THE MODERN
American Presidency

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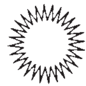
Lewis L. Gould

Foreword by Richard Norton Smith



University Press of Kansas

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Published by the University Press of Kansas (Lawrence, Kansas 66049), which was organized by the Kansas Board of Regents and is operated and funded by Emporia State University, Fort Hays State University, Kansas State University, Pittsburg State University, the University of Kansas, and Wichita State University

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gould, Lewis L.
The modern American presidency / Lewis L. Gould ; foreword by Richard Norton Smith.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0-7006-1252-1 (alk. paper)
1. Presidents—United States—History—20th century. 2. Presidents—United States—Biography. 3. United States—Politics and government—20th century. 4. United States—Politics and government—1897–1901. I. Title.
E176.1 .G68 2003
973.9'092'2—dc21 2002154108

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48–1984.

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FOREWORD

That Theodore Roosevelt is the father of the modern presidency is an article of faith among historians of the executive office. Only the boldest of revisionists would contest the claims of that swashbuckling egoist, whose flair for melodrama helped transform the presidency from chief administrative officer to a kind of permanent morality play — scripted, directed, and performed by the dervish Henry Adams called "pure act." Besides, if TR isn't the genesis of today's highly scripted, image-hungry White House, then who is? George B. Cortelyou?

George B. *who?* He may not be a household name, even in political science circles, but according to Lewis L. Gould it was Cortelyou, working in tandem with President William McKinley, who anticipated much of the modern chief executive's role as newsmaker, agenda setter, public educator, and *uber* celebrity. Seventy years before Richard Nixon scribbled malign notes in the margins of his daily press summary, Cortelyou supplied McKinley with "current clippings." Nearly a century before the Clinton White House operated a War Room reflecting the more or less permanent campaign that has all but engulfed the Oval Office, Cortelyou unveiled a nineteenth-century version. For it was under McKinley that the United States edged onto the world stage, focusing attention on the White House as incubator of American foreign policy.

That winners write history is axiomatic. Gould understands that luck and timing also rank high among the factors influencing posterity's judgment. No one illustrates this better than the last president of the nineteenth century. McKinley had the misfortune to be succeeded by Theodore Roosevelt, whose instinctive grasp of leadership rode the crest of the emerging mass media. "Taft is a far abler man than I," he once wrote of his ill-fated successor, "but he don't know how to play the popular hero and shoot a bear." Ever since, TR and his self-proclaimed "preacher president" cousin Franklin have been canonized as patron saints of executive activism.

By contrast, less aggressive — or more administratively minded — presidents have been largely written off by scholars. It is a rare his-

torian indeed who credits Taft with anticipating the modern Office of Management and Budget or Warren Harding with plans to establish a post–World War I Department of Defense. Gould is such a historian. In fashioning "a work of historical analysis aimed at the elusive target of the general reader," he understands that an American president is more than the dramatist-in-chief. Constitutionally, if not always temperamentally, he is also a manager of events for whom the *prevention* of crisis is as important as crisis management.

In this thoughtful, comprehensive, deeply researched volume, Gould skillfully draws lines of institutional continuity at the expense of what might be called the "fat pope, thin pope" theory of alternating executive styles. He *grounds* the presidency in ways that challenge popular stereotypes. Consider his treatment of Calvin Coolidge, that most prosaic of passive-negative leaders. Do the roots of twenty-first-century White House spin really lie in Coolidge's shrewd use of radio, his frequent press conferences, and his cultivation of Hollywood and other celebrities? Gould believes they do. Likewise, he argues for Dwight Eisenhower as a more naturally gifted bureaucratic innovator than FDR. Ike's military background helped to inspire the National Security Council and the White House Office of Congressional Relations, and his preference for indirect or "hidden-hand" guidance handed the poisoned chalice of visibility to surrogates. Thus, Sherman Adams became the most detested chief of staff until Nixon's H. R. Haldeman, or the first Bush's John Sununu (what *is* it about New Hampshire governors?).

If the presidency observes any law, Gould tells us, it is the law of unintended consequences. Harry Truman and Eisenhower were the least imperial of men (even if the latter displayed little reluctance to use the new CIA for covert operations in Latin America and the Middle East). Yet their response to Cold War pressures restructured the White House along lines that foreshadowed later abuses of power. For example, by citing executive privilege to shield White House staff members from Senator Joseph McCarthy's subpoenas, Eisenhower created a dangerous standard for his successors — Nixon, above all — who lacked his unique prestige earned in war.

Under John F. Kennedy the culture of celebrity took up full-time residence in the White House, aided by a glamorous First Lady, a youthful, telegenic family, and the televised press conference (sourly dismissed by James Reston as "the goofiest idea since the hula hoop"). Mindful of his narrow victory in 1960, Kennedy employed the pollster Lou Harris to help him mold public

opinion, thereby advancing the more or less continuous campaign that would reach illegal proportions under Richard Nixon. "You've got to be a little evil to understand those people out there," Gould quotes Nixon. This dark view of humanity coexisted with a mulligan stew of genuine idealism, the imaginative pursuit of decentralized government ("the New Federalism"), and a paradoxical weakness for quick fixes (wage and price controls) and intellectual men on horseback, à la Daniel Patrick Moynihan and John Connally.

"The modern presidency had an uncanny capacity to reveal the character flaw that presidential campaigns, in the case of Nixon and Carter, were designed to mask," writes Gould. "Nixon could not stay within the law, and Carter could not translate piety and commitment into effective leadership." Other writers have sought to explain Ronald Reagan's enigmatic conduct of the presidency ("He knows so little," sighed National Security Adviser Bud McFarlane, "yet accomplishes so much") within a context of Reagan's earlier Hollywood career. Few have done it so succinctly or persuasively as Gould. Supported — some would say managed — by a strong chief of staff, James Baker, and a small army of professionals gifted at packaging the modern presidency for the television audience, Reagan proved to be a conservative innovator. The president's weekly radio address and the "heroes in the balcony," choreographed as part of each year's State of the Union address, had their policy counterparts in dramatic tax and spending cuts and the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) that threatened the equilibrium of Cold War terror.

For Reagan admirers who credit the president with personally winning the Cold War through his arms buildup and SDI, Gould has constructed a deft trap: acknowledging that such conclusions may be validated as the records of his administration are opened, the author cannot resist contrasting Reagan's alleged hands-on role in dismantling the Soviet Union to the president's hazy detachment from Iran-Contra. For all this, however, Gould may underestimate the historic legacy of the so-called Reagan Revolution. In politics there is no more sincere form of flattery than imitation, as Bill Clinton's presidency demonstrates. An activist by temperament, a risk taker in his personal life, Clinton proved largely risk averse in the policy arena.

In truth, he found himself operating within a broad Reaganesque consensus, one he appeared to endorse in declaring the era of big government to be at an end. If Clinton was "a mainstream president in his policies," asks Gould, why did the man and his methods prove so polarizing? How Americans felt

about the Clintons had a great deal to do with their feelings about the decade of the sixties, a divisive era that the new president and his wife, fairly or not, came to personify. The Clinton years will be remembered for the trivialization of impeachment, Gould asserts. At the same time, he acknowledges, "Presidential scholarship always lags behind presidential actions." It is simply too early for him, or anyone else, to form more than rudimentary assessments of the second George Bush's performance.

Where the office itself is concerned, however, Gould does not hesitate to offer sobering conclusions. "To treat the modern presidency as a success story," he insists, "is to falsify the historical record. As a new century begins, the presidency today is no more capable of grappling with the difficulties of globalization, terrorism, and environmental change than was the law office approach of Grover Cleveland from 1893 to 1897." Carried to extremes, Rooseveltian persuasion, sprinkled with Sorensenian eloquence and Reaganesque image making, has led to the triumph of public relations over public policy. To wage "a long twilight struggle" against global terrorism, writes Gould, "presidents will have to reduce the time they spend on distracting trivia in order to husband their energies for the serious priority of protecting the nation."

One could easily carry this idea further — for as the president becomes a mere celebrity, citizens' expectations sink accordingly. Before Clinton left office, pollsters found it necessary for the first time to ask two questions, one dealing with job performance, the other assessing Clinton personally, in order to gauge popular attitudes. Here is disturbing evidence that the permanent campaign may have produced a permanent cynicism.

All food for thought, stylishly prepared and elegantly served up by one of America's most thoughtful, and thought-provoking, scholars. No one who reads *The Modern American Presidency* is likely to think of the office in quite the same way. George B. Cortelyou, we hardly knew ye.

Richard Norton Smith

INTRODUCTION

Four years ago, Fred Woodward said that he would like to see someone write a history of the emergence of the modern presidency in the twentieth century for general readers. To keep the book to manageable size and within the reach of its potential audience, he suggested that a text of around eighty thousand words would be suitable. With perhaps a sense of bravado, I agreed to take on the task of writing such a book.

Two decades earlier in *The Presidency of William McKinley* (1980), I had contended that William McKinley had been the first modern president because of the way he had enhanced the power of the office during and after the war with Spain in 1898. I had then considered in *The Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt* (1991) the contributions that Theodore Roosevelt had made to the development of the presidency between 1901 and 1909. As I examined the performances of William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson in the White House during the decade after Roosevelt, I became more persuaded that the rise of the modern presidency should be traced back to the period between 1897 and 1921.

To the degree that the literature on the presidency in the twentieth century ever got beyond the assertion that Franklin D. Roosevelt was the first modern president, it tended to assign little weight to the administrations of Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. Although depicting these executives as dynamic activists would have been a reach, except in the case of Hoover, it became clear that the three Republican presidents had employed techniques of managing the institution, especially in handling the media, that carried over into the Roosevelt years and beyond.

A precise definition of modernity in the American presidency has proved elusive, but the key elements would most likely include a significant increase in the size of the White House staff, a chief of staff to manage the expanded personnel, bureaucratic procedures to handle the interaction with the press, formalized relations with Congress through a White House office, greater power for the president

as commander in chief, expanded travel in and out of the United States to build political support, increasing access to and dependence upon both traditional and electronic media, and continuous campaigning to ensure reelection and the success of the president's party.

Inevitably, bureaucracy became the dominant feature of the White House, with interconnected layers of staff to interact with Capitol Hill, the public, other branches of government, foreign countries, the courts, the First Lady, interest groups, legal questions, and a host of unexpected contingencies. Simply understanding how the complex and varied presidency worked, its customs and assumptions, proved a more challenging assignment for both its occupants and eventually for the scholars who studied it.

But the essence of change in the presidency did not reside in the bureaucratic accretion of assistants, offices, and staff labels. What the presidents did in the twentieth century mattered most. They fought and won two world wars and led the country in other regional conflicts. They championed legislation, oversaw the economy, traveled around the world, and articulated American values. They became, in a favorite phrase applied to many of them, "the most powerful men in the world," and their every movement and foible were seen as suitable for analysis, criticism, and dissection. Presidents did not reach this lofty status all at once. The many roles that modern presidents play evolved over the course of the century in response to national and world pressures and events. As the United States became a world power, the president's place in the government had to be more central if the nation was to have coherent leadership.

Other forces thrust the president forward in distinctive respects. When McKinley was in office, the political party shaped the way presidents were selected and governance was conducted. After 1900, however, the intense partisanship of the late nineteenth century receded. Reformers pushed for procedural changes — the direct primary, direct election of senators, limits on patronage — that reduced the clout of the parties. The degree to which parties had been central to the designation of presidential candidates diminished. Aspirants for the White House had to gain the nomination on their own and win reelection with personal organizations that they created and maintained.

One little-noticed feature of the twentieth-century presidency was the extent to which the institution absorbed for its own purposes the style and

methods of celebrity and show business. While much attention has been properly focused on presidential press relations, the emergence of presidential stardom and its effects on the institution have needed more study, and in the chapters that follow I attempt to address that issue. To win election and reelection now requires mastery of the arts of movies and television, but these time-consuming rituals, though necessary from a political perspective, produce a corresponding loss of concentration on the business of governing the country. A key theme of this book is that presidential celebrity is a major element of the modern presidency and a long-term weakness as well.

The character of the late-twentieth-century presidency also developed from laudable attempts to remedy past problems that in turn led to unintended consequences. The most striking example is the Twenty-second Amendment, limiting presidents to two elected terms. Designed to prevent another Franklin D. Roosevelt and his four terms, the amendment codified the two-term tradition. Yet the change imposed a particular version of the presidency on the Constitution that took away the rights of voters to select an individual for a third term if they wished. More important, it created an environment in which the first term was seen only as a prelude to the productive second term that would validate presidential greatness. The Twenty-second Amendment, however, drained presidential power in the second term from what had become in effect a lame-duck president. The result was a series of anticlimactic or disastrous second terms in the post–World War II era.

One major conclusion of this account of the rise of the modern presidency is that, with the possible exception of Franklin D. Roosevelt, most chief executives would have had a better historical reputation if they had contented themselves with a single elected term and retired at the end of it. The notion that a one-term president is ipso facto a failure has been another distorting element in the conduct of the institution. The pressures of reelection do not bring out the best in presidents. The phenomenon of the continuing campaign acts like an acid on any impulse the incumbent may have to make unpopular but necessary decisions for the American people.

Even the most ambitious and successful presidents now have only eight years to impose their vision on the nation and the government. The rigors of campaigning leave most candidates exhausted at the end of the process. Presidents-elect then have to step into a job that is highly structured and physically draining but that puts a premium on symbolism over serious

thought. The days are filled with the pomp and circumstance of glorified busywork that takes time from what modern presidents most need, the opportunity to think about what they are doing.

To suggest that presidents participate in fewer campaign appearances, photo opportunities, and staged events is not to argue that they ought to become isolated figures dispensing decisions from a cloistered White House. Campaigning and communicating will always be part of what a president does. Over the course of the twentieth century, however, the notion grew that presidents were somehow about the people's serious business when they pursued reelection, raised money for their party, and staged media occasions at a rate that cut into time for understanding the complex issues and hard policy choices the nation faced. Presidents rarely increased their intellectual capital while in office; by the late twentieth century any pretense of doing so had been all but abandoned.

In the writings about twentieth-century presidents, there is the tacit assumption that the way the institution turned out was best for the nation. A talented group of politicians occupied the presidency over the past one hundred years, all of them doing what they believed to be best for the United States. It is no denigration of their patriotism and commitment to say that most of them fell well short of the challenges of an impossible job. To treat the modern presidency as a success story is to falsify the historical record. As a new century begins, the presidency today is no more capable of grappling with the difficulties of globalization, terrorism, and environmental change than was the law-office approach of Grover Cleveland from 1893 to 1897.

This is a work of historical synthesis aimed at the elusive target of the general reader. It does not pretend to be a narrative account of every twentieth-century president or administration in full. When primary sources were readily available and pertinent, I used them, but much of the narrative necessarily depends on memoirs, previous accounts of key presidencies, and the valuable work of other historians and political scientists. Citation of all the relevant works on each president would have made for a book two or three times the size of this one. Omission of a book or article should not be read as evidence of criticism of that scholar's work. Some key titles have no doubt been missed. The industry of writing about presidents never sleeps.

The book could not have been written without the aid of the volumes in the American Presidency series of the University Press of Kansas. As an author

in that series, I know how rigorous are the editorial procedures the participants must traverse. Diverse in their points of view about their presidents, the books in the series provide a narrative sweep of how the United States was governed in the past century in ways that make these volumes an intellectual resource on their own terms.

I am grateful to Fred Woodward for asking me to write this book and for guiding it with such an expert hand. His willingness to take time out from his many responsibilities to encourage my work attests to his kindness and skill. My colleague, Bud Lasby, provided a close, informed reading of the whole text and gave me valuable thoughts about Harry Truman and civil rights that went into that chapter directly. Another colleague, Robert A. Divine, was very generous over the years with opportunities to write about presidents and First Ladies in his editing projects. My former students, graduates and undergraduates, prompted me to think about the modern presidency throughout my teaching career. I owe particular debts to Thomas Clarkin, Stacy Cordery, Byron Hulsey, Mark Young, and Nancy Beck Young for sources and insights.

Some years ago, Professor Ephraim Smith shared with me documents and articles he had collected about George B. Cortelyou that proved valuable in assessing Cortelyou's influence on the presidency. Bob Lester invited me to be a consultant in the effort by Lexis-Nexis to place presidential materials on-line, and that assignment provided important background research for this book. Don Carleton, director of the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin, gave enthusiastic assistance to the book, and Linda Peterson was very helpful in selecting illustrations from the center's collections. I am grateful to Dirck Halstead, David Kennerly, and Bruce Roberts for permission to use their excellent photographs. Chris Hiers provided a superb cover illustration. The readers for the University Press of Kansas, Richard Ellis and Richard Norton Smith, gave me thoughtful criticisms, many of which I have incorporated into the final version. Richard Norton Smith also kindly contributed the foreword to the book. Neither they nor any of the other people mentioned are accountable for the shortcomings of this book, which are my responsibility.

Patricia Schaub was a valuable aide with the research for the book. Dr. Larry Breedlove kept me in good health to finish the task, as did Christine Eubank, Claire Hyder, and Ellen Smith. Rick Levinson provided timely comments about the overall approach of the book. Karen Gould was patient and supportive, as always.