

The Baxter Bulletin

F.H. Buckley: King Obama our latest monarch

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The idea that President Obama acts as if he is the king of the United States or a tyrant, instead of president, has become a cliché over the past five years. While to many Americans, the idea may seem over the top, it has deep roots in the American consciousness. Many Americans have long thought our Revolution simply replaced one despot with another. We moved from King George III to (insert the president of the day).

Unlike real kings, American presidents are elected, but they nevertheless enjoy powers a king would envy. George Mason, who declined to sign our Constitution in 1787, predicted this. He said U.S. presidents would be “elected monarchs.”

And just as Mason predicted, we’re seeing something like monarchical government under President Obama. In truth, however, the expansion of presidential power has been going on in one way or another under most of the presidents who came before. Obama has simply exploited the opportunities implicit in his office. The Framers thought they had erected a wall against rule by a king, but Obama found cracks in the wall, cracks with the fingerprints of presidents such as Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. If it’s blame you’re looking for, blame presidential government, not Obama.

The problem with presidents goes beyond the United States. The libertarian Cato Institute rates the U.S. as the world’s 17th most economically free nation. All the democracies ahead of it are parliamentary governments. Looking more broadly around the world, an empirical study I conducted found that presidential governments are less free than parliamentary ones. The U.S. has had a good run for 225 years, but the time has come to reconsider.

It’s easy to see why there are presidents for life but not prime ministers for life. The American system of separation of powers, which divided the responsibilities of Congress and the presidency, was supposed to protect freedom by preventing power from being concentrated in a single branch of government. But that’s not how it turned out. Like a boomerang that swings

back and strikes the person who launched it, the separation of powers has served to prevent Congress from reining in an imperial president.

Think of parliamentary non-confidence motions. With one majority vote, a government can be pushed from office by the House of Commons, and compare it with the cumbersome impeachment procedure of the U.S. Constitution requiring a two-thirds vote in the Senate after a majority vote in the House. Here's a trivia question: How often has a U.S. president been removed from office: Never.

Think also of the difference between the president's ability to avoid scrutiny and the prime minister's duty to attend parliament to answer questions thrown from every direction. The American system produces one kind of leader and parliamentary government, something different, quick on his feet and accustomed to brickbats and ridicule.

Finally, there's the difference between a parliamentary system that separates the head of state (the queen) from the head of government (the prime minister) and a presidential system that unites both in the president. Politicians should be figures of ridicule and not of royal reverence.

Should we be surprised, then, if presidents make laws by regulatory diktat, unmake laws by refusing to enforce them, or make wars when they want? It's in the nature of things in a presidential system. It is what happens when a president pokes his head through what was thought an impenetrable wall. It's dangerous, and we must hope for a revival of congressional power that seals up the wall again. That's what the Framers would have wanted.

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