

Political Scientist Dissects 'Myth' of the Presidency

Power, Responsibility, Actions Of Executive Office Contrasted With Those of the Congress

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A number of qualities are given to every President that are either quite fictitious or large exaggerations of the real man. In effect, they constitute a *myth*. The myth is not alone the property of the untutored mind, but of academicians, scientists, newspapermen, and even congressmen.

In fact, much of the difficulty with the institution of the Presidency is the overlay of myth and magic on the President. The fatal need for personification of society, animation of ideals, and worship of heroes introduces continuous disorder into the matter-of-fact problems of running a country.

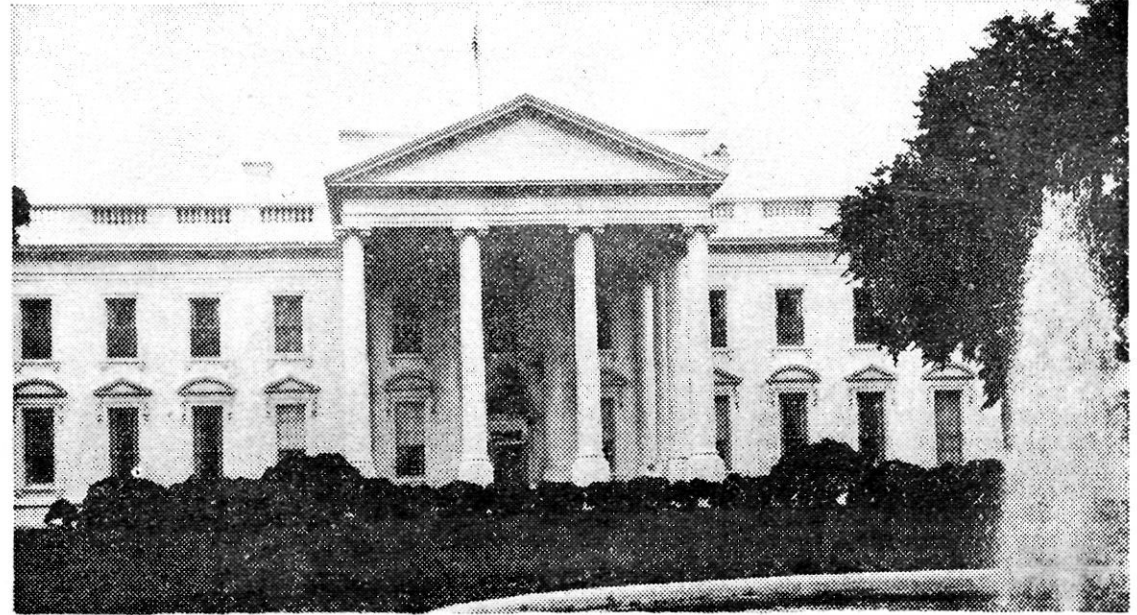
In a hundred places the President-at-work is described. The description usually contains a listing of his duties and powers. The implication is that he takes care of these matters personally. Actually, the President does almost nothing by himself. He is surrounded by staff. The Executive Office numbers over 1500 persons, of which a third pertain to the White House, and another third to the Bureau of the Budget, the rest falling in various special agencies.

DOZENS INVOLVED

On a normal issue that comes before the "President" some dozens of persons are involved. It might be presumptuous to say that more of a collectivity is engaged than

phrased, they are bound to appear incredible to the vast majority of people in America and the world outside. The President is an image of power to get things done, the Congress is not.

The President is a Congress with a skin thrown over him. Let us suppose that we have a gymnast executing various movements that end in a good round of applause. As he appears to the naked eye, he seems well-coordinated, graceful, smooth, tireless, and properly directed. But let the eye of the watcher perceive the true action of the muscles, the organ, and the mind beneath the skin, and he will observe all the near-misses, the strains, the compensated inadequacies, and the poisons formed, gathered, and discharged through the system under exercise. The hesitations of muscle and mind that must accompany even the best performance will be visible. Should he be harsher in his



White House symbolizes "the overlay of myth and magic" of the Presidency.

government and has something to say about it. Secondly the President is an office whose head knows what is going on but has nothing to say about it. Thirdly, the President is an office whose head does not know what is going on and has nothing to say about it. There is a little of the first in the Presidency, a good deal of the second, and a great amount of the third.

Woodrow Wilson rightly placed the President as potential popular idol, and declared that even the political party would bow before the people's anointed. Ordinary reasoning and logical behavior are useless before the rush of public emotions. The President repre-

later in civil rights matters but could not be said to express the views of other urban minorities who wished to check the liberties of Negroes. All of this is said without need to mention the many sectional minorities that have been represented or not represented by the Presidency in history, such as the South.

One must conclude that far from representing the majority or the minorities, or for that matter the "little people" who through the ages have always looked to remote ruling figures for succor, the President represents now one and now another and then again both at the same time. He is the champion of the minority when the mi-

least largescale efforts at claiming credit, that is responsibility, and disclaiming blame, that is "passing the buck"? And on a smaller scale, the campaigning goes on all the time. The President, it is true, is charged with signing certain documents, cutting various ribbons, and even with the giving of an indubitable (momentarily) order to fire a great missile volley upon an enemy. But only the veritable acts in themselves are inescapably his. Everything else about them may be passed off, concealed, distorted, parcelled off, and denied. An equally true little sign could read "If it's bad for us, kick it around until it gets lost."

collectivity is engaged than when the same type of issue would come before the Congress; but it would be equally presumptuous to say that fewer persons were taken up with the matter. Stephen Horn (administrative assistant to Senator Kuchel of California) shows, for instance, how dozens of executive officials became involved in the development of a White House position with respect to Senator Kefauver's bill to set up a question period in Congress. All the while, World War II was going on, but the President and cabinet officers became seriously involved too.

On the whole, probably more persons occupy themselves with the executive's policy than with the legislature's and for longer periods of time. But the character of their involvement differs greatly. The executives file politely aboard; the congressmen sometimes swamp the boat of policy in launching it.

It would perhaps be permitted to say that the President has a determinative voice on the normal issue that the Presidency takes up whereas the top oligarchs of the Congress pay more courtesy to one another's determinativeness. (Yet President Truman *did* say: "One word from me, and everyone does as he pleases!")

It might also be permissible to say that the President is the step-up transformer for more initiatives than any one of the congressional oligarchs; that is, one can say a little more accurately "to get a new national policy, get the President's support" than "to get a new national policy, get the Speaker's support" or "to get a new national policy, get the support of the Speaker and the Majority Floor Leader."

Still, no matter how carefully these ideas may be

Should he be harsher in his judgment of the athlete exposed than the athlete covered? The President is the athlete covered; even the Presidency, the collectivity, is the athlete covered because it operates under all the fictions of the single person. The Congress is the athlete exposed.

LAW OF AGENCY

There is a grand irony. The more powers that are put to the President to swallow, the less of a constitutional President he can be in reality. But not in fiction. The law of agency is a marvelous and mysterious creation of the human mind over many centuries from its birth in the great Roman legal system. By its operations, people are said to do things that they not only do *not* do but that are actually not known to them as having been done by anybody else. The trouble caused by this situation is not so much that it occurs, because indeed it must occur out of the plethora of business, but that it is believed *not* to occur and therefore people act in terms of its "truth" rather than in terms of its utility.

In part the President is an office, the Presidency, whose head knows what is going on in

emotions. The President represents by his personality and by a free choice of issues to place before the country. Unlike Congress, he can conceal his doubts in his inner office and behind seeming action. For so powerful is the amplification of the press behind the President that his expressions are taken for action itself and an expressed will to save the country from Disaster X is taken in the absence of vivid proof to the contrary to *actually* saving the country. He appears as the voice of the majority.

ALL AND SOME

If the President represents the whole people, he would not so often represent the minorities; yet the latter is the reputation that he also bears.

The President does represent some minorities, like everyone else, but underrepresents other minorities. He may have felt a majority pulse in going into the first World War, but he did not feel the pulse of the German-American minority who saw the war as a conflict of self-interested European powers, with America as a dupe of England. He may have supported the aspirations of Negro minorities a generation

nority is angry, critically positioned, and uses its votes (perhaps for lack of other weapons of social justice). He is the champion of the majority when the majority is alert and demanding. He is the representative of the "little people" in any case, and of the minority and majority in all cases except the above, too, whenever he engages in the thousands of acts and expressions of daily life that show the head of state to be not only ordinarily human but more so.

Stemming no doubt from his image as representative of the whole people is the prevalent myth that the President's views constitute the public interest or the national interest. The idea of a national interest is approximately the same as that of the public interest with the national security element added, and that the public interest is whatever one asserts to be good for the country and is agreed with by others. The *others*, of course, can be few, many, or practically everybody. To say that the President is custodian of the public interest or of the national interest is presumptuous. The President is custodian of a public interest, his own, and that may be popular or not, shared by Congress or not. In short, he is no better off than any other citizen in supplying a public philosophy, except that he has more power to implement his views.

ANOTHER MYTH

If the President lacks a monopoly of the national interest, may he not still be the center of responsible government? "The Buck Stops Here," said the little sign by President Truman's desk: no matter who may "pass the buck" to someone else in an evasion of responsibility, the President—luckily for the nation—cannot evade final responsibility.

This is another myth. What are election campaigns but at

GREAT COORDINATOR

It is probable that the more sophisticated advocates of "placing greater responsibility" upon the President and "making the government responsible to the President" are actually urging a greater coordination and integration of government—in the departments, the separate independent commissions, the Congress, and the state governments. Again the President is to be given greater powers. He is pictured as the Great Coordinator and Integrator.

Yet, if we are to confine our analysis only to the present, we do not see in the operations of the Presidency a degree of coordination and integration of work that is higher than that to be observed in Congress. Nor do we discuss the larger executive establishment here. Confining oneself to the thousand-man Congress-cum-assistant's body and the thousand-man President-cum-staff-and-associates, that is, the Presidency—which body functions in a more integrated, coordinated, and efficient way? To answer such a question, it must be asked, what are the veritable measures of such performance? These are not impossible to devise.

Comparing Congress and the Presidency:

1. Which body's members know more about what their co-members are doing?
2. Whose members know more about what the other body is doing?
3. Whose members know more about what the bureaucracy is doing?
4. Whose members know more about what is going on in the country?
5. In which body does an idea have the greatest chance of being born, and once born, of achieving some consideration?
6. In which body does an idea that is to be ultimately

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About Alfred de Grazia

"Iconoclastic" is what Alfred de Grazia terms his latest book, "Republic in Crisis" (Federal Legal Publications), and the excerpts on the Presidency herewith presented certify the accuracy of that description. Dr. de Grazia, who joined the NYU faculty in 1959, is widely known for his diverse research activities in the social sciences in this country and abroad. He is the publisher and editor of American Behavioral Scientist and is director of Project Politist, a study of the most effective organization of Congress. A prolific writer on governmental, political and social science subjects, his books include "The American Way of Government," "Public and Republic" and "American Welfare." Dr. de Grazia earned his A.B. and Ph.D. at the University of Chicago. He has taught at Harvard, Rutgers, Brown and elsewhere.



Chief Executive Need Not Work Hard, Says de Grazia

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adopted pursue a path that a group of outside scientists and experts on logic, intelligence operations, and administrative procedure would say bring to bear the more powerful interests and instruments of intelligence?

7. In which group does an order by the top leadership obtain the quickest response throughout the group?

8. Which group's ordinances obtain the quickest response in the country and in the executive establishment at large?

9. In which group is a policy originated and processed into final form most quickly?

10. Which group can give the most ready and thorough response to problems arising out of the operations of the executive establishment?

SERIOUS INDICTMENT

Here are 10 criteria of coordination, integration, and efficiency, three terms that are almost useless and certainly dangerous unless they are qualified. To every one of these 10 questions, the general answer may very well be: "Congress." And if such is the answer, then a serious indictment may be read to the numerous contingents of experts upon government who over many years have played upon these supposedly neutral and scientific terms to transform the nature of American society and government from a republican form to an executive system.

It is also likely to be a myth that "speed and dispatch are the characteristics of the

The "age of crisis," the "permanent crisis," the "cold war," the "critical times"—all demand mobilization of the country for decisiveness, speed and dispatch. Again occurs the premise that these abilities are incorporated in the Presidency, which is quite doubtful. But the other premise is doubtful too. The problems of today are perhaps grave and critical, but none of them are likely to be solved by collapsing the decision-making process by some months to save time. The French had a decade to save the whole of Indochina from the Communists; the United States had another decade to save South Viet Nam. Never during this period could it be said that the executives of either government revealed some intrinsic advantage over the legislature, or were compelled to act urgently and without recourse to deliberate councils.

In this age, which as well as being an age of anxiety and an age of crisis is an age of applied social science, it is a growing practice to create crises. And at creating crises the Presidency has no peer. It has the instruments. It can stir up the press, call White House conferences, begin "crash programs," point with alarm to underprivileged people of different sorts, and altogether discover innumerable pockets of crisis in the world. Each crisis can mean a new program and increased functions for the government, that is, the executive establishment. The crises of today are the programs of tomorrow.

Presidency" in contrast to Congress. A new idea born in a bureau will normally take several years to grow to acceptable maturity in a budget message of the President. Another year for the test of the legislative process is required for final acceptance. If the Congress were eliminated from the process, the idea would simply move more slowly through the executive offices. An idea born in congressional circles often shortcuts or speeds through several bureaucratic echelons. What passes for "speed and dispatch" in the Presidency is usually emergency action.

To expand the domain of the Presidency further, the whole area of governmental powers has been opened up by the doctrine of the age of crisis.

SOURCES OF LAW

Neither Congress nor the Presidency produces programs in the logical long-range sense. Individual laws are another matter.

Lawrence Chamberlain's documented survey of the origins of major legislation shows, for example, that the Congress was the source of many more important laws over the 50-year period before World War II than the Presidency. A large group of laws was, to be sure, attributed to the joint efforts of both congressmen and Presidency. Perhaps the situation has changed to give the President more of the initiative in the past few years. This is doubtful, however, once the cobwebs of myth are wafted away from the hard facts. The Peace Corps, for example, would be remembered by most people as President Kennedy's creation. Actually its creator might better be said to be Congressman Reuss of Wisconsin.

With a million-dollar income, in cash and kind, and a huge staff and retinue, the President need be neither lonely nor hardworking. If he wishes to drive himself into a state of fatigue and desperation from working, he may of course do so. But he has less excuse for so doing than, let us say, the small businessman, the writer, the newspaper editor, or the congressman, all of whom lack the bolstering environment the President inherits and the luxurious resources for easy decision-making that he has.