

Lonely at the top

THE TWILIGHT OF THE PRESIDENCY. By George E. Reedy. NAL/World, 205 pp. \$6.95.

By Irwin Ross

The credentials of the author, far more than the substance of his argument, make *The Twilight of the Presidency* a provocative book. George E. Reedy, a long-time aide of Lyndon Johnson in the Senate, followed him into the White House and for a time served as his press secretary. He probably knew his chief as intimately as anyone in Johnson's entourage, and he was in the White House long enough to learn the location of every skeleton in every back closet.

This slender, crisply written book is not a memoir, however, but a despairing analysis of the manner and atmosphere in which presidential power is exercised. Its thesis is that the reverence and awe that surround the presidency, the monarchical quality of the office, the physical isolation imposed by the demands of security, the flattery of a sycophantic staff, even the lush creature comforts that go with the job, all conspire to insulate the president from reality, to distort judgment and to produce grievous political error.

Reedy writes that "The process of erosion by which reality gradually fades begins the moment someone says 'Congratulations, Mr. President.'" Thereafter,

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staff members are more concerned with bolstering their own positions than with telling the president the truth. They shape their advice to his predilections. Cabinet members, who lack any independent political power of their own, are equally ineffective in setting the president straight. Even powerful senators and congressmen, who may thunder on the hill, are reduced to deferential pleasantries when they have an audience. Only the press provides him with a window on the world.

The consequences of this isolation, according to Reedy, are such extraordinary errors as the Bay of Pigs disaster under Kennedy and, one gathers, Johnson's decision to bomb North Vietnam. Reedy has curiously little to say about Vietnam. He devotes more attention to one of Johnson's domestic blunders, for example, his rash proposal to merge the Commerce and Labor Departments.

Reedy's most startling statements come in a chapter entitled "It Can Happen," in which he discusses the problem of removing a president for mental incompetence. "I do have some experience with the reaction of human beings to irrational behavior," he states, "and it is clear to me that where Presidents are concerned, the tolerance level for irrationality extends almost to the point of gibbering idiocy." This indeed is a tantalizing generalization, but Reedy provides no details about what he has seen. He goes on to argue that the mechanisms of the Twenty-fifth Amendment would be ineffective in removing an unstable president unless he

was completely lunatic. Short of that, a president is unassailable.

Reedy suggests that the one theoretical cure to the problem of presidential isolation would be to install a parliamentary system, making the president's tenure dependent on the will of the legislature. The president would then continually have to heed political reality; there would also be no constitutional obstacle to removing him. But, as Reedy quickly points out, there is no chance that the American people will opt for a parliamentary regime. He thus sees no practical solution and ends with an apocalyptic vision of the rising forces of violence in our society overwhelming the institution of the presidency.

The author's pessimism is not persuasive. There is no doubt that presidential isolation can be a major problem, but Reedy pushes his thesis too hard. Presidential failure is also caused by deficiencies of will and imagination, by intractable political opposition in Congress, and by an inability to move public opinion. At several points, Reedy concedes that Roosevelt was able to keep in touch with the real world, that he welcomed opposing advice from his counselors, that he was capable of learning from his mistakes. The same could be said of Harry Truman, a man of more modest talents. As for Lyndon Baines Johnson, after a fine start he made a botch of things. But was his problem perhaps personal as much as institutional? If not more so? *