Do Presidents Deserve More Respect, Or Less?

DOUG MATACONIS · THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2010 · **22 COMMENTS**

Ann Althouse links to a piece up at NPR today which argues that **the public's relationship with the Presidency has become too informal:**

> Does our increasingly informal relationship with the man in the White House — not just President Obama, but any sitting president — diminish our respect for the man and reverence for the office? Should we leave the uncovering of private and behind-closed-doors habits to the historians?
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> We're not talking about major scandals here. We're talking about a puff of tobacco or a mild BlackBerry addiction. Do we need to know all of these details? Would we be better off as a country if we focused less on the personal quirks and traits and more on the professional successes and failures of our commander in chief? In other words, when it comes to the most famous politician in America, does familiarity breed contempt?
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> Julian Zelizer, a presidential historian at Princeton University, believes there are pros and cons to having Too Much Information. "Knowing too much about a president makes them seem more human, but it certainly detracts from some of the prestige that Americans once held for the office," says Zelizer. "If the president is too much like us ... we have more trouble developing respect for the officeholder and we start to find fault, too easily, about issues that don't really matter."
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> After all, Zelizer says, "we should be more concerned with Obama's economic policies and political strategy than whether he snores."
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> Of course, there's nothing that says that knowing about the President's smoking habits or that he may have accidentally choked on a potato chip while watching the Super Bowl means that you cannot also be concerned with his economic policies and foreign policy plans. But, it's not a concern over information overload that the author of the NPR story seems to be

concerned about, but the fact that the Presidency has lost its aura of mystique. In fact, he seems to have a desire to return to a bygone era when the public knew very little about the President:

In days of yore, personal details about the sitting president were hard to come by. When Warren G. Harding was elected in 1920, he promised a "return to normalcy" in the wake of World War I. The man from Ohio was swept into office by the greatest popular-vote differential up to that point.

By all contemporary accounts, life inside the White House during Harding's abbreviated two-year term, from 1921-1923, was prim and proper. Occasional intimate tidbits emerged in news reports. For instance, reporter Kate Marcia Forbes — who was also a close friend of the first lady's — revealed in a 1922 *Baltimore Sun* article that Florence Harding called her husband "Sonny" and the president's pet name for his wife was "the Duchess." The president liked to eat fudge and popcorn balls, and the couple often sat on a davenport by the fireplace.

Most of the stories of the day, however, provided little detail. There were observations about the "stateliness" of events at the White House and the propriety of Florence Harding's wardrobe. "One thing I most admire in our President and his wife," Forbes wrote, "is the devotion they have for each other." She and other reporters whitewashed the White House, and Harding enjoyed great popularity while in office.

But in fact, according to historians writing much later, the Harding home on Pennsylvania Avenue was a nexus of bad behavior. Behind the scenes, writes James S. McCallops in the 2004 volume *Life in the White House: A Social History of the First Family and the President's House*, Sonny and the Duchess "were far from the upbeat and optimistic duo they portrayed in public. Petty jealousy, infidelity, illegal drinking, gambling and corruption plagued the Hardings. Yet, in the two-plus-year period the Hardings lived in the White House, the public was kept in the dark about the First Couple's private lives."

Having won 60 percent of the vote in 1920, Harding was able to appoint some of his friends, known as "the Ohio Gang," to his administration. Some of them betrayed him, and his administration was rife with political miscreancy — including the Teapot Dome scandal.

In 1923, Harding died unexpectedly, from a stroke or heart attack. And it wasn't until after his death that more details of his private life were made public. "Only as the scandals began to surface," McCallops writes, "did the American people discard their adoration of the Hardings and replace it with scorn and ridicule."

That tale alone would seem to be evidence enough that more information about the person living in the White House is always better than less, but it's only one example of information that was withheld from the public by a compliant and unassertive press. Americans didn't know, for example, that Franklin Roosevelt was in seriously declining health when he ran for re-election in 1944, or that John F. Kennedy was carrying on a long-term extramarital affair with a woman who also happened to be mistress of Chicago mobster Sam Giancana. And then, of course, there was Watergate, which is arguably the point at which the relationship between the press and Presidency changed forever and the veil between the public and the President was lifted.

Is that a bad thing? NPR certainly seems to think so:

Conventional punditry tells us that Americans are drawn to down-to-earth candidates whom they'd "like to share a beer with." But once the people get into office and Americans know that their politicians — even a president — are actually drinking a beer and what kind of beer, they are liable to lose some respect.

Of the seven two-term presidents in the past 60 years, only Reagan and Clinton had higher average approval ratings during their second terms. For the most part, the longer we had the chance to know our presidents, the less we approved of the job they were doing.

"It is healthy not to turn our presidents into kings," says Zelizer, "but too much of this leaves us without enough respect for the most important office in the land."

And that, to put it bluntly, is the problem with the view that we don't show the Presidency enough respect. The Presidency that we know today bears almost no resemblance to the institution that the Founding Fathers created when they drafted **Article II of the**

Constitution. In fact, to them, the President's main job could be summed up in ten words set forth in Section 3 of Article II:

he shall take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed,

The President's other powers consisted of reporting the state of the union to Congress (a far less formal occasion than what we're used to every January), receiving Ambassadors, and acting as Commander in Chief should Congress declare war. That's it.

For roughly the first 100 years of the Republic, Healy notes, President's kept to the limited role that the Constitution gave them. There were exceptions, of course; most notably Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War but also such Presidents as James Polk who clearly manipulated the United States into an unnecessary war with Mexico simply to satisfy his ambitions for territorial expansion. For the most part, though, America's 19th Century Presidents held to the limited role that is set forth in Article II, which is probably why they aren't remembered very well by history.

As Gene Healy notes in his excellent study **The Cult of the Presidency: America's Dangerous Devotion to Executive Power,** , it wasn't until the early 20th Century and the dawn of the Progressive Era that the idea of the President as something beyond what the Constitution said he was took forth. Healy documents quite nicely the ways in which Presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to Woodrow Wilson to FDR went far beyond anything resembling Constitutional boundaries to achieve their goals, and how they were aided and abetted in that effort by a compliant Supreme Court and a Congress that lacked the courage to stand up for it's own Constitutional prerogatives. Then with the Cold War and the rise of National Security State, the powers of the Presidency became even more enhanced. It was also around this time that the Presidency began taking on the airs of royalty and questions of "respect" became relevent.

Professor Althouse **puts it well:**

I thought the American tradition was disrespecting authority. I can't remember a President who wasn't disrespected. (And I can remember back to Eisenhower.) Disrespecting authority is a check on power. When I hear journalists, historians, and other purported experts promoting reverence for the President, I suspect them of having the political agenda of increasing his power.

Indeed. Rather than surrounding our Presidents with an aura of mystique, we should be doing everything to drag them back down to earth where he belongs, regardless of which political party he or she happens to come from.

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