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Sees presidential power too great

CP Post 7/3/73
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WASHINGTON (NEA)

One great lesson we are supposed to draw from President Johnson's conduct of the Vietnam war and the Nixon administration's Watergate affair is that presidential power today is too great and is almost certain to be abused.

But there is about this judgment an air of inevitability which I think we should distrust. Doctrines founded in rigid certitude seldom apply so precisely to human behavior — in politics or anything else.

George Reedy, once press secretary to Lyndon Johnson, voices the judgment on presidential power in his newest book, "The Presidency in Flux." A key quotation:

"Power breeds isolation. Isolation leads to the capricious use of power. In turn, the capricious use of power breaks down the normal channels of communication between the leader and the people whom he leads."

Obviously, Reedy believes there is an inescapable progression at work, once the idea of a great concentration of power is accepted.

Since presidential power has in fact been growing, at least since Franklin Roosevelt's time, that part comes easy.

It may be more questionable whether isolation follows inevitably. Mr. Nixon is of course famed for his isolation. But he appears to have lived that way most of his adult life.

Mr. Johnson, for all his midnight calls to favored advisers and his personal cajoling of lawmakers and bureaucrats, seems also to have been seriously isolated from the people at large.

Yet FDR, who really started the latest upward bound in presidential power, did not live and work in similar isolation, though his physical crippling perhaps gave him more excuse.

He did indeed sometimes use his great power capriciously, as biographers like James MacGregor Burns point out convincingly. Yet it would be difficult to demonstrate that this capriciousness seriously affected the channels of communication he had developed with the people. In fact, FDR has for years been cast up as a model of the presidential communicator.

Presidential power surely did not diminish under Presidents Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy. All three at times used that power arbitrarily, if not capriciously. Gen. Eisenhower usually is thought of as a low-key power wielder, but he did not hesitate to land troops in Lebanon when he perceived a threat to peace in the Middle East.

Without blinking an eye, John Kennedy sent 3,500 soldiers to the Thai-Laotian border when Laos was seen to be tottering.

Yet, again, it is hard to argue that any of these three was peculiarly isolated from the people they sought to lead.

It is doubtful presidential power is going to be seriously reduced in an era when swelling numbers of Americans want action, and can't get it from a debilitated Congress or the glacial mess of their governmental bureaucracy.

But history does not suggest that isolation is a rigid consequence of such power. Nor should we blithely accept the idea it will often be used capriciously (or wrongly, as in Watergate.) Human behavior is too variable.

And, even if there is capriciousness, FDR is proof that it need not gravely cripple a president's power to lead the people well.