

The American Conservative

One Cheer for the British Royal Family

Posted By [John Payne](#) On May 1, 2011 @ 5:30 pm In

Last Friday, millions of Americans rose early to voluntarily subject themselves to the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. I'm baffled by this behavior, but everyone needs some frivolity in his life. Far be it from me to condemn people for their choice of innocuous diversion. And the British fascination with their royalty might have an inadvertent political benefit.

All people feel a need to belong to a group, and many people look to the political realm to fill that need. I'm inclined to think they shouldn't define themselves by their political affiliations, but if people insist upon making politics a central part of their identities, some political figures are less dangerous objects of admiration than others. The British Royals make ideal candidates to play this role because they hold no real power. If they so choose, the British people can fawn over the royal family and feel as though they are part of Britain's long and glorious history. (Glorious to the British, anyway; Bengalis might have a different take on the matter.)

In America, by contrast, politically engaged people expect the president—by far our most powerful political figure—to embody the nation. Although the American people are rarely united in their approval for a particular president, partisans shape their identities based on what the president does. If a president abandons a campaign plank, such as a vow not to engage in wars without Congressional authorization, members of his party quickly alter their “principles” to conform to the new party line. The opposition party is no better, rediscovering their appreciation for a limited executive at the exact moment it benefits them to do so. Even the group arguably most opposed to executive power in the country, the Ron Paul movement, hopes to take the presidency and use it to radically reshape society.

This hero worship has resulted in what Cato Institute Vice President Gene Healy called in the title of his 2008 book [The Cult of the Presidency](#)^[1]. Healy summarized the dangers of our national cult in [an article](#)^[2] for *Reason*:

Throughout the 20th century more and more Americans looked to the central government to deal with highly visible public problems, from labor disputes to crime waves to natural disasters. And as responsibility flowed to the center, power accrued with it. If that trend continues, responses to matters of great public concern will be increasingly federal, increasingly executive, and increasingly military.

In the years to come, many Americans will find that the results of executive action are not to their liking. And if history is any guide, they'll respond by vilifying the officeholder and looking for another man on horseback to set things right again.

The British rarely, if ever, put these kinds of expectations on their prime ministers. Winston Churchill was a revered war leader, but the British people turned out his party almost as soon as the shooting in Germany came to an end. They did not believe that he could solve *all* of their problems. It's unlikely that something like that will ever happen under the American presidential system. If Franklin Roosevelt had survived the war and lived another twenty years, he probably could have handily won re-election as president as long as he so desired.

There are many reasons the British have more reasonable expectations of their highest elected official

than Americans. The most important is the obvious limitation on any single individual's power in a parliamentary system. I believe a minor but still significant reason is that the prime minister is not the embodiment of the British state. The opposition party (and in many cases, his own party) regularly challenge the PM's policies to his face during Prime Minister's questions. This behavior might be seen as almost traitorous in America. Public opinion cannot serve as such a meaningful check on executive power in America because the public often *refuses* to limit the power of the president out of deference to the office.

Americans expect the president to be all things to all people, so we have loaded the office with almost comical powers. As if to prove the universe has a sense of irony, our system of government with tremendous power concentrated in the presidency has become more monarchical than the British system...and their anachronistic royal family is part of the reason why.

I should note that my father is the first person I ever heard make this argument in a conversation several years ago. He might have gotten it from someone else, and I'm sure some Anglophile must have made a similar argument at some point, but I don't know of anyone who has. Feel free to cure my ignorance in the comments.

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[1] The Cult of the Presidency: http://www.amazon.com/Cult-Presidency-Americas-Dangerous-Executive/dp/1933995157/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1304136581&sr=8-1

[2] an article: <http://reason.com/archives/2008/05/12/the-cult-of-the-presidency/singlepage>

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