

Inertia Wins!

The Iron Law of Politics

A Rational View of the Presidency

By Ryan Young - Posted on October 18, 2012 | [Leave a comment](#)

Back in 2008, Gene Healy wrote a book called *Cult of the Presidency*. It was an election year, so naturally many people thought it was an anti-Bush polemic. But it wasn't about Bush. It wasn't about any president, really. It was about how people view the presidency itself.

Gene's thesis is that people have unrealistically high expectations for the office. Expectations so high that no man can meet them. But in trying to meet them, that man will grab for more and more power. As he inevitably fails to make voters' hopes and dreams come true, he will decline in popularity until a fresher face takes his place. And that fresher face will grab for still more power, and disappoint even more people. It's a remarkably vicious cycle.

When Gene wrote the book, he had no idea Barack Obama would win the Democratic nomination. But win it Obama did, in large part by tapping into voters' unrealistic expectations for what the office can accomplish. Now that four years have gone by, he has institutionalized and expanded Bush-era abuses of power. He is also decidedly less popular than he used to be (though this writer still expects him to win a second term).

Obama's Republican opponents have suffered from a tiresome Obama Derangement Syndrome from the very beginning. But even Obama's supporters have lost much of their enthusiasm. He didn't keep all those grand promises he made. More to the point: he couldn't possibly keep them.

It's not in Gene's nature to say "I told you so." But he does have a new e-book that came out today that updates *Cult of the Presidency*. His thesis has only become more compelling now that enough time has come by for it to be tested. I've only just begun reading the book, but a passage from the introduction makes it clear just how prescient he was in 2008, well before he even knew who the candidates would be:

If the Obama presidency has driven Americans mad, perhaps that's because we've embraced a demented notion of the presidency itself.

It's childish to blame this state of affairs on the powerlust of individual presidents or the fecklessness of particular Congresses.

Presidents reliably lust for power; Congress is dependably feckless. But the Pogo Principle is the soundest explanation for what the presidency has become: We the People have met the enemy, and it is us. We built this...

[O]ver the course of the 20th century, the modern president had become "our guardian angel, our shield against harm . . . He's America's shrink and social worker and our national talk-show host. He's a guide for the perplexed, a friend to the downtrodden—and he's also the Supreme Warlord of the Earth."

I'll it say for him: *he told you so*. You can buy the book for less than four dollars here.

Ryan Young - Fellow in Regulatory Studies at the Competitive Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC. All opinions are mine.