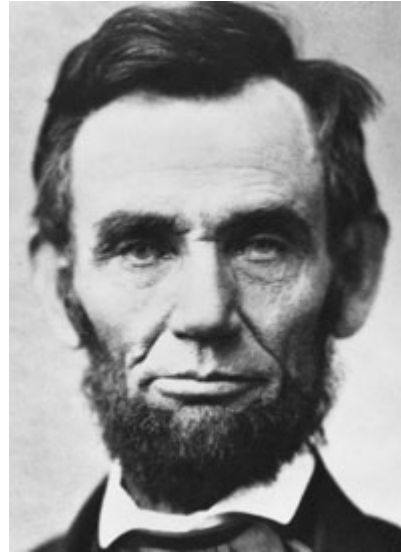




Popular Presidents

In 1909, in the great state of Illinois, school teachers one February day were directed to spend at least half the school day in public exercises, patriotic music, and recitations of sayings, verses, and speeches to mark the centennial birthday of a great hero. At the end of it all, they were to have their students face in the direction of Springfield and chant in unison the following:



“A blend of mirth and sadness, smiles and tears;

“A quaint knight errant of the pioneers;

“A homely hero, born of star and sod;

“A Peasant Prince, a masterpiece of God.”

Who was this masterpiece of God, this knight errant and heroic offspring “of star and sod”? Well if Springfield, Illinois, is Mecca, Abraham Lincoln must be the American Muhammad — if not the American Allah. While our 16th President was considered fair game for scathing political and editorial attacks during his life, his sudden death by an assassin’s bullet inspired the near-deification of “Father Abraham.” In 1868, Edward M. Stanton, Lincoln’s Secretary of War, read the “Gettysburg Address” at campaign appearances for Republican presidential candidate Ulysses S. Grant and concluded tearfully: “That is the voice of God speaking through the lips of Abraham Lincoln!... You hear the voice of Father Abraham here tonight.”

Nor did it end there. “Destiny made Lincoln the agency of fulfillment, held the inherited covenant inviolate and gave him to the ages,” Warren G. Harding proclaimed decades later. So great was the shadow Lincoln cast over the land that in the 1940s, Everett Dirksen, then a Congressman from Illinois, opined that the first duty of any politician was to “get right” with Lincoln. Nearly a century after the President’s martyrdom, historian David Donald would observe: “The Lincoln cult is almost a national religion.” Almost?

Lincoln’s role as a pseudo-religious figure in our nation’s history continues to this day. Nearly all political movements invoke his name and claim his benediction. Citizens with causes of various stripes march to his monument in Washington, there to plead their case before the grim figure in stone seated on what looks for all the world like the Judgment Seat of God. The cult of Lincoln in our histories and folklore, in our monuments and place names — and on our currency — is a fact of life. And while the 16th President, in life, had not the technological means to project himself “live” into the schoolrooms all over the country as our current and recent Presidents have done, schoolchildren are still dutifully taught to revere his image and his name. More important, as the deification of Lincoln has continued for nearly a century and a half, so has the near worship of the presidency, a cult that would no doubt amaze the Founders of our republic.

The powers and the duties of the President are enumerated in Article II, Sections 2-4 in the Constitution of the United States. They take up four paragraphs and deal mostly with appointments and minor



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duties. The authors of *The Federalist Papers* said nothing about the President providing a “vision” or lifting the spirit of, or writing an agenda for, the nation. The word “leader” was used as an epithet in warnings about demagogues who would incite a nation to ruinous folly or, worse, create an artificial crisis to inflate his own powers. Yet Presidents in our time are expected to “grow the economy” and provide us with all sorts of material blessings, while they “rid the world of evil-doers,” as George W. Bush proclaimed. President Obama has promised to “transform this country” and “change the world.” Clearly we don’t elect Presidents for their modesty.

During his one term in Congress, Lincoln voted against the declaration of war against Mexico, arguing that President Polk had unjustly and unconstitutionally started the war by invading Mexican territory. To permit a President to “make war at pleasure,” he asserted, is to acquiesce in “the most oppressive of all Kingly oppressions.”

Yet when Confederate forces fired on the Union garrison in Fort Sumter, after South Carolina had seceded from the Union, Lincoln took the nation to war without consulting Congress, later arguing that the conflict was an insurrection or rebellion and not a war. At the same time, he expanded the powers of Commander in Chief to unprecedented levels. He instituted the first national program of military conscription by executive order. He ordered the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus and held both political and editorial foes prisoner, indefinitely and without trial.

“Nobody knows how many Northern civilians were imprisoned without due process of law,” wrote historian David Donald in *Lincoln Reconsidered*, adding that estimates ranged from 15,000 to 38,000. “It required but a line from the President to close down a censorious newspaper, to banish a Democratic politician or to arrest suspected members of a state legislature.”

Lincoln’s death was followed by a three-week funeral procession that would have done credit to an emperor-god in the days of pagan antiquity. Mourning bells and wailing choirs accompanied him to his grave. Invariably historians rank him as the greatest of our “Great” presidents. In the “Near Great” category, we find the old Rough Rider, Theodore Roosevelt, another champion of a “strong executive” concept of the presidency — when strong is understood to mean unbound by the limited grant of power bestowed on him by the Constitution.

It is small wonder that both Bill Clinton and John McCain have claimed “TR” as a hero. McCain admires him as one who “liberally interpreted the constitutional authority of the office” of President and “nourished the soul of a great nation.” Just when the office of President took on the priestly duty of nourishing the nation’s soul is a question that might be debated by political scientists and theology professors. But it is surely revealing that McCain, the Arizona “conservative” and 2008 Republican presidential nominee, admires a President’s liberal interpretation of “the constitutional authority of the office.”

A Bully Presidency

A President/preacher needs a pulpit and Roosevelt saw the White House as a “bully pulpit.” (Everything about Teddy was “bully,” of course.) Vigorous exhortations and denunciations flowed freely from that pulpit to mobilize public opinion and bend Congress to the President’s will — on those occasions when the President deigned to acknowledge a need for congressional approval. In his seven-plus years in the White House, Roosevelt issued nearly as many executive orders as his 24 predecessors combined. The constitutional authority of Congress was among the things Roosevelt held in minimum regard, as evidenced by his military intervention in Panama’s secession from Colombia: “I took the Canal zone and



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let Congress debate; and while the debate goes on, the canal does also,” he explained. In setting forth what came to be known as the “Roosevelt Corollary “ to the Monroe Doctrine, the President informed Congress that the United States, “however reluctantly,” might have to assume the role of “an international police power” in Latin America.

Roosevelt acted on the assumption that the people were on his side. And in the voice of the people he could clearly hear the voice of God. “We stand at Armageddon and we battle for the Lord!” he declared in accepting the nomination of the Progressive (Bull Moose) Party in 1912. One might shudder to think on whose side that left Taft and Wilson. Wilson, after all, would describe himself as “the personal instrument of God” by the end of World War I and his crusade to make the world “safe for democracy.” With his grand pronouncements on treaties and covenants, Wilson seemed determined to bring a godly Presbyterian order out of a world of conflict and chaos. “Wilson bores me with his Fourteen Points,” said France’s Premier, Georges Clemenceau. “Why God Almighty has only ten.”

Wilson, apparently, didn’t mind the comparison. The League of Nations (a centerpiece of the Fourteen Points) was his secular means of salvation for the world. Or so he believed. It would succeed where other international agreements and even the apostolic succession had failed. “Jesus Christ so far [has] not succeeded in inducing the world to follow his teaching,” Wilson told the startled conferees at Versailles, “because He taught the ideal without devising any practical scheme to carry out his aims.” No wonder the President would brook no opposition to his divine plan. When asked if he would accept any reservations to the treaty establishing the League, Wilson was adamant. “The Senate must take its medicine,” he said. To the Senate’s credit, it did not.

Nothing to Fear

Surely no President ever assumed a more messianic role than Franklin Delano Roosevelt. While at least one member of Congress described him as Moses, leading the nation out of the economic wilderness, the new President seemed to have an even greater comparison in mind when he came into power on the fourth of March, 1933. In the depth of the great Depression, Roosevelt grandly announced in his Inaugural Address: “The moneychangers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization.” The general state of biblical literacy may have been somewhat higher in FDR’s day than in our own, and it’s a safe bet most listeners recognized the story of the moneychangers fleeing the temple and remembered it was Jesus who drove them out. Roosevelt called on the nation to “move as a trained and disciplined army willing to sacrifice for the good of a common discipline.... We are, I know, ready and willing to submit our lives and our property to such discipline, because it makes possible a leadership which aims at a larger good.... This I propose to offer. ”

The infantry in that “trained and disciplined army” was the Congress of the United States, by that time well disposed to follow the orders of Roosevelt and his high command. When the President summoned Congress to a special session on March 9, just five days after his inauguration, the nation’s putative lawmakers responded eagerly to directives from the White House. As James MacGregor Burns described it in his friendly biography *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox*:

The milling representatives could hardly wait to act. By unanimous consent Democratic leaders introduced an emergency banking act to confirm Roosevelt’s proclamation and to grant him new powers over banking and currency. Completed by the President and his advisers at two o’clock that morning, the bill was still in rough form. But even in the meager forty minutes allotted to the debate, shouts of “Vote! Vote!” echoed from the floor.... The House promptly passed the bill without a record vote; the Senate approved it a few hours later; the President signed it by nine



o'clock.

Such was the frenetic pace of legislation during the famous first “Hundred Days” of Roosevelt’s New Deal. No wonder the comic-philosopher Will Rogers concluded that members of Congress didn’t write laws anymore: “They just wave at them as they go by.” While most executives would call upon a secretary to take a letter, Roosevelt, it was said, summoned secretary Grace Tulley by saying: “Grace, take a law.” The Congress was only too willing to oblige the lawgiver in the White House. Perhaps no member went quite so far as the woman in Marietta, Ohio, who, Burns tells us, knelt on the ground and “reverently patted the dust where (Roosevelt) left a footprint.” But some may have come close. “I will do anything you ask,” a Congressman from Iowa wrote the President in the early days of the New Deal. “You are my leader.”

Some of the “reforms” Roosevelt rushed through that compliant Congress bore a remarkable resemblance to those he scorned while campaigning against his predecessor. He ridiculed Hoover’s Farm Board for “the cruel joke of advising farmers to let 20 percent of their wheat land to lie idle, to plow up every third row of cotton and shoot every tenth dairy cow.” Yet Roosevelt, with his own Agricultural Adjustment Act, had very similar policies written into a law the Supreme Court later ruled was an unconstitutional extension of federal regulatory power. Years later, when Sen. Burton Wheeler warned that lending and leasing Navy destroyers and other armaments to Great Britain during the Second World War would eventually drag the United States into that conflict, the Montana Democrat used the Agriculture Adjustment Act (AAA) as a symbol of the havoc that would follow.

“The lend-lease-give program is the New Deal’s Triple-A foreign policy; it will plow under every fourth American boy,” he warned. A furious Roosevelt called that “the rottenest thing that has been said in public life in my generation.”

Despite the widespread adulation he enjoyed through much of his first term, Roosevelt had his political enemies, whom he accused, ironically enough, of a “lust for power.” He would have his way with them as well, he told a wildly cheering crowd at New York’s Madison Square Garden. “I should like to have it said of my first administration that in it the forces of selfishness and of lust for power have met their *match*,” he said. “I should like to have it said of my second administration that in it these forces have met their *master*.” His enemies, so described, would be a useful foil to him in his campaign to a landslide reelection. “They are unanimous in their *hate for me — and I welcome their hatred*,” he declared. Though the Republicans dutifully offered an opponent in the person of Kansas Governor Alf Landon, Roosevelt really didn’t need one.

“There’s one issue in this campaign,” he said. “It’s myself, and people must be either for me or against me.”

Roosevelt’s successor, though a man of more humble origin, proved no less eager to expand the power and reach of the Oval Office. Harry Truman took the nation to war in Korea without so much as a by-your-leave to the Congress of the United States. When the nation’s steel workers threatened to strike, Truman simply seized the steel mills, a move the Supreme Court ruled lacked any congressional or constitutional authority. When asked at a press conference if he believed he could also seize newspapers and radio stations in a national emergency, Truman replied: “Under similar circumstances the President of the United States has to act for whatever is for the best of the country.” And the President himself would decide “whatever is for the best of the country.”

The Supreme Court’s ruling on the seizure of the steel mills (in *Youngstown Sheet and Tube Co. v.*



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Sawyer) offers an interesting contrast of views of the power of the President. Justice Hugo Black, writing for the majority in the 6-3 decision declaring the seizure unconstitutional, said: "In the framework of our Constitution, the President's power to see that the laws are faithfully executed refutes the idea that he is to be a law maker.... And the Constitution is neither silent nor equivocal about who shall make the laws the President is to execute." Yet Chief Justice Fred Vinson argued in dissent that the Court's insistence on congressional authority for the President's action reflected a "messenger-boy concept of the Office."

Presidential Power

The idea of a powerful, activist President, towering over Congress and freed of constitutional constraints, had become so ingrained in the public mind that when Eisenhower did not attempt to bury Congress with an avalanche of legislative proposals in his first Hundred Days, one Washington correspondent lamented that the old general seemed like "a man who slipped into the White House by the back door on January 20, 1953 and hasn't yet found his way to the desk." Yet when Eisenhower sent the 101st Airborne to Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 to thwart local opposition to court-ordered school desegregation, few outside the South objected that this was done without either the Arkansas legislature or Governor requesting the federal troops.*

In the past half century American Presidents have sent troops into combat around the globe, often without congressional authorization of any kind. They have made commitments that are literally as wide as the world, while claiming powers of their office found nowhere in the Constitution. In his highly praised Inaugural Address, President Kennedy promised the world that we Americans would "pay any price," and "bear any burden" to defend not only our own liberty, but that of "any friend" anywhere in the world. Lyndon Johnson used the bogus Gulf of Tonkin incident as the pretext for drawing us into a full-scale war in Vietnam. Richard Nixon was a notorious violator of both domestic and international law, but claimed: "When the President does it, it's not illegal."

Popularity is ephemeral and Presidents who abuse their power often fall out of favor with a public that had previously tolerated their excesses. But we typically look for another "savior," one who will inspire the nation and the world with his "vision," command and direct economic growth, and rule the world with an iron hand. Little to nothing is said in election campaigns about how the next President will, according to the oath of office "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

Presidential wannabes are, with few exceptions, eager to use the power of the office to get the nation embroiled in more conflicts in far away places. Last year, John McCain, throwing himself rhetorically into the fighting between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia, said he was sure he spoke for all Americans when he said, "Today we are all Georgians." Most of us don't remember applying for citizenship in Georgia. And few of us, I suspect, would be willing to fight and die over South Ossetia.

But Americans want a hero in the White House and conservatives believed they'd found one in Ronald Reagan. Despite doubling the federal budget and tripling the national debt, Reagan preached the gospel of conservatism and played the "national greatness" theme beloved by today's neoconservatives. Praises of Reagan at Republican events and in conservative publications are nearly as extravagant as the paeans to Lincoln in an earlier era. In Republican primary campaigns, candidates with conflicting viewpoints all claim to be acting in accord with the realism or idealism, the courage or the caution of Ronald Reagan.

As columnist Joseph Sobran wrote several years ago, "It all reminds one of the days when the Chinese



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appealed all questions to the great icon of Mao Zedong, even when Mao himself was silent." It is, Sobran said, as though Reagan embodied every perfection "and the flesh is flawed to the degree that it doesn't resemble Reagan." Most conservatives still believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, he surmised, "but Reagan runs a close fourth."

Last year, Republicans had fun parodying Barack Obama as "the One," the New Messiah, or perhaps another Moses who would lead us to the Promised Land. Some of it was quite clever. The juxtaposing of Obama promising to restore the oceans to their proper levels with Charlton Heston parting the Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments* ("Behold his mighty hand!") was inspired — and hilarious. And a good deal of Obama's rhetoric as a candidate and many of his subsequent actions as President have invited the parody. But it may be a bit late for the party of Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan to oppose a "personality cult" in presidential politics.

"American liberty will never be reestablished so long as elites and masses alike look to the president to perform supernatural feats and therefore tolerate his virtually unlimited exercise of power," wrote Robert Higgs, editor of the *Independent Review*. "Until we can restore limited, constitutional government in this country, God save us from great presidents."

* *Article IV, Section 4 of the Constitution authorizes the United States to protect a state against domestic violence "on Application of the Legislature, or of the Executive (when the Legislature cannot be convened)."*



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