By analyzing the leadership skills of seven recent American presidents, this book seeks to de-mystify the elements and dynamics of effective presidential leadership which our democracy has come to depend upon and value. Building on the pioneering work of political scientist Fred Greenstein and others, this book argues that leadership in the White House can be explained and assessed by using a consistent set of criteria to analyze presidential performance. Siegel shows that presidential leadership is exercised by real, flawed human beings, and not by superheroes or philosopher-kings beyond the reach of scrutiny or critique.

**New to the Second Edition**

- Includes a new chapter covering both terms of the Obama administration.
- Applies the author’s four-part leadership framework to the early part of the Trump administration.
- Discusses the possibilities of presidential leadership in an era of intense partisanship.

**Michael Eric Siegel**, Ph.D., is Senior Education Specialist at The Federal Judicial Center in Washington, DC. He is also an award-winning Adjunct Professor at The American University and The Johns Hopkins University.
Praise for the Second Edition

Michael Siegel’s *The President as Leader* is an outstanding book on the American presidency and political leadership from the founding to the present. It is challenging, fresh, and comprehensive. This book should be read by students of American politics and by policy makers in Washington.

*James A. Thurber, American University*

Michael Siegel’s book could not be more timely. Required reading for any citizen interested in better understanding the ambiguous definition of “presidential leadership.” More important today than ever before.

*Kenneth R. Feinberg, Former Administrator of the September 11 Victim Compensation Fund and the BP Oil Spill Fund*

Rare is it for a book to succeed on so many levels. Reading the new edition of *The President as Leader* makes you feel as if you are standing next to presidents as they make decisions that will define their tenures in office. Providing excellent information on leadership strategies and styles, the book is a pleasure to read and captures American history like few before it.

*Douglas W. Burris, Chief U.S. Probation Officer, Eastern District of Missouri*

*The President as Leader* is a compelling text for students and scholars of the presidency, and equally persuasive for curious observers of American politics. The second edition includes a comprehensive analysis of Obama’s two terms and an initial glimpse of Trump’s first few months using Michael Siegel’s four-part leadership framework, reinforcing the point that “presidential leadership is exercised by real, flawed human beings, and not by superheroes or philosopher-kings beyond the reach of scrutiny or critique.”

*Shaik L. Ismail, Linfield College*
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The first forty-three U.S. presidents were white men who had served in government or the military prior to their presidency. The forty-fourth was an African-American male with state government experience and a small amount of national political experience in the U.S. Senate. And the forty-fifth president, elected on November 8, 2016, was a businessman and real estate mogul, with no government or military experience. Nevertheless, all presidents, whatever their background and training, must lead within the design of the office stipulated in the guiding document, Article II of the U.S. Constitution. Our first forty-four presidents have used the office with varying levels of effectiveness and with differing levels of support for the constitutional framework in which it exists. The president as leader is not a monolithic paradigm.

The second edition of this book, with a new chapter on the presidency of Barack Obama, examines the leadership performance of the more recent presidents—those who have served a full term of office since Watergate. Why use Watergate as a point of departure to analyze leadership in the White House? Because the author believes the office of the presidency and the “playing field” on which presidents seek to lead the nation changed in fundamental ways after Watergate. The office that Jimmy Carter inhabited beginning in 1977 was vastly different from the one Nixon resigned from in 1974, and changes have continued since that time. Congress is more aggressive than it used to be in its duty of overseeing the executive, especially in foreign policy, where it now demands a more significant role; the public has become more cynical, less trusting of government in general and the president in particular, a trend vividly demonstrated during the 2016 presidential campaign; the judiciary has asserted its independent power to ensure compliance with the rule of law in all branches of government; and the media, including the more recent social media, have increased their coverage of the presidency, incessantly searching for every possible act of leadership imperfection, error, or malfeasance.

In spite of the formidable obstacles that these and other forces place in the way of presidential leadership, however, presidents can still succeed by pursuing a “strategic” approach to leadership. The book focuses on the leadership approaches and styles of seven presidents (including a view of Nixon and Watergate) along the following leadership criteria:

(a) Policy, or vision—their goals and aspirations, the path forward which they envisioned for the country;
(b) Politics, or strategy—their efficacy in translating their vision into reality through the staff they hired, their talent in negotiation and persuasion, and their ability to control an agenda;
(c) Structure, or management—their approach toward managing the White House and the executive branch, their preference for a “micro” or “macro” approach, the openness of their operation;
(d) Process, or decision making—their ability to encourage dissenting opinions and listen actively to debate, while still making unambiguous decisions.

The core argument of the book is that effective presidents stay focused on a clear vision, in spite of temporary setbacks or failures. They surround themselves with talented people—professionals rather than friends—and give them the freedom they need to operate. They set up nimble and effective organizational structures. And while they encourage conflict and dissenting opinions within their administrations as positive forces to help them make better decisions, they are not afraid of concluding ferocious internal debates by announcing clear and strong decisions. Of course, they also must be willing to examine the consequences of those decisions and make modifications along the way. Finally, effective presidents are not afraid to use power, but do not become intoxicated by it, as have the “imperial” presidents. Measured against the aforementioned criteria, at least three of the recent seven presidents performed admirably in two or more categories, while two struggled in almost all categories.

The book argues that the success of the American polity in the twenty-first century and beyond is inextricably linked to the effectiveness of leadership in the White House. By examining the details of presidential leadership among our most recent presidents, the author hopes to familiarize students, voters, and political leaders with the strengths and weaknesses of recent presidents along four specific dimensions of leadership, and to suggest a model of presidential leadership for the future: one that is assertive, bold, daring, visionary, and effective, but one that also recognizes the inescapable constraints on presidential leadership imposed by our constitution and by the checks-and-balances system of government that our founders created.

The presidency of Donald J. Trump presents a significant challenge to, as well as opportunity for, the testing of this model. This second edition begins to assess the forty-fifth president on the key elements of the model, in a new concluding chapter.

The author is indebted to the many undergraduate and graduate students who read and commented on earlier drafts of the manuscript, in particular Caitlan Sussman; to Mr. Howard Goldblatt, a Washington, DC government relations specialist and former Congressional staffer who painstakingly reviewed every chapter and provided insightful and helpful commentary; to Ambassador Dennis Ross, a respected national security adviser and Middle East specialist in several recent presidential administrations; and to the staff of the Library of Congress, who are frequently unsung heroes to scholars across the world, in addition to providing invaluable service to members of Congress and their staffs. Thanks also to the following readers for their comments: Edward DeRoche, University of San Diego; Matthew Dickinson, Middlebury College; Matthew Green, Catholic University of America; Justin Vaughn, Boise State University; Adam L. Warber, Clemson University; and Darren Wheeler, Ball State University.
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The author expresses special appreciation to his daughter, Sophie; son-in-law, Aaron; and grandsons, Lon and Avi, whose encouragement and love nourished and sustained him during the long hours of work on this book. Finally, the author dedicates the book to the loving memory of his late wife, Anne, whose passion for the democratic process was admirable.
The presidency was created by a group of men “who had their fingers crossed,” according to Professor Louis Koenig. The professor’s description of the founders’ anxiety reveals the conflicting interests and objectives they had in creating the presidency. On the one hand, they wanted the president to lead the country with “energy,” as Alexander Hamilton put it; on the other hand, they feared the return of a king. Indeed, the language of the
Declaration of Independence contained attacks on the king himself for a “history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over the states.” If one compares the careful, constrained use of executive power by our first president, George Washington, to the muscular and aggressive use of it by our most recent president, Donald J. Trump, the evolution of the office and the increased complexity of its responsibilities are both apparent.

The fear of executive power was codified in early state constitutions. Pennsylvania, for example, had no chief executive at all, but entrusted a council of twelve popularly elected individuals to carry out selected executive functions. Except for New York, which provided for a stronger executive, the states made their executives weak and subordinate to the legislatures.2

On the national level, the fear of executive power manifested itself in the Articles of Confederation, the nation’s first expression of a governing document adopted by the Continental Congress on November 15, 1777.3 Under the Articles, there was no real executive power; supreme power was lodged in the hands of a congress of delegates from the states. The prevailing political culture in America during the early days of the republic was a distrust of concentrated power, particularly executive power, whether it was institutionalized in an elected office or a hereditary monarch.4

By 1787, however, leading thinkers and opinion makers had become disgruntled with what they perceived to be an abuse of power by aggressive legislatures at the state level and an impotent government at the national level. James Madison wrote of the “legislative vortex” that had the tendency to suck all powers into it, whereas Thomas Jefferson in his “Notes on the State of Virginia” warned that “173 despots would surely be as oppressive as one.”5

The absence of a strong executive was one reason, among others, for the failure of the Articles of Confederation. This scheme of government failed for at least four reasons:6

- The Articles of Confederation did not give the national government the power to tax, placing Congress in the awkward position of pleading for money from the states to pay for war debts and carry out the affairs of the new nation.
- The Articles made no provision for an independent leadership position to direct the government (the president was merely the presiding officer of the Congress).
- The Articles did not allow the national government to regulate interstate and foreign commerce. (When John Adams proposed that the confederation enter into a commercial treaty with Britain after the war, he was asked, “Would you like one treaty or thirteen, Mr. Adams?”)
- The Articles could not be amended without the unanimous consent of all the state legislatures, giving each state the power to veto any changes to the confederation.

In short, once the Revolution had ended and independence was a reality, it was clear that the national government had neither the economic nor the military power to function. The weaknesses of the government were further illustrated by
the rebellion of debtors facing bankruptcy led by Daniel Shays, a Revolutionary War veteran. In 1786, Shays and his colleagues marched on a western Massachusetts courthouse with 1,500 supporters armed with barrel staves and pitchforks. They wanted to close the courthouse and prevent the foreclosure of farms by their creditors. Shays’ Rebellion lasted for an entire year, until 1787. Massachusetts appealed to the confederation for assistance, and Congress approved a $530,000 requisition for the establishment of a national army. But the plan failed, as every state except Virginia rejected the call for money. In the end, the governor of Massachusetts called on the militia to restore order.7

Shays’ Rebellion alarmed almost all American leaders, except for Thomas Jefferson, who delivered the following missive from Paris, where he was serving as the American ambassador: “A little rebellion now and then is a good thing; the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.”8

Most political leaders were not persuaded by Jefferson’s musings and turned their attention to constructing a stronger national government with an executive power. As Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson observed some 150 years later, “While the Declaration of Independence was directed against an excess of authority, the Constitution (that followed the Articles of Confederation) was directed against anarchy.”9

A total of fifty-five delegates arrived at the statehouse in Philadelphia to write a new constitution. For nearly four months, they debated many issues, including the nature of the executive branch. One proposal—the Virginia Plan—suggested an executive to consist of an unspecified number of people to be selected by the legislature for a single term.10 Finally, however, the delegates agreed on a one-person executive who would be chosen by an electoral college.

Having no model on which to base their design, the framers created a presidency that was quite radical for the eighteenth-century world. According to Gary L. Gregg II, “Though we tend to take it for granted, to have an institution that would in some ways resemble a monarchy and yet would be limited in its power and influence and that would be elected periodically was something unheard of at the time.”11

So what powers did the Constitution actually provide the president? The following is a summary of the executive article of the Constitution (Article II) and pertains to the conditions and terms of the office of the presidency, as well as the actual powers available to the president.

Section One of Article II spells out the conditions and terms of office as follows:

- The executive Power is vested in a President of the United States, and he will hold Office for a term of four years, along with the Vice President.
- Each state will appoint electors, in a manner determined by the legislature, and the number of electors will equal the number of Senators and Representatives that the state has in Congress. No Senator or Representative, however, may be an elector. The electors will choose the President and Vice President.
Congress is to choose the actual day for the election.

The eligibility criteria for election to the Presidency are that the candidate must be a natural born citizen of the United States, and 35 years of age.

The Vice President will succeed the President in case of the Removal of the President from Office, or his death, Resignation, or Inability to discharge the Powers and Duties of the Office.

The President’s compensation (salary) may not be increased or diminished during his tenure.

The President, before he enters office, must take an oath to “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States” (oath of affirmation).12

Section Two of Article II outlines the powers of the office of the president as follows:

- Commander-in-chief. The President shall be the commander-in-chief of the Army and Navy of the US, and of the militia of the several states when called into actual service of the US. He may require the opinions of officers in each executive department of government. And he has the right to grant reprieves and pardons for offenses against the US, except in Cases of Impeachment.
- Treaties and Appointment of Officers. The President has the power, with the advice and consent of the Senate, to make treaties (with two-thirds Senate concurrence) and to nominate and (with the advice and consent of the Senate) appoint ambassadors, other public Ministers and Consuls, and Judges of the Supreme Court.
- Appointments during recess of the Senate. The President has the power to fill vacancies that may occur during a Senate recess by granting Commissions that expire at the end of the next session.
- Recommendations to Congress—Convene and Adjourn Congress—Receive Ambassadors—Execute laws. The President will deliver “from time to time” information on the state of the Union and recommend measures he judges are “necessary and expedient;” he may, on extraordinary occasions, convene both houses, or either of them; receive Ambassadors; take care that the laws be “faithfully executed” and commission officers of the US.
- Removal from Office. The President, Vice President and all civil Officers of the United States will be removed from Office on Impeachment for, Conviction of Treason, Bribery, or other high Crimes and Misdemeanors.13

Once the dust had settled, the commentary on the completed Constitution and presidential provisions began. At the Virginia ratifying convention, for instance, Governor Patrick Henry expressed the fears of some about the founders’ creation of the presidency:

This Constitution is said to have beautiful features but when I come to examine those features, Sir, they appear to me to be horribly frightful. Among other deformities it has an awful squinting; it squints toward monarchy, and does that not raise indignation in the breast of every American?14
On the other hand, Alexander Hamilton, in the Federalist No. 70, refuted the allegations of “monarchy,” and suggested that “energy” in the executive branch is a leading characteristic of good government. He added:

A feeble executive implies a feeble execution of the government. A feeble executive is but another phrase for bad execution; and a government ill executed, whatever it may be in theory, must be, in practice, a bad government.15

Whether or not the presidency, as created by the founders, had enough or too much power would be debated long after 1789. But there is no doubt that the office created in the late eighteenth century proved to be an imperfect guide for presidents who followed. The Constitution did not anticipate a civil war, two world wars, or a “Cold War”; it did not anticipate a world saturated with nuclear weapons and other means of mass destruction; it could not envision a world transformed by global forces of transnational terrorism or environmental degradation. In this sense, as of this writing, it was the actions and decisions of the forty-four men who served in the office, building upon the pronouncements of the founders and philosophical insights of their contemporaries, that primarily shaped the presidency. With the advent of the forty-fifth president, the debate about the extent of presidential power, the guidance of the Constitution, and the march of events will only intensify.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE PRESIDENCY

During the more than 200 years of the presidency, the office grew far beyond the limitations imposed on it by the founders. In some cases, the accretion of power beyond those powers clearly delineated in the Constitution resulted from presidential responses to crises facing the country—including a civil war, imminent financial collapse, attacks on U.S. interests by foreign powers, and a myriad of other emergency situations.

One of the earliest examples of a president who was forced by circumstance to expand the powers of the presidency was Abraham Lincoln. When he entered office in 1861, Lincoln faced the daunting challenge of the potential dissolution of the union. When Southern rebels fired on Fort Sumter in April 1861, Lincoln did not wait for Congress to return before taking steps to prevent the country falling apart. According to Boston Globe reporter Charles Savage, in his book Takeover: The Return of the Imperial Presidency and the Subversion of American Democracy:

Without a declaration of war, Lincoln enlarged the Union Army and Navy, blockaded Southern ports, spent money not appropriated by Congress, and arrested Northerners suspected of being Southern agents without giving the legal rights—all exceeding the authority in federal law and the Constitution.16

Lincoln acknowledged that his drastic steps were, in fact, outside of the constitutional framework of government. As soon as Congress reconvened,
Lincoln asked for its authorization for his emergency actions, arguing they had been necessary to save the union.

Congress may have abided and even legitimated Lincoln’s actions, but the Supreme Court was emphatic in asserting that his actions should be viewed as a singular exception in American history, and not as a new definition of presidential power. A year after the Civil War ended, the Supreme Court struck down a military tribunal Lincoln had used to prosecute Northern civilians, thereby limiting presidential power during an emergency. The Court’s language in the case of *Ex parte Milligan* (1866) is particularly instructive, and would be repeated in later years with other presidents:

The Constitution of the United States is a law for rulers and people, especially in war and peace, and covers with the shield of protection all classes of men at all times, and under all circumstances. No doctrine involving more pernicious consequences was ever invented by the wit of man than that any of its provisions can be suspended during any of the great exigencies of government. Such a doctrine leads directly to anarchy or despotism.

During the lugubrious days of the Great Depression, when unemployment in the United States reached higher than 25 percent of the working population and thirty-four states had closed their banks, influential voices in the United States, including columnist Walter Lippmann, called on newly elected president Franklin Delano Roosevelt to assume dictatorial powers. Although Roosevelt eschewed pressures to assume “dictatorial” powers, he did not shy away from using a muscular approach to presidential leadership, including introducing far-reaching economic and social reform packages in the first hundred days of his presidency, establishing a committee on administration management (Brownlow Report) to provide more centralized administrative control by the White House over the executive branch of government, and attempting to pack the Supreme Court with justices who would approve his programs.

As well, in 1940, President Roosevelt violated the recently enacted Neutrality Act by ordering the transfer of fifty U.S. Navy destroyers to Britain in exchange for the right to lease sites for naval bases. Roosevelt was responding to an entreaty from British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who notified the president that half of his country’s destroyers had been lost and that Britain’s capacity to protect its shipping from German U-boats was nearly defunct. Attorney General Robert Jackson argued that in spite of the apparent illegality of the exchange of destroyers for bases, Roosevelt’s actions were sanctioned by his role as commander in chief. And in March 1941, Congress passed the Lend-Lease Act, which effectively ratified Roosevelt’s actions.

During the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, from 1945 to 1970, Congress actually added measures of power to the presidency through legislation enabling the president to lead the nation in the “containment” of Soviet powers; for instance, Congress passed the National Security Act of 1947 (Pub. L. 80-235, 1947), which substantially enhanced the president’s leadership in the formulation and execution of national security policy by creating a single
defense secretary responsible for all defense planning and the military budget. According to Crenson and Ginsberg, “By creating a more unified military chain of command and a single defense budget, the National Security Act diminished Congress’s ability to intervene in military planning and increased the president’s control over the armed services and national security policy.”23 The National Security Act also created the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and placed it under the direct supervision of the president. Presidents from 1947 to 1972 were more than happy to accept the elevated grants of power given to them by Congress and used these powers enthusiastically to protect the nation from communism.

Just as Congress empowered the presidency through legislation to conduct the Cold War, so too did Congress authorize President George W. Bush, within a week of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, to “use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed or aided the terrorist attacks.”24

Although this authorization for using military force was not a declaration of war, President Bush interpreted it as activating his full wartime powers as commander in chief, including the power to detain enemy combatants. Furthermore, claiming that the Taliban and al Qaeda were not entitled to procedural protections of the U.S. criminal justice system, nor to the humanitarian protections of the Geneva Conventions, the Bush administration asserted an entitlement to hold detainees indefinitely, to subject them to harsh methods of interrogation, and to try them in military commission instead of criminal courts.25 These assertions by President Bush, in his pursuit of the “war on terror” and subsequently the war in Iraq, were challenged and in some cases reversed by the federal courts, and to some extent modified by Congress. In a memorable quotation from the U.S. Supreme Court case of Hamdi v. Rumsfeld, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, writing for the majority, opined that “A state of war is not a blank check for the President when it comes to the rights of the Nation’s citizens.”26 In the Hamdi case, the Court decided that while the government could hold U.S. citizens in military custody, the Court would scrutinize the procedures used to determine whether someone is in fact an “unlawful combatant.”27

The accumulation of presidential power also occurred because of the ambition, and even the feeling of grandiosity, held by some occupants of the office. Richard Nixon, who wanted to be the “architect of his times,”28 took presidential power to entirely new heights, asserting that he knew the interests of the United States better than the public, Congress, and the courts, and that he could soar above all countervailing powers in protecting American interests both in Vietnam and domestically.29

Although the growth of presidential power was substantial, the acceptance of its growth by Congress, the courts, and the public was always tentative due to the details of the U.S. constitutional framework. And yet, the expectations of presidential leadership and power became well established in the public mind. According to presidential scholar Fred Greenstein, “the president became the most visible landmark in the political landscape, virtually standing for the federal
government in the minds of many Americans.” In their 2008 textbook, *Presidential Power: Unchecked and Unbalanced*, Johns Hopkins University political scientists Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg assert, “Today whatever the travails of particular presidents, it is the presidency that dominates American government and politics.”

In 1952, a period of relative tranquility, Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson described the magnitude of the president’s responsibilities as

> the concentration of executive authority in a single head in whose choice the whole nation has a part, making him the focus of public hopes and expectations. In drama, magnitude and finality his decisions so far overshadow any others that almost alone he fills the public eye and ear.

In his campaign for the 2016 presidential election, Donald J. Trump made several statements that suggested an elevated and empowered executive, including saying at the Republican National Convention on July 26, 2016, “I alone can fix the problems in Washington DC,” and, with regard to the war on ISIS (on October 16, 2016), “I know more than the generals.”

**THE LIMITS OF PRESIDENTIAL POWER**

Nonetheless, many presidents have expressed a different view on the actual exercise of power. In the words of President William Howard Taft, “The President cannot make clouds to rain, he cannot make the corn to grow, he cannot make the business to be good.” Similarly, Thomas Jefferson opined that the presidential experience was a “splendid misery,” and Andrew Jackson quipped that it was a “situation of dignified slavery.” A frustrated Lyndon Johnson once remarked, “The only power I’ve got is nuclear—and I can’t use that.” Harry Truman, talking about Eisenhower, said, “He’ll sit here and he’ll say, ‘Do this! Do that!’ and nothing will happen. Poor Ike—it won’t be a bit like the army. He’ll find it very frustrating.”

Expressions of frustration on the part of past presidents underline the difficulty of leadership in the office. The challenges abound. First, as already discussed, the foundational design of the office was built on compromise, anxiety, and even reluctance. Rather than asserting the unequivocal need to “put someone in charge” of the government, the founders simply attempted to fix a structure where “no one was in charge” by assigning a modicum of leadership to a person they called president.

Furthermore, the founders, borrowing from the eighteenth-century French philosopher Baron de Montesquieu, insisted on the governing principle of “separation of powers,” where no one branch of government would dominate the others. The executive, legislative, and judicial branches were meant to be equal and to keep one another in check, “ambition checking ambition,” in the words of James Madison. In short, the president was to have “energy,” but would be expected to operate in a collaborative leadership framework with Congress and the judiciary. In the area of foreign policy, for example, the founders’ approach to leadership was tantamount to “an invitation to struggle.”
The president was given the role of commander in chief, but only Congress was allowed to declare war. The president could appoint ambassadors to represent U.S. interests in foreign countries, but his appointments required the “advice and consent” of Congress.

In addition, as the nation developed, political parties gained strength, as did powerful interest groups and, eventually, the media (known by some as a fourth branch of government). These forces would place yet more obstacles and limitations on presidential power.

In their well-regarded book *The Paradoxes of the American Presidency*, Thomas Cronin and Michael Genovese observe that:

We admire presidential power, yet fear it. We yearn for the heroic, yet are inherently suspicious of it. We demand dynamic leadership, yet grant only limited powers to the president. We want presidents to be dispassionate analysts and listeners, yet they must also be decisive. We are impressed with presidents who have great self-confidence, yet we dislike arrogance and respect those who express reasonable self-doubt. We want leaders to be bold and innovative, yet we allow presidents to take us only where we want to go.40

Although compelling historical forces such as the Civil War, the Great Depression, World Wars I and II, and the Cold War contributed to the expansion of presidential powers, powerful forces during the 1960s and 1970s seemed almost to conspire to reduce presidential power and put the presidency back in check. In the wake of the Vietnam War, Congress passed legislation limiting the president’s ability to sustain a long involvement in a foreign war absent the approval of Congress.41 When specific details of Richard Nixon’s abuse of presidential power during the Watergate crisis were revealed, Congress reacted again by limiting the president’s ability to “impound” congressionally appropriated funds,42 and gave itself a larger role in the formulation of budgetary policy in general.

According to historian Robert Dallek, in the 1970s aftermath of Vietnam, which had driven Lyndon Johnson from power, and Watergate, which had compelled Richard Nixon’s resignation, a theory arose about the “fragility of the American presidency.”43 The following book titles appeared: *The Tethered Presidency; The Post-Imperial Presidency;* and *The Impossible Presidency.* The impression arose of a beleaguered and pathetic fellow sitting forlornly in the Oval Office, assailed by unprecedentedly intractable problems, paralyzed by the constitutional separation of powers, hemmed in by congressional and bureaucratic constraints, pushed one way and another by exigent interest groups, seduced, betrayed, and abandoned by the mass media.44

In 1980, ex-President Gerald Ford said, to general applause, “We have not an imperial presidency but an imperiled presidency.”45 And in 1996, former member of Congress and Defense Secretary (and future Vice President) Dick
Cheney made the following statement at the awards ceremony for the Gerald R. Ford Foundation:

I clearly do believe there have been times in the past, oftentimes in response to events such as Watergate and the War in Vietnam, where Congress has begun to encroach upon the powers and responsibilities of the President; that it was important to go back and try to restore the balance.\(^{46}\)

In the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate, Americans gazed at the White House with more skepticism than adoration, and Congress jealously guarded its powers vis-à-vis the presidency. The contemporary presidency, then, faces several obstacles to the exertion of leadership. The obstacles result from the perennial tensions in the exercise of power embedded in the founders’ documents; from the recent history of the office, including the excesses of the “imperial presidency” of Richard Nixon (and to some extent of Lyndon Johnson and perhaps even George W. Bush); and from Americans’ unrealistic expectations that a president can somehow ride into town on a white horse and in four years cure the nation of all its ills.\(^{47}\) In similar fashion, President Donald Trump campaigned for the presidency on the basis of moving to Washington, DC (or perhaps flying in on his corporate jet) and “draining the swamp,” yet found that this task could not be accomplished quickly or without the full cooperation of the other two branches of government.

**HOW CAN PRESIDENTS LEAD EFFECTIVELY?**

How do presidents overcome the obstacles to leadership and succeed in the exercise of power? The argument of this book is that they do so by mastering four key components of leadership. The components illustrate aspects of leadership that are not enunciated in the Constitution, but that constitute essential qualities of presidential job performance.

Building on the work of presidential scholar Fred Greenstein, who analyzed six qualities that influence presidential job performance,\(^{48}\) this text focuses on four elements of leadership. The four components are chosen based on years of observation of presidential performance, twenty years of service in the federal government, and a model of the “strategic presidency” enunciated in a book by two veterans of the Carter administration, titled *Memorandum for the President: A Strategic Approach to Domestic Affairs in the 1980s*. The authors of this book, Ben W. Heineman Jr. and Curtis Hessler, served in high-level executive branch positions in the Carter administration—Heineman in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (subsequently the Department of Health and Human Services) and Hessler in the Department of the Treasury. Heineman and Hessler specify four core elements of a strategic approach to leadership in the White House, and this text has embellished their elements as follows:

- **policy**—(vision), envisioned future, mission goals, objectives, purpose
- **politics**—(strategy), persuasion, execution, implementation
structure—(management), internal organization, delegation, coordination process—(decision making), conflict management, integrating diversity of thought

Here is this book’s central argument: Great position, including the presidency of the United States, sets up great potential for achievement, but does not guarantee it. Whereas a contemporary president enters an office of substantial power—which, according to Crenson and Ginsberg, is “unchecked and unbalanced”—the obstacles to forceful leadership are formidable, and four years can pass by without significant presidential success.

A president can succeed, however, if he masters four aspects of leadership. He must enunciate a clear and compelling vision (policy); develop an implementation and influence strategy to execute his vision (politics); avail himself of an effective White House and cabinet management support system (structure); and employ effective decision-making techniques, including encouraging dissenting viewpoints, while managing conflict and arriving at clear, unambiguous decisions (process). Moreover, a president has to complete all of these activities while staying within the constitutional boundaries of his office. And he has to accomplish the four leadership functions quickly; according to Heineman and Hessler:

A President has only four years to prove himself, less than that, actually since the campaign clock starts ticking well before the conclusion of his four-year term. It is important in this regard for the President to act quickly and decisively in pursuing policy objectives and redeeming campaign promises. If the President has a strong vision on what needs to be done he will be able to move things along, to shake the bureaucrats out of their complacency and the members of Congress out of their defensiveness and sell them all on a big cause.49

In short, a president has to develop a “strategy” of leadership that encompasses the four specified elements. The elements, or components, of presidential leadership work together in the following manner. (Each component of leadership will be detailed later.) When a president has a strong vision, he will be able to convey his policy objectives to the public and his own staff in a compelling manner; his staff will easily comprehend the president’s priorities and channel their energy into the accomplishment of these goals; the president and White House staff will work hard to maintain control of their agenda, resisting the tendency of drift and internal, destructive personality conflicts; the president will organize the White House staff in a manner that supports the accomplishment of his vision and policy goals and will provide adequate points of access and influence to his key staff members; and the president will invite a diversity of views in the presidential decision-making process, but announce clear, unambiguous decisions. Of course, things will occasionally go off course, and the president must also utilize effective damage-control techniques when necessary. Few presidents have been successful in all four areas of leadership, but some were. Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan in his first
term are exemplars of success in all four areas of leadership. President George H. W. Bush provided strong leadership in the “politics” area, but came up short on “policy.” Jimmy Carter experienced difficulty in several aspects of leadership as defined here, and Bill Clinton showed significant achievement in “policy” and “politics” but proved wanting in the areas of “structure” and “process.” President Obama proved to be strong in the areas of “policy” and “process,” but showed some weaknesses in “politics” and “structure.” Accordingly, we can also learn from the presidents who performed admirably in some aspects of leadership but failed in others.

The text will also suggest how the denouement of the Nixon administration set the stage for the post-Watergate presidency, which is the reason for the selection of presidents who have served since Watergate. The book’s major focus is a more in-depth comparison of the six most recent (post-Watergate) presidents—Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama—along the specific dimensions of leadership adumbrated earlier: policy, politics, structure, and process. We will also look ahead to how the Trump presidency may unfold in each of these areas. The analysis is driven not by partisan concern, but by the search for leadership acumen among the men who have served as president since Watergate. Hopefully, this analysis will also help students and American citizens generally sharpen their focus in estimating the potential abilities of candidates for the highest office in the land.

Policy (Vision)

The issue of “vision” is central to a president’s objectives and goals.

Questions a president or presidential candidate might ask under this component include:

- Why am I running for office, anyway?
- Where do I want to lead the nation?
- What do I want to accomplish during the next four years?
- What are my most important goals or results? What is my purpose?
- How will my administration make a difference in the lives of American citizens?
- What do I want my legacy to be?

“The first requirement of presidential leadership,” according to historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “is to point the republic in one or another direction. This can be done only if the man in the White House possesses, or is possessed by, a vision of the ideal America.” In a very real sense, a visionary president can help to change the terms of political debate. In the words of historian Robert Dallek, “There is something almost magical in the mass appeal of presidents who are devoted to high-minded, broad-gauged purpose.”

Ray Smilor, author of the book Daring Visionaries, defined vision as “the organizational sixth sense that tells us why we make a difference in the world.” Vision is a powerful instrument of presidential leadership because it helps a
president clarify his purpose, goals, and most important priorities. Vision helps provide focus to presidential staff members and allows them to concentrate their energy and prevent drift. In the absence of a strong vision, a president will be pushed and pulled in a thousand directions; he will become the object of the political process, not its master. The president must control his agenda, enunciate clear priorities, and energetically focus on the execution of those goals as intimated in the aforementioned words of Alexander Hamilton.

George Washington, the nation’s first president, demonstrated an embrace of vision when he assumed the office. Although few men began their presidency with more prestige than Washington, no president entered an equally undefined office. From his behavior and decisions, it is clear that Washington understood the impact his actions would have in setting a precedent and creating a vision of how government would “administer national affairs for the foreseeable future.” President Washington also displayed a strong dedication to the vision of republican government, never losing sight of the fact that his legitimacy derived from the consent of the governed. He showed an appreciation for the importance of his action to later generations, as reflected in the following statement:

Many things which appear of little importance in themselves and at the beginning may have great durable consequences from their having been established at the commencement of a new general government. It will be much easier to commence the administration, upon a well adjusted system, built on tenable grounds, than to correct errors or alter inconveniences after they have been confirmed by habit.

Showing strong determination for assertive leadership, Washington avoided, at all costs, “indecision, ambiguity, and vacillation” as undermining popular confidence in the competence of government. He also aimed to show his contemporaries that “the head of state can be powerful without endangering liberty.” President Washington adopted a methodical approach to decision making, intervened actively in issues that were of importance to him, and demonstrated clear understanding that “successful presidential leadership greatly depended on a vision of purpose, which was necessary to inspire and unify a newly formed country divided by competing impulses that could have torn it apart.”

President Abraham Lincoln confronted a nation that was literally tearing itself apart, but he had a strong vision of saving the union and ending slavery. He would not be dislodged from these beliefs, no matter how many crises he confronted during his years in office. They formed his core ideology and animated his presidency. Lincoln’s dedication to saving the union and to ending slavery related to his profound belief in republican government. His strong vision helped clarify his purpose and helped mobilize his energy, and those around him, toward the accomplishment of specific objectives. His vision also helped him deal with the persistent and numerous personality conflicts among his cabinet members and generals. Lincoln’s vision helped him orbit around mission, not ego. With regard to the office of the president in particular, “He possessed an acute understanding of the sources of power inherent in the presidency, an unparalleled
ability to keep his governing coalition intact, a tough-minded appreciation of the need to protect his presidential prerogatives and a natural sense of timing.”

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, while demonstrating great flexibility and pragmatism, also reflected a strong vision born of the needs of America during the Great Depression. Roosevelt’s visionary innovation helped to change the terms of the political debate in Washington. In his view, “government owed a definite obligation to prevent the starvation or other dire wants of its citizens.” And in terms of the presidency, he established the principle that action to help ordinary people was a part of the presidential job description. President Lyndon Baines Johnson displayed vision when he called on America to overcome years of racial intolerance and hatred and to provide equal opportunities to all Americans. At a 1965 Howard University ceremony, Johnson reflected his vision of a highly active federal government when he said, “It is not enough for us to open up the gates of opportunity; we must push people through those gates.” Johnson acted on his beliefs in the war on poverty—when he took office in 1964, 22.2 percent of Americans lived in poverty. When he left, only 13 percent were living below the poverty line—the greatest one-term poverty reduction in U.S. history.

President Ronald Reagan also possessed a strong vision, in his case one related to cutting taxes, cutting social welfare spending, and increasing defense spending. His surpassing vision was a nation whose economy would be more robust once rid of the shackles of taxation and costly welfare spending, and a nation that would dare to lead the fight against the “evil empire” of communism. Reagan’s vision helped him mobilize the energy of his staff to lobby Congress with great dexterity and focus. Though a Republican, Reagan was ultimately effective at persuading a Democratic House of Representatives to go along with many of his policy initiatives. In a May 26, 2008, issue of the New Yorker, author George Packer quotes Princeton historian Sean Wilentz on Reagan’s impact:

Reagan learned how to seize and keep control of public debate. On taxes, race, government, spending, national security, crime, welfare and “traditional values,” he made mainstream what had been the positions of the right-wing fringe, and he kept Democrats on the defensive.

President Barack Obama’s vision was of a strong, consequential executive who would promote fairness in American society, and in pursuit of that goal provide health care coverage to millions of Americans. He also sought a more realistic, less bellicose foreign policy vision than that of his immediate predecessor, George W. Bush. Obama would base his foreign policy less on grandiose ideals, like ending tyranny, and more on principles of prudence, restraint, sustainability, and engagement. If a president lacks a strong vision, he will be tossed around by events, pulled and tugged by powerful interest groups and congressional leaders, and paralyzed by the inevitable personality conflicts among his own staff members. President George H. W. Bush spoke mockingly of the “vision thing,” and did not truly articulate a guiding vision for his administration. President Carter oriented his political campaigns around philosophical themes, such as honesty and integrity in government, but did not really articulate a compelling vision for Americans. In
many respects, Carter campaigned on what he was, and not on what he would do. As one journalist put it, “Carter seems to stand for everything and believe in nothing.” According to former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, “Great leaders lead by ideas . . . The people who work for you, those who look to you for answers, the media, even your rivals have a right to know how you see the world.”

Politics (Strategy, Political Savvy)

“Politics” captures the leader’s ability to transform vision into reality, to get things done. As Mario Cuomo (former governor of New York) often says, “You can campaign in poetry, but you must govern in prose.”

There are several relevant questions a president must ask here:

- How will I implement or execute my vision, my program?
- Upon whom will I rely to communicate my message?
- Who will manage congressional relations?
- What strategy will I use to influence the opposition party, or even members of my own party who may have their own political agendas?
- How will I lead or manage the executive branch of government of some 2 million people?
- How will I work with the media?
- How will I stay true to my agenda, fulfill my campaign promises, and still have time to reflect and assess what I am doing?
- How many issues will I tackle at one time?

Condoleezza Rice, who served as President George W. Bush’s national security adviser and secretary of state, summed up the importance of “politics” in an interview with Richard Haass in 1994. At that time, Rice was the provost at Stanford University. She said: “You don’t have a policy unless you can get it done. You can have the best policy in the world on paper; it can be intellectually beautiful and elegant, but if you can’t get it done, it never happened.”

There are two critical aspects of “politics” for a president to master: the details of implementation and the “retail politics” or persuasion aspects of the job. First, the president must understand the requirements of policy implementation. A president cannot get things done alone. As Dwight Eisenhower observed at the end of his two-term presidency:

The government of the United States has become too big, too complex, too pervasive in its influence for one individual to pretend to direct all the details of its important and critical programming. Competent assistants are mandatory; without them the Executive Branch would bog down. To command the loyalties and dedication and best efforts of capable and outstanding individuals requires patience, understanding, a readiness to delegate, and an acceptance of responsibility for any honest errors—real or apparent—those subordinates might make.

A president relies on the other parts of the executive branch to implement his programs. President Harry Truman’s commitment to recognizing the state of
Israel in 1948 was made in a commitment to Chaim Weizmann, the future president of that country, that he would support partition. Truman was alarmed to learn that the American ambassador to the United Nations had voted for a UN trusteeship. Enraged, Truman wrote a note on his calendar that said, “The State Department pulled the rug from under me today . . . I’m now in the position of a liar and a double-crosser. I’ve never felt so low in my life.” Truman’s belief that recognizing Israel was the right thing to do, supported by his counselor Clark Clifford, was being undermined by third- and fourth-level bureaucrats at the Department of State (especially the Director of UN Affairs, Dean Rusk, and the agency’s counselor Charles Bohlen). It was also being opposed by the formidable “wise men” of the American foreign policy establishment, including George Marshall, James Forrestal, George Kennan, and Dean Acheson, who were looking at the practical matters of oil, numbers, and history. “There are 30 million Arabs on one side and about 600,000 Jews on the other,” Defense Secretary Forrestal told Clark Clifford. “Why don’t you face up to reality?” Through his persistence and absolute dedication to the rightness of the decision to recognize Israel, and with Clifford’s assistance, Truman prevailed; however, this was not accomplished through a simple presidential command.72

In a more recent example of the importance of policy implementation, once again demonstrating the president’s inability to act alone, President George W. Bush experienced frustration in implementing his human rights vision. In a June 2007 speech in Prague, in the Czech Republic, Bush vowed to order U.S. ambassadors in unfree nations to meet with dissidents and lauded the fact that he had created a fund to help embattled human rights defendants. Nevertheless, the State Department did not send out a cable instructing ambassadors to sit down with dissidents until two months later. As of August 2007, not a penny had been spent on the program.73

We can glean an insight into the idea of bureaucratic defiance of the president through the following discussion between a Bush administration staff member and a State Department official shortly after Bush’s Prague speech:

**Bush Administration Staffer:** It’s [support of dissidents] our policy.

**State Department Official:** What do you mean?

**Bush Administration Staffer:** Read the President’s speech.

**State Department Official:** Policy is not what the president says in speeches. Policy is what emerges from interagency meetings.74

The second aspect of “politics” relates to a president’s facility with persuasion and with “retail politics.” For example, President Ronald Reagan displayed great dexterity in the art of persuasion, as he worked tirelessly in 1981–1982 to secure passage of his conservative political agenda in a Democratic-controlled House of Representatives. Reagan relied heavily on Washington insiders, including his Chief of Staff James Baker and Congressional Liaison Max Friedersdorf.

Reagan’s legislative team met for long periods around a conference table in Chief of Staff James Baker’s office, hammering out details of how to get key
legislation tied up and passed on Capitol Hill. They addressed important persuasion questions, such as: Who needed to be stroked in Congress? How? With what arguments? What interest groups needed to be mobilized? To pressure whom? How should the issue be framed for the press? What columnist needed special attention? What must the president do? Could members of the cabinet take some of the load?

The Reagan team displayed a legislative acumen that was absent from the Carter administration. Reagan’s team was completely dedicated to their cause, but also understood the importance of the interests of those they were trying to convince, and tailored their persuasive appeals accordingly. Carter’s team believed that the justness of the cause itself, which was never totally clear to begin with, would help the president prevail.

In an interesting exchange with House Speaker Tip O’Neill, an old-style Democratic politician whose basic instinct was to help a Democratic president, President Carter explained how he “handled the Georgia legislature by going over their heads directly to the people.” O’Neill replied, “Hey wait a minute—you have 289 guys up there [House Democrats] who know their districts pretty well. They ran against the Administration and they wouldn’t hesitate to run against you.” Carter replied, “O really!”

Negotiating, bargaining, influencing, building coalitions, enlisting the support of competent people—all of these are requisite skills of a successful strategic president. According to political scientists Robert Dahl and Charles Lindblom in their classic text, *Politics, Economics, and Welfare*, “Because he is a bargainer, a negotiator, the politician does not often give orders. He can rarely employ unilateral controls. Even as a chief executive or a cabinet official he soon discovers that his control depends on his skill in bargaining.”

**Structure (Management)**

Structure is setting up an effective organizational structure: an efficient White House operation.

Questions a president might ask under this component include:

- *How will I organize the White House?*
- *What management structure will I utilize?*
- *Will I have a chief of staff?*
- *Will I have an open or closed operation?*
- *Will I favor micro or macro management of White House staff?*
- *How will I assure the alignment of the management with my policy agenda?*

There is nothing in the Constitution that mandates an organizational structure for the presidency. Presidents have wide latitude in the kind of management design they choose, and, as of this writing, the forty-five men who have served in the office have certainly taken full advantage of this flexibility. One of the fundamental choices a president must make, for example, is whether to have a chief of staff. President Jimmy Carter decided against including a chief of staff in his White House initially, but was persuaded to add the position later in
his administration. Carter believed that he could replace the traditional White House hierarchy with a “spokes of the wheel” management structure—with the president at the center of the wheel and the spokes radiating in and out with great ease. He favored a management style that political scientist Erwin Hargrove described as “collective collegiality.” But the loose structure proved problematic, enabling cabinet members to articulate public positions that were actually at odds with administration proposals and to initiate meetings with individuals with whom Carter had not authorized contact.

The importance of the chief-of-staff position is aptly illustrated in the transition between the first and second Reagan administrations. In the first Reagan administration, James Baker served President Reagan deftly and even protected the president from his own blind spots. In deciding to replace Baker with Donald Regan as chief of staff during the second term, however, President Reagan clearly underestimated the impact this would have on his presidency.

To amplify Reagan’s blind spot in this instance, he casually and spontaneously accepted a proposal that Donald Regan (his first-term treasury secretary) and James Baker (his first-term chief of staff) change jobs. Baker was attracted to the switch because he knew it would place him at the center of Reagan’s continuing interest in cutting taxes and also provide him more access to foreign policy decisions. For his part, Regan liked the idea of becoming chief of staff because it would place him at the very core of power and give him increased access to the president. But these men were not the same, and the change amounted to a breakup of the team that had been largely responsible for Reagan’s first-term success. As Lou Cannon explains:

No presidency has ever undergone such a thoroughgoing transformation in management as Reagan’s did under his new chief of staff, Donald T. Regan. Where Baker was collegial, Regan was directive. Where Baker was cautious, Regan was bold. Baker preferred to operate behind the scenes, forging a political consensus and framing it in terms that Reagan could endorse. Regan charged ahead, dismissing arguments he disagreed with as readily as he had dismissed contrary opinions at Merrill-Lynch.

Baker and his deputy chief of staff, Michael Deaver, had been protective of Reagan to a fault, always sensitive to the possibility of self-inflicted wounds. Reagan had some serious blind spots, as most leaders do, and Baker was willing to confront his boss as a “courageous follower.” But Donald Regan had been groomed mostly in the private sector and was unskilled in the arts of diplomacy and retail politics. He expressed surprise, for instance, about the fact that Baker would consistently return phone calls and did not understand that “strong political capital in Washington is as important as accumulating financial assets on Wall Street, and he had no resources to draw upon when crises struck.”

**Process (Decision Making)**
This dimension of leadership relates to the methods a president uses to make and announce decisions. The leader must consider whether he wants a great diversity
of opinion, or a more narrowly drawn range of options. The following questions are relevant to decision making:

- How will I make and announce decisions?
- Will I deliberately encourage dissenting opinions?
- How will I handle conflict among my own advisers?
- How will I apply “damage control” when needed?

In the spring of 2005, President George W. Bush described the office he held as follows: “It is a decision-making job, when you’re dealing with a future president, you ought to say, ‘How do you intend to make decisions? What is the process by which you will make large decisions and small decisions? How do you decide?’”87 A year later, he described himself as the “decider.”

Decision making is central to presidential job performance and presidents need to develop processes, techniques, and strategies for effectiveness in this area. One vital aspect of effective decision making is the president’s interest in hearing a diversity of views. The research on “group-think,” about how groups can quickly form the illusion of consensus and block out any dissenting opinions, has been applied to presidential decision making by psychologist Irving Janis. Janis uses the Bay of Pigs incident to illustrate the dangers of group-think.88 In that case, Kennedy’s advisers were much too quick to reinforce the president’s notion that we could “liberate” Cuba by sending in U.S. troops and fomenting a “revolution” against Castro. Realizing that mistakes had been made in the decision-making processes of the Bay of Pigs incident, President Kennedy took specific measures to ensure that there would be an open and honest debate among members of the Executive Committee during the Cuban Missile Crisis; one measure he took was to leave the room during various stages of the Committee’s deliberations.89

President Kennedy had learned an important lesson from the Bay of Pigs fiasco: that many, even most, presidential advisers will give the president the advice they think he wants to hear, not the advice he needs. Most people want to please their boss.

It is equally clear that the boss, in this case the president of the United States, can have great influence over his aides’ ability to express diverse opinions. A president can actively solicit diverse points of view, consider them seriously, and then reach a clear decision. Kennedy did this in the Cuban Missile Crisis and Lincoln did it during the Civil War.90

Alternatively, a president can signal impatience with dissenting views and seek closure on issues prematurely. One example of this tendency in presidential decision making is the decision by George W. Bush to introduce a massive tax cut in his first administration. During the 2000 campaign for president, Bush had promised to cut taxes, and he meant to deliver on that promise quickly and unambiguously. Early in his first term, he proposed a $1.6 trillion tax cut over ten years that included reducing the top brackets of tax, eliminating the estate tax, reducing the marriage penalty, and increasing child credits.91 Democrats objected to the plan, but following rounds of negotiations, the Senate and House eventually agreed on a cut of $1.35 trillion, amounting to a significant victory for Bush.92
As the president’s proposal was making its way through the scrutiny of his own advisers, however, Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill and Alan Greenspan, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, raised concerns about the extent of the cuts. O’Neill and Greenspan feared that Bush was making unduly optimistic assumptions about the extent of the budget surplus over the ten years to come and underestimating the potential ripple effects on the economy of a tax cut this large, particularly its potentially negative effect on the deficit.93 O’Neill was publicly less enthusiastic about the size of the Bush tax cuts, and there was growing concern in the administration about his loyalty to the president. In a one-on-one conversation with President Bush in O’Neill’s office, the treasury secretary laid out his concerns and ideas about the tax cut. Bush responded by saying, “I won’t negotiate with myself. It’s that simple.”94 In short, the decision had been made and the time for discussion had ended, in the mind of the president. He was no longer open to dissenting opinion. This tendency to close off debate—in service of being a “decider”—would hurt Bush in many aspects of his presidency, including the war in Iraq.95 By the end of his two terms, the federal deficit had mushroomed to almost $400 billion, and the war in Iraq was considered highly unpopular. It is possible that Bush would have arrived at a better decision had he been more open to dissenting views. In the case of Iraq, the dissenting view was expressed forcefully by Secretary of State Colin Powell. In a private meeting with the president, Secretary Powell expressed his concerns about the imminent war in Iraq:

Don’t let yourself get pushed into anything until you are ready for it or until you think there’s a real reason for it. This is not as easy as it is being presented, and take your time on this one. Don’t let anybody push you into it. You are going to be the proud owner of 25 million people. You will own all their hopes, aspirations, and problems. [Privately, Powell called this the Pottery Barn rule: You break it, you own it.] It’s going to suck the oxygen out of everything. This will become the first term. Iraq has a history that is quite complex. The Iraqis never had a democracy. So you need to understand that this is not going to be a walk in the woods.96

Presidential aides must summon the courage to give their boss honest and direct advice, as articulated by Ira Chaleff in a compelling book titled The Courageous Follower: Standing Up To and For Our Leaders (1995). Chaleff argues that we all serve our bosses more effectively by telling them the truth, and not by currying favor through deceit or half-truths.

Dean Acheson served as secretary of state under President Harry Truman, and he described the sort of relationship needed as follows:

It is important that the relations between the President and the Secretary of State be quite frank, sometimes to the point of being blunt. And you just have to be deferential. He is the President of the United States, and you don’t say rude things to him—you say blunt things to him. Sometimes he doesn’t like it. That’s natural, but he comes back, and
you argue the thing out. But that’s your duty. You don’t tell him only what he wants to hear. That would be bad for him and everyone else.\textsuperscript{97}

The selection of advisers to provide honest, unfiltered feedback to a president was seriously tested in the early days of the Trump administration. With a level of supreme confidence in himself, bordering on what some call certifiable “narcissism,” President Trump will have to work assiduously to develop the modesty to admit that he does not have all the answers he needs to today’s challenges, and to yield to the expertise of those who know.

With these four aspects of presidential leadership in mind, subsequent chapters of this text will assess the performance of four recent presidents to derive “lessons” of leadership. But first a review of the Nixon presidency and its demise will set the context for the presidents who served full terms after Watergate—and perhaps offer a cautionary tale for the newest president.

NOTES

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