



A false idol, a loaded weapon

Gene Healy - *October 22, 2012*

In the spring of 2008, well before Sen. Barack Obama had secured the Democratic nomination, I wrote a book called "The Cult of the Presidency," arguing that for too long, Americans had looked to the presidency for far too much. The hopes and dreams we'd invested in the office had transformed it into a constitutional monstrosity, too powerful to be trusted and too weak to deliver the miracles we crave.

I thought I'd said my piece on that subject. Then Barack Obama ascended to office on an unprecedented wave of adulation, promising to lay hands on "the arc of history" and "bend it once more to the hope of a better day."

When it comes to presidential cults, Barack Obama has turned out to be the gift that keeps on giving. To paraphrase Michael Corleone, "Every time I tried to get out ... he pulled me back in."

As I explain in [my new ebook, "False Idol,"](#) "No federal chief executive in recent memory has done as much as the 'Yes We Can' president to stir Americans' longing for presidential salvation; nor has any recent president done quite as much to enhance the presidency's dominance over American life."

In an important new article for Newsweek, "President Obama's Executive Power Grab," Andrew Romano and Daniel Klaidman note that Obama has "expand[ed] his domestic authority in ways that his predecessor never did." Frustrated by congressional resistance to his agenda, he's pursued "government by waiver," reshaping welfare, education and immigration law via royal dispensations and decrees.

"Obama is drafting a playbook for future presidents to deploy in response: How to Get What You Want Even If Congress Won't Give It to You," Romano and Klaidman write. The result is an "extraconstitutional arms race of sorts: a new normal that habitually circumvents the legislative process envisioned by the Framers."

Alas, there's no presidential "man on horseback" ready to ride in and restore normalcy. Presidential messianism infects the Romney camp, as well. On the stump and in his campaign ads, Gov. Romney insists that this is "an election to

save the soul of America." In a recent speech at the Virginia Military Institute, he made clear that his ambitions went well beyond preserving the Constitution and faithfully executing the laws: "It is the responsibility of our president to use America's great power to shape history," he told the cadets.

In Romney's answers to an executive-power questionnaire late last year, he suggested that the president has great power indeed: He could launch a war without Congress, order the assassination of American citizens via drone-strike and use the U.S. military to arrest American citizens on American soil.

Romano and Klaidman note that Obama "has been known, during discussions about executive authority, to worry about 'leav[ing] a loaded weapon lying around.' "

It doesn't seem Obama lost much sleep over it. But for the rest of us, that metaphor ought to concentrate the mind wonderfully. Even rabid partisans ought to strive to see past the next election cycle and recognize that the powers forged in one administration usually do pass on to the next.

"I've abandoned free market principles to save the free market system," President George W. Bush famously proclaimed in December 2008. By so doing, he made sure that President Obama would inherit staggering new powers over the U.S. economy, effectively becoming commander in chief of the American auto industry, and much else besides.

Obama's successor -- whether eventual or immediate -- will inherit an expanded National Surveillance State and a presidential "kill list" that includes American citizens.

The "Cult of Obama" is fading. But the powers we've ceded to the office will remain -- a loaded weapon for future presidents to wield.