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Presidential history lesson: Talk less, promise less

By Steven F. Hayward

Next week America observes "Presidents Day," the holiday that consolidates observances of the birthdays of George Washington (Feb. 22) and Abraham Lincoln (Feb. 12). This might seem like an insult to the memory of our two most revered presidents, but if Washington and Lincoln were alive today, they would not recognize what the office has become.

Like all our political institutions, the presidency has evolved with the growth of the nation and the pace of change in the modern world. Three key changes come to mind.

First, the office of the president has expanded considerably. President Ulysses S. Grant ran the White House with a staff of six and President William McKinley had a staff of 27. Today, there are several hundred people on the White House staff as well as the nearly 3,000 executive branch appointments the president must make upon taking office.

Second, the president speaks to us almost daily, in person, in written comments, or through senior staff or spokespersons such as the White House press secretary, who offers daily briefings to reporters. Some day, it might occur to a president that one secret of preserving public support is to talk less. Before the 20th century, presidents spoke publicly very seldom, and then usually in the most general terms.

Rare appearances

Our first 25 presidents gave an average of 12 speeches a year. And even this low average is skewed upward by late 19th century presidents, who began giving more speeches around the country after railroads made presidential travel more feasible. Washington averaged three public speeches a year; John Adams only one; Thomas Jefferson five; and James Madison -- zero. Even President Andrew Jackson, thought to have introduced a measure of populism into presidential politics, averaged only one public speech a year.

Third, though all presidents and candidates for the office emphasize their "leadership vision" for the country, this has led to a counterproductive inflation of our expectations that no president can fulfill. As the **Cato Institute's** Gene Healy puts it, "We still expect the commander in chief to heal the sick, save us from hurricanes,

and provide balm for our itchy souls."

Miracle worker

Today, it is clear that many Americans believe that the president ought to be a miracle worker. For liberals, the "president as hero" makes perfect sense, which is why they swooned over the personality of Barack Obama, who reminded them of Robert and John Kennedy because of his "charisma." Herman Finer, an eminent political scientist of the Kennedy era at the University of Chicago, wrote that "the president has become the incarnation of the American people in a sacrament resembling that in which the wafer and the wine are seen to be the body and blood of Christ."

But it was not always so. Before the 20th century, Congress was considered the more important branch of government. Thomas Reed, the legendary Republican House speaker in the 1890s, turned away suggestions that he run for president because he considered it a lesser office.

This suggests a huge counterintuitive opportunity for a president who wants to effect real change in America: promise less, and shut up. All presidents like to talk about the greatness and self-reliance of the American people. Someday, maybe a president will take this to heart, and simply promise to run the government well, defend the country from its enemies, let us sort out our problems more on our own, and leave the miracle-working to God.

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