

The Exaltation of the Presidency

By Victor Gold

WASHINGTON — "After all," the man was saying back in 1946, "the President of the United States is neither an absolute monarch nor a descendant of the sun goddess."

Quick now, just as a test in historical trivia, who said it? Robert Taft the Elder? Richard Nixon the Younger? Neither, though Taft or Nixon would have been pretty good guesses since those were the days when Republican spokesmen took an irreverent view of the James MacGregor Burns thesis of White House hegemony-in-government.

Evidently Harold Ickes, the Democratic heretic who uttered the blasphemy, had been left cold and unpersuaded by those sun worshipers of his party who carried the Burns thesis to its ultimate spiritual conclusion: that if the man in the White House is the repository of all power he must necessarily be the dispenser of all light.

To be sure, the temptation to exalt the Presidency—which in practice has meant the man who holds the office—can be traced to the earliest days of the Republic. It can even be discerned in the writings of that paradigm of American democratic instinct, Thomas Jefferson. All that heavy Jeffersonian breathing over "the splendid misery" of Presidential leadership was really the forerunner of a certain latter-day style of exaltation that portrays whoever sits in the Oval Office not as a politician, which he is, but as a martyr of history consigned by unremitting destiny to serve His People.

Today the clichés of the style abound. However, to keep the historical record straight, they were created not by Republican but Democratic public relations men during the Franklin Roosevelt years; embellished during J.F.K.'s tenure; and polished to a fine luster under L.B.J.

Thus, we have heard it said and written by the sycophants of all recent Presidents, that the exercise of Presidential power is an *ordeal*. That the responsibilities of the office are (one of Mr. Johnson's favorites) *awesome*. That the man who stands there by that Oval Office window photographed in soft silhouette, enduring that *ordeal* and burdened by those *awesome*

responsibilities is what, Mr. Arbuthnot? Why, he is *lonely*, of course.

If some sun worshipers consider such mockery of modern Presidential mythology an aggravated case of *lèse-majesté*, so be it. But the Old Curmudgeon was right 27 years ago and it's too bad his message didn't get through: Presidents of the United States are human beings — working, sweating politicians who have been graced by the office, not the reverse. Lest we forget, they are not pressed into service involuntarily and, as a matter of fact, have been known to pursue the awesome burden rather vigorously and hold onto it with a vengeance.

For these reasons, I for one found the he's-really-doing-us-a-favor style grating and pretentious long before Richard Nixon assumed the Presidency. Indeed, as a Republican, my fervent hope was that as of Jan. 20, 1969, Professor Burns' homogenized *Führerprinzip* view of the office, with its accompanying public-relations *Weltschmerz*, would be pitched out of the Oval Office window the better to fertilize the Rose Garden.

Had it been pitched out—which is to say, had Mr. Nixon acted to diminish the exaltation of Presidential power—he might have saved himself and the Presidency from the cult of blind imperial obedience that led to Watergate. But the apparatus was there and, in the event, the temptation to enjoy its use proved too great.

So it is that thirty years after they were outraged by a President's use of a battleship for a vacation cruise; 25 years after they were fulminating over a President's too-frequent sojourns to Key West; ten years after they were pounding their dinner tables over the Hapsburgian connotations of a Hyannis Port White House: hardnosed Republicans are stuck with explaining precisely how a San Clemente villa fits into the philosophy of the American work ethic.

But what of the future? In the wake of Watergate's excesses have the sun goddess genealogists finally been discredited? Will the next occupant of the White House, whether Republican or Democrat, accept the fact of his umbilicus and be content to govern, not reign? Will he recognize, as

testimony before the Ervin committee has pointed out time and again, that the road to Watergate was paved with the good intentions of people trained to exalt Presidential power and prerogative above all else? More than any other, that should be the central issue of the next Presidential campaign, one to which party platforms and candidates address themselves.

The omens, however, are not encouraging. For the Democrats' part, most seem eager to accept the Watergate abuse as some form of Nixonian aberration, a character virus infecting only the men surrounding this President. Republicans, though for other reasons, are buying and selling the same line. Finally, there is Mr. Nixon himself, reacting to these unsplendid miseries by seeking to wrap himself ever more tightly in the Presidential mystique. And of all things, in concurrence with his Democratic predecessor, prescribing as an antidote a constitutional amendment to provide future children of the sun goddess a single extended term.

On this subject I can't pretend to speak for the democratic spirit of Mr. Ickes. Yet again, as a Republican, I don't doubt that were Taft the Elder and Nixon the Younger around today they might have other ideas. First, that we simply let the Constitution alone on this subject. But that if indeed an argument is to be made for changing Presidential tenure, advocates of the longer term are pointing us the wrong way. With the experience of recent times as the catalyst, all logic would seem to dictate an amendment headed in the opposite direction: six years, hell. Cut it to two.

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