to “the continuation of Coolidge policies.” To today's historians, Borghum's impulsive idea of putting Coolidge on Rushmore sounds far-fetched—to put it politely. But at the time, the idea was not so improbable.

Writing this, one can hear the intake of breath of critics before they bellow that posterity forgot Coolidge because Coolidge caused the Great Depression. But this logic—“post-Coolidge, *ergo propter* Coolidge”—is fallacy. For the policies of the presidents who succeeded him and ushered in the Great Depression were the opposite to his. Hoover, while Republican in name and claim, broke with Coolidge tradition, raising taxes and intervening in markets following the 1929 crash. Evidence suggests these moves deepened the Depression. Franklin Roosevelt institutionalized a vast progressive state. And these policies contributed to the depth and duration of the Depression. In 1936, Roosevelt ran for a second term—an election that as he himself acknowledged, was, Borghum-wise, more about Roosevelt than about platform. “There is one issue in this campaign,” Roosevelt told his increasingly skeptic adviser Ray Moley. “It's

myself and people must be either for me, or against me.”⁶ “Myself” enjoyed his own landslide in 1936, even greater than Coolidge’s. But in 1937 and 1938, when unemployment in some cities passed 15%, Coolidge had already been resting in his Plymouth Notch grave for half a decade.

Several features of this Coolidge counterrevolution warrant study today. One was Coolidge’s own personal discipline. White House scandals cost parties and their leaders political capital. Through his sober and determined deportment, Coolidge husbanded his party’s capital and cleaned up the institution of the presidency itself. Another was the discipline of the gold standard, no creation of Coolidge, but certainly respected by him and his Treasury secretary, Andrew Mellon. Had Coolidge and Mellon, along with the Fed, loosened spending and money, their nation’s economy would have gone the way of Britain, and they knew it.

The most important discipline and the greatest incentive to virtue was that fat 1920 Republican Textbook and the Republican commitment to honor its promises. The prominence of the platform in the 1920 and 1924 campaigns must be contrasted with the absence of a Republican platform in the 2020 election, when the party went so far as to dispense with a serious platform update and run, as Democrats had in Roosevelt’s case, on the candidate alone. Presidential character matters, but even presidents of character need common sense and platforms.

Still, the chief value for us today in the 1920s story is the “counter” in the Coolidge counterrevolution. Today, many Americans assume that progressivism’s edifice cannot be dismantled—that progressivism is, as it were, blasted into granite. There is no returning to “normalcy.” What Coolidge showed is that a disciplined president with a disciplined party and a commitment can, himself, help the country return to its commonsense ways—or move a mountain when it comes to policy. And that feat is, in its way, nothing short of monumental.

⁶ David W. Reinhard, *The Republican Right since 1945*—(Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983).

Chapter 2:

The 21st-Century Presidency is Not the Office that the Kennedy Brothers Sought

By Lawrence J. Haas

It was May of 1960 and Jack Kennedy, who would turn 43 late that month, was running for president. Arthur Krock, an influential *New York Times* columnist and a Kennedy family intimate, suggested to Joe Kennedy, the family patriarch, that if Jack didn't secure the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, "there would be a strong drive" to nominate him for vice president. Joe quickly shot down the idea. "For the Kennedys," he told Krock, "it's the castle or the outhouse. Nothing in between."⁷

The Kennedys did more than seek the "castle" (i.e., the presidency), however; they assumed they would reach it. And, within the family, such presumptuousness did not originate with Joe Kennedy. It actually dated back a generation. When Joe's wife, Rose, gave birth to their first son, Joe Jr., in July 1915, it was Rose's father, the colorful former Boston mayor known as "Honey Fitz," who told reporters, "Well ... he is going to be president of the United States, his mother and father have already decided that he is going to Harvard, where he will play on the football and baseball teams and incidentally take all the scholastic honors. Then he's going to be a captain of industry until it's time for him to be president for two or three terms. Further than that has not been decided."⁸

Joe and Rose ingrained such lofty expectations in the boys from a young age, whether the challenge was school, sports, or, later, politics. "In this family we want winners," Joe told the boys. And he would tolerate no self-pity when one of them didn't finish first. "We don't want any crying in this house," Joe said,⁹ prompting the children to invent the motto, "Kennedys don't cry." Friends who

⁷ Arthur Krock, recorded interview by Charles Bartlett, May 10, 1964, 14, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program. Available at: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKOH/Krock%2C%20Arthur/JFKOH-AK-01/JFKOH-AK-01>.

⁸ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 306.

⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 14.

visited the Kennedys marveled at their competitiveness at touch football on the family lawn or such other sports as sailing. “It wouldn’t make any difference who you were,” said Eddie Gallagher, a family friend who competed with them. “They were running you over even as kids.”¹⁰ Political adversaries would voice similar complaints when the boys ran for, and served in, office.

It was actually Joe who was first tempted by the presidency and, as a Democrat, he tried to position himself as best he could in case the opportunity to run for it arose. A banker, speculator, liquor distributor, and Hollywood mogul, Joe Kennedy met Franklin Delano Roosevelt during World War I when FDR was assistant secretary of the Navy and Joe was spearheading a federal wartime shipbuilding effort. Joe strongly backed FDR for president in 1932, contributed lots of money to his campaign, raised more from other wealthy people, traveled around the country with Roosevelt, and signaled to fellow Catholics and businessmen that they should vote for him. He endorsed FDR for re-election in 1936 and even wrote a book, *I’m for Roosevelt*, to spread the word. In return, Roosevelt tapped him in the early 1930s to chair the U.S. Maritime Commission and then serve as the first chairman of the new Securities and Exchange Commission, before giving Joe what he really wanted in the late 1930s—an appointment as U.S. ambassador to Great Britain.

Whether FDR would break a long-standing national tradition and seek a third term as president in 1940 was unclear as that year approached. By then, Joe had used his outpost in London in the most outrageous of ways. Rather than represent the president’s views to Britain’s leaders and people, which is what U.S. ambassadors to other countries are supposed to do, Joe often promoted his own views about foreign affairs—which were often different than Roosevelt’s. While FDR sought to prepare the American people for what he thought was an inevitable U.S. entry into World War II, Joe pushed his isolationist views and downplayed the differences between the world’s democracies and its rising fascist powers. That prompted an angry Roosevelt to develop a backchannel with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and work around his own embassy in London. Roosevelt, of course, ran for and won re-election in 1940 and again in 1944, leaving Joe no opening. Nor would an opening arise in later years, as Joe became an increasingly controversial figure around the country for clinging stubbornly to what by then were very outdated views.

When Joe shifted his political ambitions to his offspring, he focused on his first-born son. Joe Jr. was not only the oldest of four sons—and, thus, the first in line for public glory—but also the center of his father’s dreams. He was tall, handsome, smooth, and magnetic and, whether he was caring for his siblings when Joe and Rose were away or pursuing his education, he assumed the

¹⁰ Edward M. Gallagher, recorded interview by Ed Martin, January 8, 1965, 22, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program. Available at: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKOH/Gallagher%2C%20Edward%20M/JFKOH-EMG-01/JFKOH-EMG-01>.

posture of a future leader. He shared some of his father's unseemly sentiments, including more than a little antisemitism as well as admiration for a rising Nazi Germany. Though, outwardly, he seemed quintessentially self-confident, he was actually quite insecure. That is why he worked hard to ensure his place as the shining star among Joe and Rose's nine children and battled challenges to that position from Jack (the second son). After Jack won national glory for his exploits aboard the PT-109 in the Pacific in August of 1943—guiding his surviving crew members to safety after a Japanese destroyer split their boat in half—Joe Jr. signed up for a dangerous bombing mission over Germany a year later at least in part to one-up his brother. Joe Jr. died when his plane exploded in the air, leaving Jack to inherit his father's hopes for a presidential son.

As it turned out, all three of the remaining boys would seek the presidency. Jack won it in 1960 and served until he was assassinated in late 1963. Bobby Kennedy, who was Jack's attorney general and then a U.S. senator from New York, sought the presidency in 1968 both to heal the nation's serious divides and restore the Kennedys to their rightful place on the presidential throne, but an assassin struck him down in June of that year. Ted Kennedy tried to seize the Democratic Party's nomination from unpopular incumbent Jimmy Carter in 1980, but he fell short.

Nevertheless, this is no simple story about three brothers who each wanted to be president. They ran for different reasons, and with different levels of enthusiasm. Jack achieved the goal after years of dogged preparation; Bobby sought it after months of soul-searching; and Ted pursued it under great pressure from party colleagues. As the sons of Joe Kennedy, they had several traits in common: They were each ultracompetitive, very hardworking, often audacious, sometimes reckless, and more than a little entitled. In their runs for president, however, they also showed how different they were from one another.

THE RESTLESS ONE

"There wasn't much power as [Jack] understood power unless he became president," JFK's friend, Charles Spalding, later observed. "That's really the only place he felt where you could accomplish much."¹¹

Of the three brothers, Jack was the most determined, over the longest period, to reach the Oval Office, and the most restless to get there. For years before he won the presidency, he presented himself as a kind of president-in-waiting. Whether in his native Massachusetts, in Washington, or around the country, he espoused national visions, described national problems, and posited national solutions.

¹¹ Charles Spalding, recorded interview by John F. Stewart, March 14, 1968, 26, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program. Available at: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKOH/Spalding%2C%20Charles/JFKOH-CHS-01/JFKOH-CHS-01>.

He was restless to reach the “castle” for another reason: He knew that life was uncertain, fate could intervene, and he might not live long. As a child, he had scarlet fever and enough mysterious and painful ailments that he joked about death in letters to his friends during his many hospital stays. As an adult, he had the adrenal illness known as Addison’s disease, as well as a very brittle back that left him in constant, sometimes searing, pain. Moreover, he lost his older brother to war in 1944 and his sister, Kathleen (“Kick”), with whom he was very close, to a plane crash in 1948, leaving him the sole survivor of what the family termed the “golden trio.” As president, he spoke openly to family and friends about his vulnerability to an assassin, musing that neither his security detail nor anyone else could stop a determined killer. He even voiced such thoughts at the outset of his fateful trip to Dallas in November 1963, when they proved prophetic.

From his global travels starting as a teen, his voracious reading during his many illnesses, and his studies at Harvard, Jack developed a keen interest in the world—and in America’s proper role in it. His naval service in the Pacific during World War II further shaped his views on foreign policy. Like many veterans, he experienced the horrors of war and returned home with a fervent desire to help prevent another one. A hard-core Cold Warrior, consumed with fear about America’s capacity to prevail over its communist adversaries, Jack spoke in apocalyptic terms throughout his career. To him, the nation was always at a “moment of maximum peril,” facing “great danger,” confronting “our most critical challenge.” He warned that “time is running out,” that we were confronting “a peril more deadly than any wartime danger we have ever known.” He fretted over the “tide of events” that were always moving toward the Soviets, the coming communist “onslaught,” the “major disaster” that was just around the corner, the “seemingly hopeless predicament,” the “sense of paralysis ... waning of hope ... sense of drift ... [and] gnawing dissatisfaction” that was afflicting us, and the threats to “the peace and security of the world,” if not the “very continued existence of mankind.”

Elected to the U.S. House of Representatives at just 29 in 1946, Jack spent six frustrating years there as a backbencher, as one of what he called the 435 “worms” in the unruly chamber. As a Kennedy in an overwhelmingly Democratic district, and a war hero, he probably could have occupied that House seat for as long as he wanted, gaining seniority over the years so that one day he could wield power as a party leader. Rather than a House leadership post, though, he wanted a national perch from which to craft a national agenda. That Jack’s overwhelming interest was foreign policy—the quintessential national issue—made his quest for that perch more urgent. So frustrated was he in the House that he risked his political future by launching an uphill battle for a Senate seat in 1952. As he knew, he could influence foreign policy far more effectively with the prestige of a Senate seat rather than from the House—as Sens. Henry Cabot Lodge did after World War I, Arthur Vandenberg did after World War II, and J. William Fulbright would do in the 1960s and 1970s. But

Jack took a big chance by running in 1952, which everyone knew would be a strong Republican year because President Harry Truman, a Democrat, was very unpopular. Moreover, he was running against Republican incumbent Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., who, like Jack, hailed from a legendary family. That Jack campaigned relentlessly and won the seat showed just how hungry he was.

On Capitol Hill, he showed little patience for the art of lawmaking—for holding hearings, proposing legislation, buttonholing colleagues to support his bills, and tweaking them to nourish more support. With the approval of Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson, he took a seat on the influential Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1957. He was hardly the most active of members, however. “When he comes to the committee meetings,” a frustrated Chairman Fulbright observed at one point, “what does he do? He sits down at the foot of the table autographing pictures of himself.”¹² When the committee created a subcommittee focused on Africa—by then a subject of great interest to Jack—the committee’s chief of staff, Carl Marcy, asked him whether he would be willing to chair it. “Well, if I take it, will it ever have to meet?” Jack replied. After Marcy told him that it would not, he agreed.¹³ It was the same impatience with legislating that Bobby would display in his three-and-a-half years as a senator. That is because, to Jack (and later to Bobby), Capitol Hill was but a steppingstone to the office that he really coveted.

While running for president, Jack made clear that he viewed the job expansively, as a source of vast power that he planned to wield. “The modern presidential campaign,” he told the National Press Club in January of 1960, “covers every issue in and out of the platform from cranberries to creation. But the public is rarely alerted to a candidate’s views about the central issue on which all the rest turn. That central issue ... is not the farm problem or defense or India. It is the presidency itself.” The times, he said, demand “a vigorous proponent of the national interest—not a passive broker for conflicting private interests ... a man capable of acting as the commander in chief of the Great Alliance, not merely a bookkeeper who feels that his work is done when the numbers on the balance sheet come even.” To meet the challenge of the “revolutionary Sixties,” he said that “our next president ... must above all be the chief executive in every sense of the word.”

Jack would serve only about “a thousand days,” in the title of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s bestseller about his presidency,¹⁴ and his accomplishments were limited. He created the Peace Corps for the world and the Alliance for Progress for Latin America. He stared down Nikita Khrushchev when the Soviet premier

¹² Carl M. Marcy, Oral History Project, United States Senate. Available at: https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/oral_history/Carl_M_Marcy.htm.

¹³ Pat M. Holt, Oral History Project, United States Senate. Available at: https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/oral_history/Pat_M_Holt.htm.

¹⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965).

threatened to force the United States to abandon its presence in West Berlin (which was located within Soviet-controlled East Germany). He resolved the Cuban missile crisis peacefully and signed a landmark nuclear test ban treaty with the Soviets and the British. He announced the goal of a moon landing by the end of the 1960s (which the United States achieved). And he helped to desegregate some colleges and other establishments across the South.

As a man who exuded energy and loved action, he thoroughly enjoyed the presidency and the power that came with it. Not every day, of course. He was distraught after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the ill-conceived U.S. plan to spur a populist uprising against Cuba's Fidel Castro that ended in disaster; he agonized over how to resolve the Cuban missile crisis without igniting a nuclear Armageddon with the Soviets; and he struggled over how to control the violent backlash against civil rights protesters in the South and to advance civil rights. Those were episodic moments of anguish, however, amid the hope, optimism, and cheerfulness that he displayed. "Sure, it's a big job," he said a month before taking office. "But I don't know anybody who can do it any better than I can."¹⁵ Even with the serious missteps of his three years, he never seemed to lose his sunny outlook about the presidency and all that came with it.

Bobby Kennedy was not sunny about the presidency, or much else for that matter. So, when he sought the highest office in 1968, he was driven as much by national crisis and family obligation as by personal ambition.

THE HESITANT ONE

Bobby launched his campaign for president in March of 1968 from the Senate Caucus Room at the age of 42.¹⁶ That is where Jack had launched his own campaign, at the same age, eight years earlier. When it comes to their presidential runs and the motives behind them, that is about where the similarities end.

Would Bobby have run for president if Jack had lived and (presumably) served two terms? Perhaps, although that was no foregone conclusion. Jack's death, however, changed Bobby's calculation immeasurably. What had been a fuzzy thought became a personal imperative after Jack died.

Several factors drove Bobby. For starters, he could not bring himself to accept the fact that, in the wake of Jack's death, another person would serve as president, wield power, propose his own agenda, and demand loyalty from aides. That the person in question was Lyndon Baines Johnson, with whom Bobby shared a mutual hatred that dated back to the 1950s—when Johnson was a Senate Democratic leader and Bobby was a Senate staffer—only fueled

¹⁵ Hugh Sidey, *John F. Kennedy, President* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), 11.

¹⁶ In 2009, the Senate renamed it the "Kennedy Caucus Room," in honor of Jack, Bobby, and Ted Kennedy. See <https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/buildings-grounds/senate-office-buildings/russell>.

his resentment. While LBJ served as Jack's vice president, Bobby, his wife, Ethel, and their friends used to mock him behind his back as crude and uncouth, often at big parties at Bobby's house in a tony Virginia suburb. After Jack's death, Bobby and those around him viewed LBJ as an altogether unworthy successor to his beloved brother.

Nor could Bobby understand how senior aides to JFK who remained in their posts under LBJ could transfer their loyalty so easily to the new man in the Oval Office. "Those who were closely identified with President Kennedy who came to work for Lyndon Johnson," Bobby later said, "I thought that they felt: 'The king was dead, and long live the king.' " Well, yes. That's how our system works, whether or not Bobby could accept it. When JFK was killed, his vice president stepped into his position, as the Constitution mandates. When, in addition, LBJ received credit for things that, Bobby believed, Jack had done, Bobby chafed that JFK holdovers such as Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy did not correct the record. "I don't think," recalled Milton Gwirtzman, a Kennedy intimate, "that Robert Kennedy at the time could appreciate the fact that other people could make the same claim of loyalty on subordinates that his family could." Democratic Party elder Clark Clifford called Bobby's views "curious ... completely illogical, wholly emotional."¹⁷

With Jack's presidency cut short, Bobby was now, in the view of many JFK loyalists and other Democrats across the country, the heir apparent, the next in line, who would restore a Kennedy to his rightful place in the Oval Office. But after LBJ won re-election overwhelmingly in 1964, Bobby (and his team) assumed that his own run would come in 1972, since Johnson presumably would run again and win a second full term in 1968. Bobby began to rethink his timeline only after LBJ militarized the U.S. effort in Vietnam by sending more than 500,000 troops; the war turned into a horror show of death and destruction that deeply divided America; race relations soured and riots erupted in cities all across the country; and Democratic activists urged him to seek the party's nomination in 1968 and save the country from four more years of Lyndon Johnson.

For many months, Bobby was a distinctly hesitant, even reluctant, presidential aspirant as he sought to navigate his place in the tumultuous 1960s. Aided by LBJ's landslide victory in 1964, Bobby won a Senate seat from New York that year and, as a senator, he was even more impatient with the legislative process than Jack had been. Increasingly pushed to challenge LBJ in 1968, Bobby was keenly aware of his long-standing reputation as a "ruthless" politician. Consequently, he worried that if he challenged LBJ, all-too-many people would

¹⁷ Edwin O. Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, eds., *Robert Kennedy in His Own Words: The Unpublished Recollections of the Kennedy Years* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 407-410; and Jeff Shesol, *Mutual Contempt: Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy, and the Feud that Defined a Decade* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 174.

view his run as nothing more than an opportunistically political move that was spurred by a personal vendetta. He also worried—with some justification—that his challenge to LBJ would make the Vietnam problem worse. That is, Bobby feared that as he argued for de-escalation, LBJ would dig in even more on the military effort simply because Bobby was recommending the opposite. As he told Jack Newfield, an anti-war activist, in December 1966, “I’m afraid that by speaking out I just make Lyndon do the opposite, out of spite. He hates me so much that if I asked for snow, he would make rain, just because it was me.”¹⁸

Nor would seizing the party’s nomination from a sitting president be easy for even a Kennedy to pull off. But two weeks after Bobby jumped into the race in March of 1968, LBJ announced that he would not run for re-election. After Bobby won several state primaries that culminated in his June victory in California, he had a reasonable chance to seize the party nomination from, among others, Vice President Hubert Humphrey (who had joined the race after LBJ bowed out). Bobby’s nomination would have set the stage for another Kennedy-Nixon contest, with a different Kennedy but the same Richard Nixon who lost narrowly to Jack in 1960. On the night of Bobby’s victory in California, however, an assassin’s bullet pierced his skull and shattered the dreams of his supporters.

What if? What if he had seized the nomination and won the election? Like Jack, Bobby was a hard-core Cold Warrior through the early 1960s. In fact, as a devout Catholic from his childhood days, he tended to view the Cold War like he viewed everything else—in terms of black and white, good and evil. After Jack’s death, however, he re-emerged from months of mourning as a somewhat different man: more humane, and more cautious about military force. He turned against the Vietnam War in increasingly urgent terms as LBJ militarized the U.S. effort, casualties on all sides soared, South Vietnam’s government grew more corrupt, its people grew less committed to the fight, and the United States made only mixed progress. At the same time, Bobby was worrying more and more about poverty and justice at home and abroad.

One need not be a Bobby acolyte to recognize just how differently the history of America in the 1960s might have unfolded if Bobby had won the presidency. He would have sought a much faster U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam than Nixon did under his “Vietnamization” policy (through which South Vietnam would assume the full war effort over the course of years). That would have prevented tens of thousands of U.S. casualties and avoided years of anti-war protests, sit-ins, and violence that further divided America. Bobby might have brought a U.S. opening to China years before the opening and “normalization” of U.S.-China relations under Nixon and Carter. By the mid-1960s, both Bobby and Ted were pushing publicly for a new U.S. policy of outreach to China to ease the deep hostility between the two nations.

¹⁸ Jack Newfield, *Robert Kennedy: A Memoir* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1969), 128.

Nor must one be a Bobby fan to recognize the support that he drew across racial lines, so perhaps he could have helped bridge the growing racial divides in the 1960s in ways that Nixon was ill-equipped to do. He would have worked hard to alleviate the deep poverty that so moved him when he traveled to the South. And he would have promoted human rights both at home and abroad.

After Bobby's death, attention shifted to the youngest brother, Ted. As a Kennedy, he, too, was a man of great ambition. But a funny thing happened on his way to the presidency: Ted realized that he did not necessarily crave the job.

THE AMBIVALENT ONE

In the same year that Bobby ran for president, Ted positioned himself for his own run down the road.

"The men who signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776," Ted wrote in *Decisions for a Decade*, his largely forgotten book of 1968, "were fired by the conviction that free men could build a great nation, governed by their own wisdom. The coming decade will bring grave challenges to this conviction."¹⁹ For decades, presidential aspirants have written books to raise their profile and showcase their intellectual heft—and, with *Decisions for a Decade*, Ted would be no different. On domestic policy, he wrote about race and crime, democracy and dissent. On foreign affairs, he wrote about U.S. relations with Europe, Asia, and Latin America, and of the overriding issue of war and peace. Signaling his seriousness, he asked George F. Kennan, the famed diplomat, to write the preface.

But in ensuing years, Ted Kennedy seemed decidedly ambivalent about the presidency. He surely knew that the Chappaquiddick incident of July 1969—when a young woman in his car died after he drove it off a narrow bridge and into Poucha Sound on Martha's Vineyard—would always prove a political cross to bear, an unforgivable act in the eyes of many. That alone could explain why he did not run for president in 1972, and it may explain why he passed up the chance in 1976. But it does not explain why, after challenging Carter for the Democratic nomination in 1980 and falling short, he never ran for president again. Nor does it explain why, in 1980, he ran so awkwardly at first and took so long to find his footing and deliver a compelling message.

He was *supposed* to run for president, for he was a Kennedy. What Jack would achieve, and Bobby would seek, Ted would pursue. Whether Ted really wanted to run, however, was a different story. The one time he did, he was under enormous political pressure to do so. By 1979, Carter was deeply unpopular, and many voters simply did not think he was up to the job. That summer, polls showed that Democratic voters heavily favored Ted over Carter as the party's

¹⁹ Edward M. Kennedy, *Decisions for a Decade* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), 19.

nominee in 1980. Many party leaders begged Ted to run so that Carter would not drag other Democratic candidates around the country down to defeat with him. He may well have secured the nomination, if not for his own misstep and a foreign policy crisis that came within hours of one another. In a disastrous interview with CBS' Roger Mudd that aired on November 4, 1979, Ted gave a rambling, largely unresponsive answer to the question, "Why do you want to be president?" (perhaps reflecting his ambivalence about running). That same day, Iranians seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and took more than 50 Americans hostage, and the party quickly rallied around the president (as Americans tend to do during foreign policy crises). Ted suffered two huge political setbacks on that one day from which he never fully recovered. Why, however, did he never run again? Why, especially, did he pass up the chance in 1984, when his aides were so confident he would run that they organized a campaign staff before he announced otherwise?

Unlike Jack and Bobby, for which the Senate was but a way station on the road to the "castle," Ted fell in love with the esteemed institution. He paid courtesy calls on its most powerful leaders after his arrival in early 1963, nourished warm ties with rank-and-file members of both parties, learned the Senate's byzantine rules, and sat patiently through committee hearings from start to finish. Warm, friendly, and gregarious, a "senator's senator" in the words of Sen. George McGovern,²⁰ he formed deep partnerships with such unlikely Republicans as the very conservative Orrin Hatch of Utah to push important legislation through Congress. From Goodspeed's, a legendary bookstore in Boston, he collected pictures, letters, and speeches of the famous senators who had held his seat, including Charles Sumner and Daniel Webster, and he displayed some of those artifacts at his home. The more Ted learned about the Senate, and the more he soaked up the atmosphere on Capitol Hill, the more effective he became in building coalitions and making landmark law. He didn't need to be president to achieve big things; he was doing so from the Senate.

To be sure, all three Kennedy boys were born with politics in their blood. They were not just the sons of a political father; they were also the grandsons of two highly accomplished politicians. Rose's father, Honey Fitz, served on Boston's Common Council, in the U.S. House, and as Boston's mayor over a career in elective office that covered almost three decades. Joe's father, P. J. Kennedy, served in the state House and Senate and, as a powerful ward boss, received the honor of delivering a seconding speech for presidential nominee Grover Cleveland at the 1888 Democratic National Convention. Of the three Kennedy boys, however, it was Ted who became the best politician by far, as the others acknowledged. Frank Morrissey, a family friend, called him "the most naturally gifted political person I've ever met."²¹ His skills emerged from the struggles of his youth.

²⁰ George McGovern interview, March 22, 2006, Edward M. Kennedy Oral History Project, Miller Center, University of Virginia. Available at: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/george-mcGovern-oral-history>.

²¹ Burton Hersh, *Edward Kennedy: An Intimate Biography* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), 93.

Growing up, Ted Kennedy was often lonely. Not only was he shuffled among 10 different schools, but he sometimes came home on school breaks to a largely empty house, with his father away for work, his mother traveling for pleasure, Joe Jr. and Jack at Harvard or at war, and his other siblings away at their own schools. To assuage his loneliness while he moved from one school to the next, he learned how to make friends quickly. As his mother wrote of him when he was 10, “He ... scans the movie columns, makes his dates, and goes confidently off without bothering anyone.”²²

During Ted’s childhood, Honey Fitz was a particularly important influence. While Ted attended junior high school in West Newton, MA, he would come to Boston to visit the grandfather who, in Ted’s later words, was “a second parent ... who would listen to my adolescent chatter, my hopes and dreams.”²³ They spent lots of time together, whether eating lunch at Honey Fitz’s hotel or walking the streets of his beloved city. Vibrant, buoyant, and joyful, Honey Fitz was the quintessential retail politician, one who knew how to trade stories, offer condolences, rub shoulders, and slap backs. Ted watched his grandfather, learning the skills that he would later put to such good use.

“I hope when you grow up,” Ambassador Joe Kennedy wrote to Ted, who was just 8, from London in September 1940 as the Nazis were bombing the city, “you will dedicate your life to trying to work out plans to make people happy instead of making them miserable, as war does today.”²⁴ He took his father’s counsel to heart, and for more than 46 years—from January of 1963 until his death from brain cancer in August of 2009—Ted Kennedy put his fingerprints on more pieces of legislation that made their way into law than any other lawmaker of his time, or perhaps any time.

Nicknamed the “liberal lion,” he was overwhelmingly known for his domestic policy achievements as he worked to advance civil rights and voting rights, expand health care coverage, protect labor rights, and provide more federal aid for education and human services programs. But, while far less known, his work on foreign affairs was equally important. Among a multitude of accomplishments, he spearheaded the effort to impose U.S. sanctions on South Africa (due to its apartheid policies) over President Reagan’s veto—organizing the first congressional override of a president on foreign policy in 11 years. He was the single most important U.S. figure, over the longest period, to help bring peace to Northern Ireland. He persuaded Congress to help end proxy wars with the Soviets in Latin America. And, in his behind-the-scenes efforts that have not received nearly the attention they deserve, he persuaded Soviet and Chinese leaders to free scores of political prisoners by negotiating the prisoners’ release before he would visit their countries.

²² John F. Kennedy Library Foundation, *Rose Kennedy’s Family Album* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2013), 287.

²³ *Ibid.*, 268.

²⁴ Amanda Smith, ed., *Hostage to Fortune: The Letters of Joseph P. Kennedy* (New York: Viking, 2001), 471.

In the pantheon of great senators over America's two-plus centuries, Ted Kennedy ranks near the top.

OF KENNEDYS AND LEGACIES

Though limited in time and achievement, Jack's presidency was undoubtedly among the most consequential. That is because he confronted urgent, potentially catastrophic, matters of war and peace—and because he left a legacy of energy and action that later presidents have sought to emulate.

After recovering from the Bay of Pigs fiasco, JFK defended the U.S. presence in West Berlin in the face of Khrushchev's threats to kick America out by force, and he resolved the Cuban missile crisis peacefully. He inked a nuclear test ban treaty, improved U.S. relations with the developing world by creating the Peace Corps and Alliance for Progress, set America off on a successful quest to reach the moon, and made progress on the politically dicey issue of civil rights. While maintaining peace, he raised aspirations at home and brought hope to hundreds of millions of people abroad.

Not every president has governed in such perilous times, nor has every president left a legacy of such note. Consequently, in some periods, leading figures in Congress have proven more consequential than presidents. Ted Kennedy was one of them. From advancing civil rights and labor rights, expanding health care coverage and federal aid to education, sanctioning South Africa, making peace in Northern Ireland, and freeing political prisoners around the world, Ted did more to reshape the United States at home and abroad than some of our postwar presidents who served no more than one term.

Ted's legacy surely exceeds that of President Gerald Ford, who served from August 1974 to January 1977 and is best known for pardoning Richard Nixon over Watergate and restoring calm to Washington. Ted's legacy probably also exceeds that of Jimmy Carter, who served one term after Ford, secured Israeli-Egyptian peace, and returned the Panama Canal to Panama, but who also presided over the combination of tough economic times and the Iran hostage crisis that cost him re-election in 1980.

For 62 straight years—from January of 1947 until August of 2009—one or more of the Kennedy brothers held public office. That period spans the presidencies of Truman, Eisenhower, JFK, LBJ, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush I, Clinton, Bush II, and Obama. Since Ted's death, Trump and Biden have also served. These 14 presidents of the post-World War II period have reshaped the office in dramatic ways, gradually but relentlessly expanding the authority of the world's most powerful individual. In fact, our four most recent presidents (Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden) stretched their powers in controversial, and sometimes constitutionally dubious, directions.

If they reawakened in 2022, what would the Kennedy brothers make of the power that presidents now wield? Jack and Bobby, who have been gone for more than half a century, would be amazed. Ted would be far less surprised because he served until August of Obama's first year. All three brothers, however, would be united on one point: They would love to be president today.

THE GROWTH OF PRESIDENTIAL POWER

To be sure, presidential power was bound to grow as the federal government grew steadily in size and scope over the years, so that it now performs an astonishing array of tasks at home and abroad. A government that measured less than 7% of gross domestic product (GDP) before FDR's New Deal has topped 20% of GDP every year since 2008. The president's Cabinet, which began with four members, now represents 15 departments—six of which have been established since JFK's death. The federal workforce, which totaled just under 700,000 in 1940, numbered 2.2 million in 2020.²⁵ The modern-day president oversees an executive branch that comprises more departments, runs more programs, writes more regulations, and supervises more employees than did his predecessors.

Presidential power was bound to grow as well with the advent of mass communication. With radio and TV, presidents could reach Americans across the country by voice (which FDR mastered with radio chats) and by face (which JFK mastered with speeches and press conferences). As just one example, the annual State of the Union message, which presidents until Wilson used to deliver to Congress on paper, became one of the best opportunities for presidents to enunciate their agendas to prime-time TV audiences. Now, with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other organs of social media, presidents can reach the country instantly, with none of the planning that TV and radio require. Because presidents speak with one voice for the executive branch at home and for the entire country abroad—and can drive a single message for days, weeks, or months at a time—Congress cannot compete with a president for influence through mass communication; day to day, the legislative body is a cacophony of 435 House and 100 Senate voices, all of them targeting their message first and foremost to very different constituents in very different states and districts.

As they ran a growing government, and particularly as they faced national crises, presidents throughout our history seized opportunities to assume more power. Abraham Lincoln suspended the writ of habeas corpus during

²⁵ "Historical Tables," Office of Management and Budget. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/historical-tables/>; and "Executive Branch Civilian Employment Since 1940," Office of Personnel Management. Available at: <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/data-analysis-documentation/federal-employment-reports/historical-tables/executive-branch-civilian-employment-since-1940/>.

the Civil War; FDR assumed vast power to regulate the economy during the Great Depression and interned Japanese Americans during World War II; and Truman sent troops to Korea and tried to seize the steel industry. JFK, too, played an important role in expanding presidential power in foreign affairs. He created the Peace Corps and Alliance for Progress, launched the Bay of Pigs plan to topple Castro, and imposed a “quarantine” on Cuba during the Cuban missile crisis. Most prominently (but not exclusively) on foreign affairs, presidents have grown more powerful vis-à-vis Congress, which has the constitutional power to declare war but which has largely accepted the fait accompli after recent presidents have taken military action against targets in numerous countries.

But, if presidential power has grown steadily since the nation’s founding, it is our four most recent presidents who have taken such power to new heights, assuming the kinds of independent authority that worry more than a few constitutional scholars as well as proponents of congressional power. The “imperial presidency,” about which Arthur Schlesinger Jr. warned the nation amid Watergate, could not hold a candle to the imperialism of Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden.

- In the aftermath of 9/11, George W. Bush expanded the national security state by creating the Department of Homeland Security, pushing through the Patriot Act, warring with Afghanistan and more controversially Iraq, and imprisoning “enemy combatants” at Guantanamo Bay, where some have remained for two decades. Bush also assumed a power that he clearly lacked. Presidents can sign or veto bills, and Congress can try to override the latter. Once new laws are enacted, however, the Constitution directs presidents “to take care that the laws be faithfully executed.” Bush, however, issued signing statements—which technically have no role in the legislative process and no legal authority²⁶—about new laws in which he declared that he would not enforce, or would reinterpret, hundreds of provisions with which he disagreed.²⁷ In essence, he assumed the power of a “line-item veto”—the power to veto particular items within legislation—which presidents do not possess.
- In a pattern that Trump and Biden would follow, Barack Obama criticized his predecessor for assuming new power but then assumed new power for himself. With the House in Republican hands after the 2010 midterm elections and positioned to block his legislative proposals, Obama decided to sidestep Congress whenever he could by issuing executive orders. “Where they won’t act, I will,” he said in 2011, echoing that sentiment to the end of his presidency. After saying early on that he lacked the power to do so, he gave “lawful status” to 4.3 million undocumented immigrants. On his own,

²⁶ “Presidential Signing Statements,” Library of Congress. Available at: <https://guides.loc.gov/legislative-history/presidential-communications/signing-statements>.

²⁷ Norman Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann, “The Threat of Bush’s Signing Statements,” Brookings Institution, July 7, 2006. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-threat-of-bushs-signing-statements/>.

he raised the minimum wage for hundreds of thousands of cooks, janitors, and other federal contract workers and expanded worker protections for 29 million people who worked at companies with federal contracts. And he delayed implementing some provisions of his landmark health care reform law—the 2010 Affordable Care Act—and reinterpreted others. In foreign affairs, he launched military strikes against Libya and traded five Taliban commanders from Guantanamo Bay for U.S. Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl.²⁸

- “I alone can fix it,” Donald Trump declared, in one of his more ominous assertions, as he accepted the Republican presidential nomination in 2016. If Obama sidestepped Congress, Trump often ignored the legislative branch altogether. He and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi shouted at one another in public and did not speak for the last year of his presidency. On his own, Trump imposed a travel ban on seven majority-Muslim countries; slashed refugee quotas; rewrote asylum rules; slapped tariffs on allies and adversaries; overhauled immigration and environmental rules; scaled back two big national monuments in Utah; shifted money in the Pentagon’s budget to fund his border wall with Mexico; and withdrew the United States from the Paris climate agreement, the World Health Organization, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. He unilaterally sent troops to Kuwait, ordered the military to kill Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, and threatened more military action in response to Iranian provocation. He pardoned friends and thought about pardoning himself.²⁹
- Joe Biden promised to restore normalcy after four years of Trumpian chaos, but, when it came to presidential power, his first year in office was expansive in its own way. He vowed to use his executive authority to reverse many of Trump’s directives and, not surprisingly, he quickly did so—issuing 17 executive orders, directives, memorandums, and proclamations in his first hours in office and more than three dozen in just over his first week. He

²⁸ Erin Hawley, “Obama’s curtain call: A look back on a legacy of executive overreach,” *The Hill*, December 24, 2016. Available at: <https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/the-administration/311608-obamas-curtain-call-a-look-back-on-a-legacy-of>; Binyamin Appelbaum and Michael D. Shear, “Once Skeptical of Executive Power, Obama Has Come to Embrace It,” *The New York Times*, August 13, 2016. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/14/us/politics/obama-era-legacy-regulation.html>; Ilya Shapiro, “Top 10 Ways Obama Violated the Constitution during His Presidency,” Cato Institute, January 19, 2017. Available at: <https://www.cato.org/commentary/top-10-ways-obama-violated-constitution-during-presidency>; and Marc Fisher, “Donald Trump and the expanding power of the presidency,” *The Washington Post*, July 30, 2016. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/donald-trump-and-the-dangers-of-a-strong-presidency/2016/07/30/69cfc686-55be-11e6-b7de-dfe509430c39_story.html.

²⁹ David A. Graham, “Obama Warned Trump—But He Didn’t Listen,” *The Atlantic*, August 14, 2019. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/trump-is-repeating-obamas-executive-action-mistake/596056/>; David A. Graham, “The Strangest Thing About Trump’s Approach to Presidential Power,” *The Atlantic*, June 7, 2018. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/06/the-strangest-thing-about-trumps-approach-to-presidential-power/562271/>; and Sarah Burns, “Trump, like Obama, Tests the Limits of Presidential War Powers,” *Government Executive*, January 10, 2020. Available at: <https://www.govexec.com/defense/2020/01/trump-obama-tests-limits-presidential-war-powers/162366/>.

also launched airstrikes against targets in Iraq, Syria, and Somalia.³⁰ More audaciously, after winning the presidency by a decent margin but not a landslide, Biden assumed a mandate to greatly expand the domestic side of government and make “transformative” change in the spirit of FDR’s New Deal—with huge investments in preschool, education, child care, health care, housing, clean energy, tax cuts, and more. After pushing his \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan through Congress in March of 2021, he sought to build on it through his Build Back Better plan—a slimmed-down version of which was enacted in August 2022. Whether voters will later applaud the investments or resent the “transformative” effort remains to be seen.

WHAT WOULD THE KENNEDY BROTHERS THINK?

While running in 1960, Jack Kennedy said that the next president “must be prepared to exercise the fullest powers of his office—all that are specified and some that are not.” In that spirit, he would be delighted to be president today. In his time, the presidency was weaker, and Congress stronger, than today—both alone and vis-à-vis one another. Also in his time, each political party was far less united on Capitol Hill than today. While that provided opportunities for presidents to build bipartisan support for their initiatives, it also created roadblocks for presidents to secure unified support from their own party. Although Congress during Jack’s presidency was in Democratic hands, conservative Southern Democrats did the most to block much of his domestic agenda. Although he pushed through a minimum wage increase, Congress blocked his plans to provide medical care for the elderly and create a Department of Urban Affairs, and it passed his tax cut only after he died. Today, with Congress in Democratic hands, he would likely push more of his agenda to fruition.

With his go-it-alone style on the Bay of Pigs and Cuban missile crisis, Jack himself stretched the president’s power in foreign affairs, the subject of his overwhelming interest. Today, after the presidencies of Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden, Jack could exploit far more of the unspecified powers to which he eluded in 1960 to launch strikes, deploy troops, steer the Department of Homeland Security, and maintain Guantanamo Bay. To strengthen national security and pursue his global agenda, Jack likely would follow the lead of

³⁰ Aamer Madhani, “Biden faces scrutiny over reliance on executive orders,” AP News, January 28, 2021. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-donald-trump-coronavirus-pandemic-immigration-environment-f5c48846c6db54ec0ddf0f3f62485b1e>; Henry Gass, “‘A too-powerful presidency’: Will US ever rein in executive branch?” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 25, 2021. Available at: <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Justice/2021/0125/A-too-powerful-presidency-Will-US-ever-rein-in-executive-branch>; and Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Letter to the Speaker of the House and President Pro Tempore of the Senate Regarding the War Powers Report,” December 7, 2021. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/07/letter-to-the-speaker-of-the-house-and-president-pro-tempore-of-the-senate-regarding-the-war-powers-report-2/>.

Bush and his successors by taking executive action when necessary to sidestep congressional opposition.

Bobby, too, would love the modern presidency, but for reasons less of policy than personality. Whether as attorney general or a senator, he was the Kennedy brother who was most impatient with the slow machinery of government, the byzantine congressional process of turning a bill into a law, and the arduous ordeal of persuading lawmakers to support administration priorities. After, as attorney general, a night of helping Jack chat up lawmakers on the presidential yacht, Bobby plopped into an aide's car, loosened his tie, and blurted, "What a shitty job this is."³¹ Obsessed with toppling Castro after he bested Jack at the Bay of Pigs, Bobby demanded results from Jack's foreign policy team and, when they did not come, he slammed his papers on his desk and knocked over chairs in frustration.

He was no more patient on Capitol Hill. Though he befriended some senators, he was often cold, brusque, abrasive, and moody. So, not surprisingly, he was a bit of a loner in the august body, just as Jack had been. Bobby refused to respect the norms, traditions, mores, and niceties of congressional work. He often left committee meetings early as they dragged on. When he attended them, he subjected some colleagues to withering criticism and questioned the intelligence of others. Restless in the executive branch, patronizing as a senator, Bobby would have salivated to wield the power of a modern-day president; for him, ruling by fiat would be a dream come true.

Ted, of course, had a much different view of Congress, and of lawmaking in general, than his two brothers. He revered the Senate, befriended colleagues of all stripes, and loved what author Eric Redman memorably called "the dance of legislation."³² Because he was so devoted to legislating and so skilled at it, he would have been far more reluctant—as a modern-day president—than Jack and Bobby to sidestep Congress quickly; at the very least, he would have given legislation a serious try before resorting to executive action. Having said that, the Congress of today is far more polarized than during Ted's long Senate tenure and, thus, far less accommodating to efforts to build bipartisan coalitions to enact laws. In addition, Ted had a far broader domestic policy agenda than Jack and Bobby.

The issues with which Ted Kennedy grappled on Capitol Hill have not disappeared. In fact, such issues as voting rights and immigration have grown only more urgent. Were he president today, he would use all the powers at his disposal, both legislative and administrative, to bolster voting rights in order to undermine state efforts to restrict them; enact broad immigration reform that would secure the border while giving undocumented immigrants a path

³¹ Nicholas Katzenbach interview, November 19, 2005, Edward M. Kennedy Oral History Project, Miller Center, University of Virginia. Available at: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/nicholas-katzenbach-oral-history>.

³² Eric Redman, *The Dance of Legislation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973).

to citizenship; expand health care coverage by building on the Affordable Care Act; and strengthen labor rights at a time of declining union membership and stagnant wages for many workers. On foreign affairs, he would work to reduce tensions with China and Russia, seek arms control, promote human rights, and use American influence to prevent regional wars or end them once they erupted. Were he stymied by congressional gridlock on legislation, he would take executive action, as aggressively as possible, to pursue his agenda.

When the Kennedy brothers were growing up, expectations within the family were the lowest for Ted. Were he serving as president today, with his broad agenda, legislative skills, and expanded powers that recent presidents have assumed, he probably would achieve far more than Jack or Bobby would in the same position.

Panel Discussion: The 21st-Century Presidency in the External Environment

The following is an edited version of a conversation held on February 15, 2022, at a BPC conference focusing on how the public and expert outsiders view the presidency.

Tevi Troy: I'm going to pass things on to Susan Glasser from *The New Yorker*, who wrote a terrific book along with her husband, Peter Baker, *The Man Who Ran Washington*, on James Baker, who I consider to be the greatest chief of staff in White House history.

Susan Glasser, Staff Writer, *The New Yorker*: I think it's a really wide range and interesting set of provocations that makes us consider this question of, how has the presidency changed over the last few presidencies? And I know it's going to sound a little counterintuitive that one of the ways that we're going to consider that is by talking about Calvin Coolidge, but trust me, it works. And I think it's a really important thing that we're bringing in history as well, and not just immediate modern history. But I thought we would go ahead and start today with the question, a sort of baseline assumption, about presidents today.

Susan Glasser: I'm delighted to have Larry Haas to answer the question for us today of, "What would Jack Kennedy do?" to WWJKD on Twitter (now X). But no, his paper doesn't quite get to that level of granularity. But I think it's really, it's a provocation that I think helps to elaborate on this kind of new normal that both Kristen Soltis Anderson and Ken Baer are trying to establish for us. And obviously Larry is a great, distinguished author. In fact, his most recent book is a version of, he's done a shortened version for us today. His new book is *The Kennedys in the World: How Jack, Bobby, and Ted Remade America's Empire*. And we have all three Kennedy brothers who make appearances in your paper for this conference. So, Larry, "What would Jack Kennedy do? Would he be a Trump-style tweeter? Would he just be like an Instagram influencer, maybe more because he was so cool?"

Lawrence J. Haas, historian and former Bill Clinton aide: It's such a fascinating thing to try to picture someone waking up from their previous life in 2022 and how would they approach it. So let me get to that, lead up to that, in a sense. Let me step back and talk a little bit about the Kennedys, all three of them, and how they approached the presidency. And then we'll try to modernize it a bit. Well, needless to say, all three of them ran for it. The Kennedy family saw the office as somewhere between an entitlement and inevitability. And

that actually predates the three brothers. After all, people forget Joe Kennedy, the father, actually wanted to run for president in 1940 and was hoping to do so as a Democrat in the hopes that Franklin Roosevelt would not run for an unprecedented third term. Obviously, that didn't work out for him, and Joe never wound up running.

But then the sense of inevitability fell to Joe Jr., the first born who surely would have run for public office and the presidency had he not died in war at the age of 29 in 1944. But what the Kennedys have in common is that in their pursuits, whether it's sports or politics, they aim for the top. As Joe Kennedy said to a columnist one day, "For the Kennedy's, it's either the castle or the outhouse, nothing in between." But having said that, the three brothers who did seek the presidency, in a sense, viewed their pursuit differently. And it's interesting. And we will get to the question of what they would do today, were they alive. Jack was the most determined to be president of the three of them, because he had the biggest sense that the presidency was as he called it "the center of action." And from his earliest days—he served in the House first and then in the Senate and then as president—you always got a sense that he thought presidentially. He did not think legislatively. Even as a House member, he was giving speeches that you would think a president would give, big questions, on war and peace, the future versus the past, and all the rest. And, of course, since his overriding interest was foreign policy, that is the most presidential of issues. If you want to affect it in the biggest way, you need to be president. And I'll say one more thing about Jack in terms of being the most determined. He was also the most in a hurry, because he suffered from great ailments throughout his life. And he himself didn't know how long he was going to live. His Addison's disease was worrying him.

His back was causing him severe pain. He had all sorts of other ailments. So, he felt that he wanted to get to the top, and he needed to get there in a hurry. Now, Bobby, who ran in 1968, would not inevitably have run for president had Jack not been assassinated. He talked about doing all sorts of other things: running a university, going to teach somewhere, and all the rest. But with Jack's death and with Lyndon Johnson taking over, Bobby Kennedy's world changed immediately. He was immediately seen as the heir apparent who needed to restore a Kennedy to their rightful place on the presidential throne. And along with that, Bobby Kennedy loathed Lyndon Johnson and thought he was an unworthy successor to his beloved brother. Obviously, there were policy differences, and they arose almost immediately. And they did not start with Vietnam, by the way, as everybody thinks. They began in Latin America. Then they moved to Vietnam as Johnson militarized our effort there. But they were on domestic policy, too: race, urban affairs and all the rest. So, he felt the obligation in 1968 to run that he did not feel in his earlier days. Teddy Kennedy is perhaps the most interesting of the three when it comes to the presidency. In his earlier days, he of course expected to run simply because he was a Kennedy. And in fact, he wrote a book in 1968 called *Decisions for a Decade* that almost

nobody remembers, but it was almost like a manifesto of a presidency for the future. He was under enormous pressure to run when he did run in 1980, because just as Democrats worried that LBJ was going to take the party down in 1968, Democrats worried in 1980 that Jimmy Carter was going to take the party down.

So, he did challenge Carter in the primaries and wound up losing. But what you see from Ted is this very conflicted figure about the presidency. And I don't think it was any coincidence that he got off to a very slow start and that famously he could not answer the question from Roger Mudd of CBS, "Why do you want to be president?" The conflict came from the fact that unlike Jack and Bobby, who saw the Senate as only a steppingstone to the presidency, Ted Kennedy, who became a senator back in 1963, fell in love with the Senate. He saw it as a place, not necessarily to leave, but perhaps to serve a career, to do fulfilling work. Unlike Jack and Bobby who were terribly impatient with the legislative process, Ted Kennedy loved the ebb and flow of issues and how they evolved not only within a year or within a Congress, but across Congresses and was willing to stick with things in a way that his impatient brothers were not. And I'll say one more thing about him, which was that he was by far the best retail politician of the three of them, which lends itself to the Senate or House, where you need to build coalitions patiently. He knew how to put his arm around people, how to slap their back. He knew how to shake their hands. He knew how to kiss their babies in a way that was superior to how Jack, who was talented in that, and Bobby, who was actually quite shy, knew how to do. So, they were quite different in their pursuits. Having said that, all three of them would have loved the modern presidency, but for different reasons. We've discussed the fact that the president is more powerful. Also, Congress grew weaker over the course of time.

Presidents preside, as we've said, over bigger executive branches with much bigger budgets. Presidential power has grown, as Ken Baer has discussed, with the advent of mass communication, which has complicated the challenge of messaging, but has helped presidential power grow. And as Tevi said, at the beginning of this conference, unilateral presidential power has grown with presidents stretching the limits of executive action, whether it's executive orders, it's rules and regulations, it's signing statements, and the rest. So why would they have loved the modern presidency? Well, Jack saw the presidency as the center of the action. Needless to say, if a president can take more unilateral action, it plays to the fact that you are in fact the center of the action. Jack Kennedy stretched the powers of the presidency himself with the unilateral action in the Bay of Pigs in April of 1961. And obviously, although he certainly, as president, was the only one who could have done it, he singularly with the help of his aides, but singularly solved the most perilous moment of the Cold War, whether we were going to have nuclear war with the Soviets in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis. So certainly, he was comfortable with executive power. He would have exploited these other avenues of unilateral

action that presidents today take for granted. Bobby would have liked the modern presidency for different reasons. He was the most impatient of the three brothers. He hated the legislative process even more than Jack did. In fact, I'll tell you a funny story. When he was serving as attorney general and Jack's top aide, Jack had taken some members of Congress out on the presidential yacht to schmooze them, try to get some support for some bill. So, they're grilling steaks, drinking drinks, and all the rest. Bobby gets done, and an aide is driving them home to his house. He turns to the aide after plopping in the seat of the car and says, "Wow, this is such a bleepy job." And "bleepy," I'm obviously cleaning up. But it was simply because he didn't like any part of that. So unilateral executive action, that would have played to his impatience. I don't need Congress. I'll do this stuff on my own. Ted Kennedy finally would have been the most reluctant of the three of them to bypass Congress. He was a product of Congress. He loved the institution. Had he won the presidency, he would have given legislation a bigger chance than the other two would have. And he also had a broader agenda than his brothers. It stretched across not just domestic affairs, but foreign affairs as well, which people don't realize. Having said that, the partisanship of today and the inability to pass legislation would have forced him to the same place Jack and Bobby would have wound up, which was exploiting all the tools of unilateral action that presidents have today. So, all three of the Kennedy brothers, were they to wake up in 2022, each of them as president, they all would have loved the powers at their disposal for different reasons.

Susan Glasser: I think that is a really great setup for Amity Shlaes, our next panelist, and that conversation around the inevitability of where we are today or lack thereof. The imperial presidency certainly was something that probably would have been welcomed by Jack Kennedy and many, but not necessarily all, presidents who didn't have all of the tools at their fingertips that a modern president does. And I think we can have a conversation hopefully in our back and forth among everyone here around this question of, "Is it incentives?" Is it individual presidents who got us to the place where we are, or would it have happened regardless? So, I really love, and I'm intrigued by Amity's paper for this group, which is called, "The Possibility of a Counterrevolution and a Meditation on Calvin Coolidge," of which she is, I think, the world expert. Her bestselling biography of Calvin Coolidge came out in 2013. And she of course has written widely on the Depression period as well. And I think, for the purposes of our conversation today, is actually the chair of the national Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation, among many other distinctions. Amity, thank you for giving us this important counter-perspective, which is, it didn't necessarily have to turn out this way. Did it? So, does that mean that we should be hesitant to overinterpret the moment we're in right now?

Amity Shlaes, bestselling author and chair, Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation: Thank you for that magnanimous intro. I will say before I answer the question that Calvin Coolidge would have been a very comfortable tweeter. He spoke in short sentences, so, I'll give you three Coolidge tweets. Number

one tweet, “Men do not make laws, comma, they do but discover them.” Tweet two, “There is no right to strike against the public safety by anyone anywhere, any time.” He said that. In another kind of inverted grammar like Latin, he said: “About the Declaration, ,there is something that is exceedingly restful.... If all men are equal, that is final.” So, I see these as Coolidge’s from a century ago, his tweets to us. He was Silent Cal, but he did say a lot. And I’m glad Susan liked my provocation, which is really to say that Coolidge made the presidency greater. We’re talking all along here about cleaning up the presidency, improving a president’s or the presidency’s reputation. Coolidge made the presidency cleaner and probably greater by making it smaller. What a paradox. That’s so different.

I’ll just tell the story and you’ll hear, as I tell it, some of the questions we’ve been addressing and hopefully get a little bit of illumination. In 1920, which is when Coolidge ran for vice president behind Warren Harding, there was a new tradition of large government from World War I, Woodrow Wilson. We had nationalized the railroad. Government had taken over a good share of the economy, then untaken over it. And the country was angry. We don’t have a monopoly on rudeness at this point, right? It [the period of the early 1920s] was angry. The Ku Klux Klan was on the rise. There was much unemployment, even 20% unemployment in some places. Jobs weren’t where they were supposed to be. There was the beginning of a downturn in agriculture, and nobody knew quite what to do; there was also an overwhelming federal debt from the war, notwithstanding the war bond. So, Harding and Coolidge run the Republicans on “Normalcy.” When I was a child and I heard about “normalcy,” I thought that’s awful. They want us all to be normal. They want us to be pegs in holes. That’s not what they meant at all [by this slogan] when I went back and looked into it. Awkward term, “Normalcy,” but what they meant was they want the environment to be kind of in the middle and common sense so that business can get back to work. They don’t want an extreme, and you could hear that in all the candidates now talking. Let’s get back to the way it was. And in specific, wanted to clean up [after the mess of World War I]. And Harding’s vision of that with Coolidge along was to cut the government so that the economy could grow.

And Harding had all sorts of plans. One was to privatize some natural resources that were in the hands of the government. That would be energy out West. Another was to get the budget and the debt under control, and actually cut the budget. And Harding, once elected, did do some of that, with Coolidge watching as vice president. They passed the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921, which is kind of the inverse of the budget law that we got passed around the time of Nixon’s [Watergate] catastrophe. It moved to the executive some control and took it away from Congress. And he passed a tax cut, which was important for them because they thought, and there’s some evidence for that, that business was too heavily taxed. It was after World War I, that business wasn’t creating jobs. Or there was what’s called a “capital strike” in that period. But Harding did not clean up the presidency or help the office because he was, as Alice Roosevelt

Longworth said, “a bit of a slob.” (And on the next show like this, the Harding revisionist will come on and prove me wrong.)

But he was [a slob]. He had other things going on in his life. He screwed up a lot. And so that meant he, as President Bush 43 would say, “squandered political capital.” Example: Prohibition was on. Nobody liked it, not even the Republicans, but it was the law and the recent amendment had been passed, the 18th Amendment. Well, the president ought not to pick a fight with it. Harding partied wildly, including serving alcohol in the White House, and everyone knew it. He undermined the rule of law, and his reforms in particular, the energy reform and another for hospitals, undermined his principles and his case. Because if you say you must privatize resources and take an asset away from the government and put it into private hands, you don’t do a Teapot Dome, [the crooked deal of Harding Administration friends in which Administration friends received sweetheart deals relating to federal energy assets].

Harding undermined the very principle he is trying to advance, which is essentially privatization, by the manner in which he privatized: [the leases to the] private sector, the energy resources; he had said “no” on pensions for veterans. He said he would build hospitals [for the veterans] instead. That’s a very hard piece of news. And what was discovered was that his hospitals were corrupt and were enriching, again, friends of friends of Harding. There was a consensus after World War I that the government—America—owed the veterans something. The vets wanted pensions, which were then called the Bonus. The compromise the Administration offered was hospitals. The Administration was effectively making the case that hospitals sufficed. When it emerged those hospitals were likewise poorly built, or inaccessible, that gave the veterans something the Administration had sought to avoid: a stronger argument for direct payment to them. So, I would say, Harding failed in terms of policy, he wiped out. And when he died, he left a besmirched presidency—the corruption of Teapot Dome, the botched hospital benefits—is what Coolidge inherits. Coolidge, therefore, has two jobs as president. One is to complete the agenda that Harding wiped out on. And the other is to clean up the office that Harding unfortunately, charming as he was, dirtied. And he did both. I’ll just speak briefly about how he did that. He was Silent Cal, but he spoke a lot in press conferences. He did put through while president further tax cuts as promised. He did use the budget and accounting law that Harding had seen into law to cut the budget.

It’s worthwhile to pause there. Coolidge actually cut the federal budget. Today when we speak of cutting the federal budget, we mean reducing the rate of increase. Coolidge actually cut the budget over his 67 months in office. It’s important to know too, in 1924, he cut taxes. To look into Harding’s scandals, Coolidge appointed two special prosecutors, one Democrat, one Republican, to be fair, to look into the Harding scandals. Some men did go to jail. The Interior secretary, Albert Fall, in particular. So, he cleaned up and moved past [the

Harding scandals]. That was very important. Coolidge saw his goal as shrinking government, and he did it. And then, as a result, Coolidge became very popular. I want to say two things about the way he did it, which is quite important. One is: he focused [on cutting government]. All he did was cut the government. What do White Houses name their pets? Willow, Bo, Sox, right? The Coolidges named their pet lions “Budget Bureau” and “Tax Reduction.” Why did they do that? Because Coolidge was making a joke about how very determined, in every aspect of his life, he was to control the budget and control the tax rate. Coolidge maintained a very pristine White House. He even laid off the White House housekeeper because she spent too much. Coolidge knew that because he was asking, as he said, the people to cut the federal budget, then he must cut his White House budget as well. And the big character thing that he, the demonstration of character he offered, was the following.

At the end of his presidency, Coolidge was rather popular, contrary to what history books suggest now. And so, he easily could have run again in 1928. He chose not to run. Why? Because he was trying to convey that the office is more important than the man. His case was not like LBJ’s case, [in which a president who had held one elected term forwent a second because of political pressure]. Coolidge wanted to recede in order to make the office more respectable. “We live in a Republic of laws, not men.” And that was a tough decision [by Coolidge] not to run in 1928 because the party didn’t exactly thank him for it. When a candidate is very popular, he has big coattails. Well, Coolidge stuck by his decision not to run. There were other factors [in his decision not to run again] including illness, his wife and so on, but the main factor in Coolidge’s decision not to run again was that he wanted to make like George Washington, rather than make like Theodore Roosevelt, who said he wouldn’t run again and then did. And made life very difficult for the Republican Party by splitting it when he chose to run again [in 1912].

Coolidge really feared vanity, and he thought vanity in the office was a problem. And I’ll just stop there and say one last thing about Coolidge, which is he made the presidency small. He was a meticulous constitutionalist. And by doing so, he also made it greater. And one of the scenes that most touches me, we’re making a movie right now about Coolidge, is when he was at Mount Rushmore because the giant busts at Rushmore represent the other kind of presidency, right? It’s the big presidency. Presidents as titans—by the sculptor Gutzon Borglum. I was just looking at the footage of Coolidge at Rushmore. At the very beginning when Gutzon Borglum was about to sculpt Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt. And Coolidge looks practically terrified at the idea that someone might like to put him up on a big rock in that way someday. Coolidge’s modest vision of the Presidency is not something most Americans understand. That is vision is why he’s lesser known. And in our work at the [Coolidge] Foundation, we’re trying to help him be better known without betraying his spirit of modesty.

Susan Glasser: You basically just described the antithesis of the presidency,

and, in particular, on our most recent past president, although they share a party identification, it's hard to think that someone who was known for his restraint and especially in the use of words with probably our most logorrheic president, a nonstop four-year monologue. Does Amity's counterexample here with Calvin Coolidge suggest that we make the mistake of assuming that our new is the trajectory that we're going to be on for a while? Did you see anything as you looked at the data from presidential approval ratings that suggests it's not necessarily a straight course ahead toward this sort of polarization and division? Is there a way for someone to overcome it? Biden doesn't seem to, he suggested he would try, but he doesn't seem to have succeeded.

Kristen Soltis Anderson, pollster and author: I would certainly never want to be in the business of saying that the way things are today is the way that they will be forever and ever. Amen. I think you don't have to look very far back in history to see things constantly in flux and that I think because outside events really do matter, you can take a look for instance at the job approval that George W. Bush received after September 11. And that would have been something very hard to predict in the midst of *Bush v. Gore* and the immense division that our country was experiencing around that 2000 election and its outcome, its very close outcome. And so external events have the ability to disrupt and drive things in a very different direction. And we don't know what that will look like. I also think that leadership matters and that there's a little bit of this, that is, "What came first, the chicken or the egg?" Is it that presidents nowadays make less of an effort to win over the other side because it's less possible to win over the other side? Or does it cut the other direction? Is it that because presidents are making less of an effort to win over the other side, things just seem more baked in and polarized than ever? I don't know which direction the causality arrow points on that front. But I would say that the things that are holding presidential job approval in this kind of low and steady pattern right now are pretty big strong forces. Solving the polarization we are facing is not something I imagine that will happen overnight. But I wouldn't be reluctant to say that I think it's just going to continue on this way forever and ever, because leadership matters and external events matter.

Susan Glasser: It's really interesting, because there's two ways of having this conversation. One is about politics and about the voters and the people who make up the base of a presidency. And then there's the question of the president himself or one day perhaps herself. And so, I'm interested, too, because when I think of Obama and your experience, and then the Kennedys. That's the other way to look at this conversation. And Amity also suggested that when she talked about the difference between Teddy Roosevelt versus Calvin Coolidge, it is sort of ideology versus personality or celebrity. JFK has a sense of cool guy, cool cat president. Obama in that sense, it's kind of his air. Trump, very different kind of appeal, but also all about the celebrity, taking Republicans to places where ideologically, many of them would have said were anathema to go even just a year or two before.

We didn't frame it that way in any of the conversations yet, but actually I feel like every single one of your papers gets at this question of how much has the ideology figured into the modern presidency and where we're at right now, versus these just overwhelming other factors of partisan identification or the overall powers of the office or the communications piece. So, Larry, you've thought a lot obviously about what it means to be kind of a modern celebrity president figure to think about and write about the Kennedys. What's your view about it? Does ideology have the same weight now that it did in the Cold War era?

Lawrence J. Haas: I have a whole variety of things that I'm thinking from these very interesting comments from my colleagues. First of all, I do want to echo the point about the inevitability of anything and the static nature of politics. You don't have to be a very in-depth historian to know how many times we have said, "It's never going to get better. It's never going to get different. It's never going to change." I remember heading into the Clinton years where people were very angry about economic stagnation. We're never going to get out of this. We were never going to get out of the 1970s with stagflation. We were never going to solve inflation after that. So that's my number one point. We will get out of this. I can't tell you if it's going to be next week, next month, next year, in a decade. But something will follow this because people will get tired of it, enough people at the grassroots level.

Number two, with regard to this question of, can presidents overcome it? In the advent of mass communication, you can't underestimate the power of a face, a voice, a figure, the central figure of America, for sure. But I don't think we've talked enough about externalities. Amity's paper about Calvin Coolidge reducing the presidency, the size of government. But when the Depression hits, people look to Washington. And a president had to respond, and Hoover did not to the public's dismay and Roosevelt did. And I do think that was singularly presidential in the aftermath of World War II and the advent of the Cold War, we had this central issue of freedom versus communism and containment. And yes, there was cooperation with Congress, but presidents had this issue that they could galvanize the country around. And when they had divisive issues, obviously their popularity sank. Johnson and Vietnam, Nixon and Vietnam, Bush and Iraq, and all the rest. With regard to our politics today, could Joe Biden have overcome Republican opposition by schmoozing? I doubt it. I think the first thing to address is redistricting, which is beyond presidents. So, there is a limit. Finally, on the question of personality and glamour and all the rest. As someone who studied Kennedy and who previously studied Wilson and Roosevelt. And who has watched Clinton, worked for Clinton, and watched Obama, and obviously saw Trump operate there. There is something to that, but I do believe that online media now competing with mainstream media and this 20% in the middle of America that has been switching back between the parties. Both parties today are missing the boat. There is a potential 60% of America that is gettable if either party would find a way to overcome its extreme

forces on either wing. Both parties are missing the boat. I definitely think that Democrats have missed the boat. And I definitely think Republicans in earlier eras have missed the boat. There was a governing coalition there that can overcome the partisanship, but neither party seems to want it.

Susan Glasser: Donald Trump, Franklin Roosevelt, there was no platform in their party except for them. Are you suggesting to us that sort of authoritarianism and the imperial presidency go hand in hand together? Is that what Calvin Coolidge would have said about these trends we're talking about?

Amity Shlaes: The Republican platform, I recently bought a copy of it from 1920. Actually, it was called the Republican Textbook. It's size: five Ritz crackers thick, more than an inch, as you know, because I had some Ritz next to it. So, the Republicans of 1920, who were the ones who were going back to the center with the 60% reasonables that Larry was describing, they wrote [what they planned] all out in a book and then they slapped the candidates' pictures on the cover. But the candidates were less important than the platform. And this emphasis [platform over personality] was extremely useful when President One, [Warren Harding] wiped out. President Two, [Calvin Coolidge] had to come in: he had a playbook. So, for both parties, if that's what you're asking, platform should come first. And for both it's about personality because that's TV, but that leads to incredible disappointment in the electorate. I want to say one other thing, which is sometimes events happen that change what the country is looking for in a President. In an easy time, a disciplinarian like Coolidge looks unlikely as a candidate. But hard times are different. I wouldn't have considered Margaret Thatcher, for example, popular, charismatic, until Britain got into so much trouble that it needed a very strong personality to deal with real economic trouble. When our interest rate goes above 10%, we will look for a different kind of president than when our interest rate is at 2%. Same for our inflation rate. So, it really depends on the mood of the country. Thank you very much for this wonderful event.

Tevi Troy: The presidency is changing. It changes, it seems, a little bit at a time, but when you look over a 20-year period, it's changed a great deal in ways that have significant implications for all of us, for our lives, and for our polity. We are only scratching the surface here. This is the launch of a program by the Bipartisan Policy Center on the study of presidential leadership. And I'm excited to do it. I will be calling on great experts, such as the ones you've seen today and others in the months ahead. We're also only scratching the surface on this question of the 21st-century presidency. A lot of us want to have this conversation about what we want out of the presidency, what we can get out of the presidency, and what is the path to get there.



Bipartisan Policy Center

1225 Eye St NW, Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005

bipartisanpolicy.org

202 - 204 - 2400

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