

A New Presidency

Long before the Watergate crimes brought Mr. Nixon's White House into disrepute, there had been widespread concern that the office of the Presidency had somehow become bloated, unresponsive, unduly secretive, out of touch with the people and perhaps even with reality.

Each President to some extent shapes the office to his own personality and needs, but the unhealthy trends derive from sources deeper than the personalities of the two most recent Presidents, even though Mr. Johnson and Mr. Nixon have been unusually fond of secrecy and surprise.

One source of uncontrollable change has been the invention of atomic weapons. Since 1945, a single man in the White House has had it in his power to order the use of bombs that could destroy the civilized world. This unimaginable inflation in the powers of the Presidency has worked like yeast to transform the character of the modern Presidency, giving it a uniqueness, an awesomeness, an almost mysterious character that the pre-1945 Presidency never had.

Another source of change lies in the enormous increase in the size of the Federal Government, particularly in its worldwide military, diplomatic and economic responsibilities. The military establishment today is twenty times as big as it was in 1940, and the sizable foreign intelligence, foreign aid and overseas information bureaucracies did not then exist. This quantum leap in international responsibility has imposed new and heavy burdens of leadership and control upon an American President.

The technological revolutions of the last three decades have increased the potentialities of the Presidency for good and evil without increasing the moral and intellectual capacities of the man who occupies the office. Today, travel by jet plane and helicopter, face-to-face communication by television and numerous electronic inventions have combined to increase a President's reach and even to create illusions of monarchical omnipotence.

A President today can telephone an astronaut on the moon or have an enemy's office electronically "bugged," appear on every television screen on a few minutes' notice or make several personal appearances in widely separated regions of the country in a single day. This afflatus of power has made the Presidency more grandiose and remote rather than actually more effective in its work or more truly meaningful to ordinary citizens.

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There is no way to return the atomic genie to its bottle, to scale the nation's responsibilities down to those of two generations ago, or to undo the triumphs of modern technology. Yet if democracy is to survive and flourish, it is necessary to make old, fundamental principles valid once again in this new, transformed setting.

In a thoughtful speech the other day, Senator Walter Mondale, Minnesota Democrat, discussed the need for a new Presidency within the framework of the old and fundamental principles. The Presidency has to be accountable to Congress and the people, has to be under the law, has to do its business in as open and visible a fashion as is humanly possible. An unaccountable, lawless, secretive Presidency is a menace to the liberties of the people and ultimately can only fail.

To increase Presidential accountability, Mr. Mondale would require confirmation by the Senate of every important officer within the executive office, including such powerful officers as the directors of the Office of Management and Budget, of the Domestic Council and of the Council on International Economic Policy. Further, he would provide for a question and report period in the Senate in which Cabinet officers could be examined on their policies. This adaptation of British parliamentary practice is definitely worth a trial.

Senator Mondale urges, as do we, the enactment of pending bills to restrain the President in impounding appropriated funds, in substituting executive agreements for treaties subject to Senate ratification, and in deploying armed forces in combat without specific Congressional consent. If the sweeping powers of the Presidency are to be contained within the law, Congress must also see to it that sensitive agencies such as the F.B.I., the C.I.A. and the Internal Revenue Service cannot be exploited for corrupt or partisan purposes.

Although Presidential study commissions have fallen into disrepute from overuse in recent years, there is merit in Senator Mondale's proposal for a long-range study of the Presidency. A new Presidency in the sense of a genuine redefinition and restructuring of the powers of the office almost certainly has to await the election of a new President, but it is not too soon to begin a careful examination. Their conception of the office ought to be an important topic of debate among the candidates for the Presidency in 1976.