



## That 'incredible shrinking presidency' just keeps growing

By: [Gene Healy](#) | 09/19/11 8:05 PM

It never fails. Every time a president's popularity tanks, you get a new cycle of media hand-wringing about an enfeebled, "shrunk" presidency.

Politico provided the latest installment in this timeworn genre with its recent cover story on "The Incredible Shrinking President." Noting President Obama's recent political setbacks, the authors declare that "a once-muscular presidency is undergoing a dramatic downsizing in terms of its power, popularity, prestige and ambition."

A "dramatic downsizing"? Hardly. I'll concede their point on popularity and prestige, but this president has never lacked for ambition -- and, under Obama, the powers of the office have only grown vaster and more menacing.

Reports of the Imperial Presidency's death are, as always, greatly exaggerated. We've seen this movie before, and by now we ought to know how it turns out.

A little over 10 years ago, the Wall Street Journal ran a column by then-Washington editor Al Hunt with the same title, "The Incredible Shrinking President."

President Bush was "on the defensive," Hunt insisted -- increasingly weak and irrelevant. Three days later, al Qaeda toppled the twin towers, and, in short order, America had embarked on a seemingly permanent war, with permanently enlarged powers for the commander in chief.

But the shrinking-CINC meme somehow refused to die. After Bush's Republicans lost the House and Senate in the 2006 midterms, the Economist led with a story on, yes, "The Incredible Shrinking Presidency." The magazine's cover featured a caricature of a dwarfish Bush, his head peeking above the top of a cowboy boot.

And yet, despite the shift in control, Congress continued to expand the president's power: in surveillance, in foreign policy and in domestic affairs as well. Bush's "last 100 days"

looked a little like FDR's first 100, with the president remaking the commanding heights of the economy by executive fiat.

As Yale law professor Jack Balkin observed on the eve of inauguration, "Obama takes office as probably the most powerful president in American history in terms of what he can do and how he can project his power both around the world, in the economy and through the new forms of surveillance power."

It was "precisely the wrong time to worry about an enfeebled presidency," Balkin wrote. "The American Presidency is currently on steroids, and will continue to be for a very long time to come."

And, as before, a Congress held by the nominal "opposition" continues to grow the presidency's powers. Even now, the House Armed Services Committee is considering new legislation allowing the president to expand the terror war beyond al Qaeda and the Taliban, targeting new groups virtually at will.

For his part, Obama has added powers Congress never granted, like a supposed right to assassinate American citizens abroad, far from any battlefield, and launch cruise missiles and drone strikes anywhere in the world without triggering the War Powers Act. If this isn't an Imperial Presidency, it'll do until the real thing comes along.

It's a peculiar office, the presidency. Apparently, it keeps shrinking, but -- with an executive branch of some 2.1 million civilian employees and counting -- it never gets any smaller.

As the Daily Beast's Reihan Salam put it recently, "The president commands a vast array of bureaucracies devoted to shaping the way we work, travel, eat, exercise, and sleep, and the executive branch is increasingly seen as the guarantor of American prosperity."

Politico argues that "Obama has a power problem." Actually, he has more power than any one man should have. That's a problem for the rest of us.