



Presidential Fantasies

Bring the 'clerkship' back to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

By: Jay Cost – November 11, 2013

At the start of last month's government shutdown, a mostly overlooked message emanated from the Twitter account of Michelle Obama, informing her followers: "Due to Congress's failure to pass legislation to fund the government, updates to this account will be limited." The conventions of American governance typically exclude the first lady from the rough-and-tumble of politics, yet it does raise an important question: Why is America paying a staffer good money to publish Tweets under Michelle Obama's name?

Today, the White House employs over 400 people with a payroll of nearly \$40 million. Compare that to the 45 employees under Franklin Roosevelt and one can appreciate just how enormous the operation is today at the White House—large enough to pay somebody to tweet for the first lady.

The enormous expenditure on the White House staff reflects the growth of the modern presidency, which has been remarkably transformed from the original vision proffered by the Founders. Presidential adviser Richard Neustadt famously called the old presidency a "clerkship"; the tasks were to wield the veto pen, prepare a State of the Union address (usually delivered in writing), manage foreign affairs and war-making, issue pardons, and, of course, "take care that the laws be faithfully executed." This limited vision held the country in good stead for over a century, and its responsibilities and powers were flexible enough that excellent men like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln could still make of it what their extraordinary capacities enabled them to.

But it was not enough for the Progressives. Woodrow Wilson in particular sought a revision of the presidential office. He thought the Framers had made a grave mistake in dispersing power as they did. Their outdated views of the danger of concentrated power kept the government from acting with responsibility and energy. Early in his academic career, Wilson praised the British parliamentary model, in which the executive and legislative functions were combined in the House of Commons. But after he witnessed the vigor of Grover Cleveland and Theodore Roosevelt, he changed his mind on how the government should be "fixed." He thought an active and vigorous president could inspire and mobilize the public behind his program, and thus unify what the Framers had separated.

Most presidents ever since have seen their role in a similar light. Ditto the people at large. According to Cato Institute scholar Gene Healy, just about everybody sees the president simultaneously as "world leader," "protector of the peace," "chief legislator," "manager of prosperity," and "voice of the people."

This is why nobody much complains that Mrs. Obama is paying somebody good money to tweet on her behalf.

Yet in pursuing this “modern president,” the people have in fact been chasing a fiction. The president simply lacks the capacities that Wilson envisioned. The vision of the modern president was never amended into the Constitution, meaning that the formal powers of the office are the same as they ever were. The power of the modern president is informal, mostly wrapped up in his power of persuasion. But as political scientist George C. Edwards III demonstrates in *The Strategic President*, there really is no evidence that the president persuades in the way that Wilson thought he could. He cannot move public opinion by fiat; at best, he can mobilize existing opinions into a coalition for action. But even those efforts are inevitably constrained by a host of factors, like the partisan makeup of the legislature. Wilson learned this lesson the hard way as his efforts to pressure the Senate to ratify membership in the League of Nations failed.

Yet the public still looks for a man who can be the voice of the people, and this fruitless quest has created a great deal of harm along the way. Every president feels compelled to “spin” the news in as favorable a light as possible to create the (often false) impression that he is the master of events. Always and everywhere, the modern president must give the impression that he has everything under control, and is sure to iron out whatever problems he may encounter. Yet quite often the president is a victim of circumstance or his own ineptitude, and has no power to do anything about it. As a result, the president comes, sooner or later, to be perceived as a liar by all but his most diehard supporters.

Furthermore, the modern presidency can be a deeply alienating institution. The Framers understood that ours is a diverse country. In *Federalist 10*, James Madison argued that this diversity would be its saving grace, as no faction or interest could hope to dominate all the others. Keen students of history, the drafters of the Constitution were well aware of the concept of strong executive authority, of kings in particular. They consciously excluded such an instrument from the Constitution, via the Congress and the federal structure. It was Wilson and the Progressives who rejected this ideal, arguing that the country was becoming unified, and would continue to do so with strong national leadership.

While there is certainly much truth to the idea that the United States has become a more unified nation since the Founding—when it was easier to travel from Boston to London than from Boston to Charleston—ours remains a strikingly diverse nation. No president can hope to unify our many factions, which means that a large segment of the public will invariably find the chief executive extolling values antithetical to their own. Is it any wonder that liberals chafed under the George W. Bush presidency as conservatives have under Obama’s?

Worse still, the modern presidency distracts the citizenry from its paramount civic duty of monitoring Congress. Despite the pretensions of the White House to omnipotence, the fact remains that Congress is—as Morris Fiorina once put it—the “keystone of the Washington establishment.” Domestic power flows from Congress, not the White House, and yet Americans pay little attention to the doings of the legislature. Instead, for generations, the best proxy for predicting congressional elections has been the

standing of the president. If Congress today comes across like a spoiled, undisciplined child, maybe it is because the people have been distracted by the bells and whistles of the modern presidency.

Finally, Americans spend too much time looking for a superman to sit in the Oval Office, rather than a decent administrator who can actually do the jobs assigned him by the Constitution. It is here that we can see Barack Obama as the apotheosis of the Wilsonian ideal. He campaigned self-consciously as a national shaman, whose mere presence could make the government function “properly.” Meanwhile, he never exhibited the slightest aptitude for or interest in the humdrum skill-set that the Framers envisioned the chief executive should possess. Taking care that the laws be faithfully executed, negotiating treaties with foreign powers, using the veto as a check on legislative overreach—all of this is insufferable tedium for a personage as special as Barack Obama thinks he is. As Valerie Jarrett told Obama biographer David Remnick: “He’s been bored to death his whole life. He’s just too talented to do what ordinary people do.”

And so in Obama we can see that the Wilsonian model has the tendency to produce the worst of both worlds. Here is a man who cannot realize the ideal of the modern presidency, because it is simply unrealizable. But he lacks the facility to attend to the basic tasks of the chief executive. He spends his days planning “inspiring” speeches that predictably fail to move public opinion, and is AWOL on the uninspiring tasks set forth for him in the Constitution. For instance, when it came to figuring out what the United States should do in Syria—according to the *New York Times*—he “often appeared impatient or disengaged while listening to the debate, sometimes scrolling through messages on his BlackBerry or slouching and chewing gum.”

It is fair to suppose that such executive torpor has contributed to the various fiascos of this administration—from policy drift in Syria to the murders in Benghazi to the disastrous implementation of Obamacare to the 2011 budget crisis. In all of them, it is a reasonable bet that things turned out as poorly as they did because the country has a chief executive who sees himself more as a soothsayer than an executive.

“Democracy,” H. L. Mencken once quipped, “is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard.” For over a century, the United States has been deluded by an erroneous and costly understanding of the presidency. In searching for a superhuman leader who does not actually exist, the nation has repeatedly selected leaders who are not up to the decidedly human tasks the Constitution requires. And this misguided pursuit facilitates executive mendacity, division, and misbehavior in Congress. Unless we correct our faulty notions about the potential power of the president, we are bound to be saddled time and again with incompetent administrators like Barack Obama, who, in his efforts to “save” the country, will leave it worse off than when he found it.