

The Presidency: A Need for Greatness Again

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The experiences of the last four American Presidents have shown that the Presidency is in trouble. I am referring to the Presidency as an institution of leadership. This distressing phenomenon has taken place at a time when our nation is in trouble fiscally, could be at a tipping point of decline globally, and could witness a possible decline in the standard of living for the next generation.

The Founding Fathers invested what they considered were extraordinary powers in the Commander-in-Chief, especially considering that they had revolted against a monarchy. The Founding Fathers did not—and could not—allow for what they called in the Federalist Papers “factionalism.” The Founding Fathers felt that such factionalism could destroy Democracy. Today, we would label factionalism as polarization, single-issue politics, shrill talk radio, and the lack of a culture of civility in the Congress. This mélange hinders accomplishing the first principle of Presidential leadership—national unity of effort—which is vital to overcome the severe challenges facing the United States. We achieved this unity of effort when we prevailed against our enemies during World War II and the Cold War.

In more placid periods of American History, such factionalism and partisanship did not present a major problem. For example, vindictive personal politics were the norm when John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson confronted each other in the 1820s and 1830s. Some in the Adams camp insulted Mrs. Jackson, calling her a woman of ill-repute—a wound from which Jackson never fully recovered. Such partisanship did not disturb the course of American history then, but extreme partisanship today can indeed disturb the course of history.

I published a book the year before the Presidential election, entitled *A Call to Greatness: Challenging Our Next President*. It was made available in draft to the candidates. I wrote that a storm was then gathering that threatened the new President’s prospects for success. This storm was eroding America’s strategic and financial freedom of action, including the threats of an over stretched military, two simultaneous wars, international terrorism, and financial insecurity—imperiled by our addiction to debt, easy credit and runaway healthcare costs that were driving businesses overseas. We also were—and still are—over dependent on foreign oil and a rapidly declining basic education system. Little did I calculate that the new President would face a financial catastrophe exceeded only by the Great Depression. Internationally, the new rising economic superpower, China, had become our banker. No wonder that our chief negotiator abroad, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, complained that “we have to address this deficit and the debt of the United States as a matter of national security not only as a matter of

economics...I do not like to be in the position where the United States is a debtor nation to the extent that we are.”

The famous British historian, Arnold Toynbee, wrote that throughout history nations that confront severe challenges choose renewal or decline. You may recall a recent cover story of *Newsweek*, ominously on the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, December 7, 2009. The cover pictured the Capitol building upside down, pointing toward the title, “How Great Powers Fall.” The subtitle read, “Steep Debt, Slow Growth, and High Spending Kill Empires—and America could be next.” The lead article was by another eminent British historian and economist, Niall Ferguson, of Oxford and Harvard. I believe, whether we like it or not, whether Barack Obama likes it or not, that the President stands at the crossroads of either decline or renewal. Obviously, we must choose renewal and prosperity. We must agree with President Obama who in past speeches says that renewal can only take place if it is broadly bipartisan and consensual.

How can a President successfully achieve such consensual leadership in view of the dysfunctionalities of the Presidency described earlier? Mark Twain said, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it can rhyme.” Unfortunately, we seem to be getting all the bad rhymes. So, let us seek some good ones. President Ronald Reagan was successful because with his articulation—which could match that of his idol, Franklin Roosevelt—and his ability to bring Democrats into his coalition, he became the President of all the people. George H.W. Bush perfectly executed the Gulf War, oversaw the end of the Cold War, and united East and West Germany, thus bringing the combined nation into the NATO alliance, but he was then thrown out of office largely by the result of a disaffected Republican party. Similarly, Newt Gingrich’s “Contract with America” and mid-term election victories successfully knocked Bill Clinton down a peg in 1994.

Then we began the ups and downs of recent Presidencies, with one excess leading to a counter excess. Representative Gingrich summoned me to his office four days after he was named Speaker of the House. I still headed the Center for the Strategic and International Studies at the time. “Dave, we have won this reform, I have worked with you and CSIS in building bipartisan groups. While I want this revolution to be bipartisan, I need to warn you, these newly elected Republicans are not your kind of guys. None of them have been overseas. They will take controlling.” True to his ominous warning, the party ran out-of-control to his right. Newt tried to follow them. Then he led the effort to close down government.

Such abruptness with the next election put a wiser Bill Clinton back on his feet. He picked up a good rhyme, he triangulated. He built Republican and Democratic coalitions. We then entered the golden years of the Clinton administration, with welfare reform, the Balanced Budget Act and a booming economy. It tragically came to an end with the Monica Lewinski affair. That forced President Clinton to move left to hold Democratic House votes during the impeachment proceedings. In the Senate trial, Clinton’s ratings remained high, an indication that the Republican prosecutors lacked public support. Senator Dianne Feinstein offered a constructive way out and called for a resolution stating that President Clinton “gave false and misleading testimony,” and his actions “impeded

discovery of evidence in judicial proceedings.” This resolution had bipartisan support from seventy-nine Senators. Unfortunately, this statesmanship was rejected and fed the polarization that followed.

George W. Bush was elected to heal these partisan wounds, apparently planning to govern as he had in Texas, with Democratic and Republican coalitions. He intoned in his beautiful first inaugural speech, “Civility is not a tactic or a sentiment. It is the determined choice of trust over cynicism, of community over chaos. This commitment, if we keep it, is a way to shared accomplishment.” After 9/11, he united the country and had the sympathy of the world, but he later lost this unity because of polarization and division at home and abroad. His Presidency became to some political scientists the most partisan in history.

The peril to the nation, as we have noted, vastly increased by the time that President Barack Obama was inaugurated. He faced not only two wars and continued terrorism, but also a financial meltdown as well.

It is amazing however that, underneath this financial crisis, one of the smoothest Presidential transitions in history occurred. The transition between George W. Bush and Barack Obama was dramatically the opposite of that between Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt, who spoke only once during the transition. FDR deliberately distanced himself from Hoover on the international front, which fueled the domestic downturn even more. By contrast, during the catastrophic events of September 2008, Senator Obama phoned Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson frequently during the campaign and transition.

Chairman of the Federal Reserve Ben Bernanke, who like others had made mistakes in forecasting the crisis, then showed that he learned from the Great Depression by expanding the credit market. He worked hand in hand with Tim Geithner at the New York Federal Reserve and then as Secretary of the Treasury. I believe Bernanke truly saved us from another Great Depression and this is why the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress (CSPC) presented him with the “Hamilton Award” in April 2010. The Bernanke-Paulson-Geithner experience shows how Americans can rise above the partisan fray to rescue their country in a principled way.

In his first inaugural, President Obama—like George W. Bush—called upon the nation to come together. In his stimulus package he brought Republicans and Democrats to the White House for agreements on principles. But, when he sent the bill to Congress, to the Speaker, and to the Chairman of the Appropriations Committee, polarization reigned. Congress has complicated each of President Obama’s initiatives, except in the field of educational reform and national security policy. This is the reason that his greatest success on K-12 education, which incorporates many Republican ideas on charter schools and teachers pay, has been an historic initiative.

In the national security area he appointed as his advisor—to the surprise of the liberal left—6’4” Marine General Jim Jones, kept on Republican Defense Secretary Robert Gates, and picked Hillary Clinton from the Senate to become Secretary of State. While the challenge of the two wars and the fight against al-Qaeda, particularly in Afghanistan and

Pakistan, can be an uphill battle, President Obama has developed the teamwork that will prevent previous disasters such as the Bay of Pigs, the Iran-Contra Affair or the inadequate planning of and strategy for the Iraq War.

Some encouraging signs exist that the nation is waking to this challenge, especially in the Senate, but few have crossed party lines. Senators Mark Warner and Bob Corker collaborated on financial reform before Senator Chris Dodd moved in another direction. Senators Lindsey Graham, Joe Lieberman and John Kerry also have collaborated on independent energy initiatives. In fact, the Foreign Relations Committee Chairman and Ranking Member, Senators Kerry and Richard Lugar respectively, regularly work across party lines.

More importantly on the unsustainable fiscal course, a proposed Fiscal Future Commission, modeled on the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission (BRAC), had the sixty votes in the Senate necessary to avoid a filibuster. But when President Obama finally endorsed the new Commission, the dysfunction within the system and partisanship led six Republican senators—who had previously co-sponsored the Conrad-Gregg legislation calling for such a commission to be established—to vote against it. Now, under his own initiative, the President has set up this Commission by an Executive Order to be chaired by former White House Chief of Staff Erskine Bowles and former Senator Al Simpson.

Overcoming the dysfunctionalities of governance through bipartisan leadership is becoming more urgent and, increasingly, it demands courage from our leadership. One example of courage occurred when House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer told a group of people, including myself, “I just left Speaker Pelosi. She doesn’t like the idea of a commission to take fiscal reform options out of the legislative process. I have since broken with her on this issue.” Congressman Hoyer did this because he said he could no longer sacrifice his grandchildren’s future.

Whether or not the Republicans take back the House in the mid-term election, it is clear that their strength will increase. Part of President Obama’s problem in the House has been that the Speaker and some Committee Chairs are more to the left than the country, as well as President Obama. As a result of the mid-term elections changing that center of gravity, President Obama will have the opportunity to follow that golden period of the Clinton administration, between the 1994 mid-terms and the Monica Lewinsky affair, and craft a bipartisan agenda and strategy for accomplishing it. What needs to be done for the country is the subject of a report released by CSPC on March 19, *Saving America’s Future*, led by Norman Augustine, David Walker and Roy Romer.

What does all this mean for US Chiefs of Mission abroad? I was Ambassador to NATO during a severe period of crisis from 1983-1987. We were then faced with the Soviet deployment of SS-20 missiles, which, if not checkmated by counter-deployment, would have severed the transatlantic deterrent strategy. This would have allowed the Soviets to threaten Europe without automatically triggering our full deterrent response. Three European governments opposed our counter-deployments because they felt that it

would provoke the Soviet Union. Before we could confront these challenges, we needed the credibility of a strong President backed by a strong economy to ensure freedom of action. We needed the credibility of President Reagan, who eventually would go to Geneva and recognize that Gorbachev was looking for a way out of his economic dilemma and begin the waltz that eventually ended the Cold War without firing a shot. This was an America with its freedom of action preserved, despite the fact that the Soviets offered a major nuclear and conventional threat to us.

Every fellow ambassador no doubt has a similar story where they called up history and America's ability to set aside partisan interests to advance national priorities. Today's challenges are great, but not insurmountable. The key is to find the correct rhymes in history and to build consensus throughout government, with our allies, and with the American people.