

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

George Washington and the Modern Presidency

STEVEN F. HAYWARD

Page | 1

On Friday, February 17, 2012, the American Enterprise Institute hosted a panel discussion, “First Among Equals: George Washington and the American Presidency?,” featuring Richard Brookhiser (National Review), Harvey Mansfield (Harvard University), Steven F. Hayward (AEI), and the coeditors of What So Proudly We Hail: The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song.

A reading of George Washington’s “Farewell Address”¹ served as the starting point for a discussion of Washington’s exemplary founding presidency, its lessons for the modern presidency (as well as for today’s aspiring presidential candidates), and the importance of preserving and perpetuating our political institutions.

I drew the assignment of offering some reflections on the modern presidency and how it has departed from the example set by Washington and his republicanism. . . .

Often when you consider when the modern presidency began, people are tempted to recur to Henry Adams’ famous quip that the progression of presidents from George Washington to Ulysses S. Grant single-handedly disproved the theory of evolution—but this is not really right. Although you can mark out the evolution of the office in shadings that were brought to the office by Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and especially Theodore Roosevelt, I think that Woodrow Wilson marks out the clear dividing line from previous presidents for two reasons above all.

The first reason is Wilson’s open disdain for the Constitution. Professor [Harvey] Mansfield noted some time ago that Wilson is notable for being the first president to criticize the Constitution, and that criticism was merely of a piece with his dismissal of the political philosophy of the American founding in general, which he thought was no longer relevant to the 20th century. His second original sin of the modern presidency is his conception that the president should be someone who ought to be a leader with a capital “L”—not in the ordinary sense of a sports team coach or even a chief executive of a company or a military commander, but someone of a lofty, transformative vision taking

¹ Read George Washington’s Farewell Address at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-meaning-of-america/farewell-address.

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

the American people to new and distant destinations that the people themselves might not even be entirely aware they want to go.

On a slightly more prosaic plane, Wilson began the familiar practice that is increasingly debasing republican government: namely, the in-person State of the Union Address to a joint session of Congress. He did that in large part to try to assert the mastery of the presidency over Congress, to supplant Congress as the leading institution or center of gravity in American politics. Prior to Wilson, almost all presidents fulfilled their constitutional requirement to provide information on the state of the union by sending letters to Congress and publishing them in the newspaper. Wilson created the spectacle we know today, which all presidents since have followed, with one or two minor exceptions. As much as I hate to say it, even Ronaldus Magnus, as Rush Limbaugh calls him, contributed to the degradation to the State of the Union speech—which should not surprise us as he was the president with the only show-business background. There is this to be said to Reagan’s credit however: His State of the Union speeches tended to be much shorter than his successors. Reagan’s State of the Union speeches were all about 4,800 words long, and he delivered them fairly crisply—often getting them out in 45 to 50 minutes. By contrast, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama’s State of the Union addresses have been as long as 7,200 words and plucking in at a delivery time that is probably starting to annoy even Fidel Castro.

Page | 2

But when we contemplate not merely the spectacle of the modern presidency, we also have to take into account the tensions and expectations promised by candidates and demanded by the people. It is then jarring to reflect on what other options the Founders considered as to what the title of the executive should be. They considered calling him the “Governor of the United States,” but they rejected that title in preference to “President” instead because the memory of the colonial governors who had abused their powers was fresh in their mind. And president, arriving from the Latin “to preside,” was thought to be a more restrained office than governor.

Today, our president is expected to be a miracle worker. We owe Gene Healy at the CATO Institute for dredging up the apotheosis of the sentiment from Herman Finer, a political scientist of the Kennedy-era at the University of Chicago who wrote the following: “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.” Now, by contrast, behold this sentiment from an eminent person: “It is a great advantage to a president, and a major source of safety to the country, for him to

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

know that he is not a great man. When a man begins to feel that he is the only one who can lead in this republic, he is guilty of treason to the spirit of our institutions.” Who said this heterodox idea? Calvin Coolidge. The ostensibly Silent Cal, who was not silent of course, added the following: “It is difficult for men in high office to avoid the malady of self-delusion. They are always surrounded by worshippers. They are constantly and, for the most part, sincerely assured of their greatness. They live in an artificial atmosphere of adulation and exaltation which sooner or later impairs their judgment. They are in grave danger of becoming careless and arrogant.” And finally, one more offering from not-so-Silent Cal: “A sound and wise statesmanship which recognizes and attempts to abide by its limitations will undoubtedly find itself displaced by that type of public official who promises much, talks much, legislates much, expends much, but accomplishes little.”

Page | 3

It is worth recalling the contrast between Wilson and Coolidge because of the one modern episode that illustrates the forgetfulness of our appreciation of Washington’s generation and his republicanism. It came when Ronald Reagan replaced Thomas Jefferson’s portrait in the cabinet room with Calvin Coolidge’s portrait. The culturati were outraged at this. They couldn’t believe that Reagan would do such an obviously silly thing. Mark Shields wrote in the [*Washington*] *Post*: “Don’t try and tell me that Calvin Coolidge could ever substitute for Thomas Jefferson. That’s almost a national sacrilege.” And the irony of this remark is that Coolidge was arguably the most fervent presidential defender of Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence in the 20th century, and when you compare him to Wilson and Wilson’s successors, it turns out it would be liberal presidents who would want to have removed Jefferson’s picture from the cabinet room if they paid faith to their ideas.

One might wish that more presidents saw fit to emulate Coolidge’s inaccurate name of Silent Cal. One malady of modern presidents is that they simply talk too much and would benefit from embracing certain rhetorical minimalism. It is nearly forgotten today that one of the bills of impeachment against Andrew Johnson, when you strip it down, is essentially that he was talking too much in too partisan a way. Here is the article’s language itself: “That said, Andrew Johnson, President of the United States, unmindful of the high duties of his office and the dignity and proprieties thereof . . . did make and declare, with a loud voice certain intemperate, inflammatory, and scandalous harangues, and therein utter loud threats and bitter menaces, as well against Congress as the laws of the United States. . . . Which said utterances, declarations, threats and harangues, highly censurable in any, are peculiarly indecent and unbecoming in the Chief Magistrate of the United States, by means whereof the said Andrew Johnson has brought the high office of

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

the President of the United States into contempt, ridicule, and disgrace, to the great scandal of all good citizens.”

There is only one modern president who had an inkling that he might be well-served by emulating Coolidge, and that was Dwight D. Eisenhower. He was, of course, the first president of the television age and a lot of his political aides thought he should take advantage of this new medium. It is also notable that Eisenhower is the only president since polling began in the thirties whose public approval rating never dropped below 50 percent. People have always chalked that up to his reputation of a war hero and his grandfatherly bearing, but I wonder if his reticence of not over-exposing himself to the public is not part of the story. Often when his advisers would try and persuade him to go on TV or make some type of high-profile speech, Eisenhower would say, for example: “I keep telling you fellows I don’t like to do this sort of thing. I can think of nothing more boring for the American public than to have to sit in their living rooms for a whole half hour of looking at my face on their television screens. . . . I don’t think the people *want* to be listening to a Roosevelt, sounding as if he were one of the Apostles, or the partisan yipping of a Truman.” On another occasion, he pushed back by saying: “What is it that needs to be said? I’m not going to go out there just to listen to my tongue clatter.” And then, finally, on one occasion he said: “Alright, but I’m not going to talk more than 20 minutes.” The author Derek Leebaert also notes that Eisenhower was “one of the few national leaders in the electronic age who seems to have taken a close to malicious delight in his capacity for incoherence”—which we learned quite later was delivered incoherence on his part.

Page | 4

Eisenhower does illustrate another problem of the modern presidency, and that is the noticeable atrophy of constitutional literacy in our executives. It has led to the capitulation of the idea of judicial supremacy. For example, in a letter to his brother, Milton Eisenhower wrote the following: “You keep harping on the Constitution; I should like to point out that the meaning of the Constitution is what the Supreme Court says it is. Consequently no powers are exercised by the Federal government except where such exercise is approved by the Supreme Court.” That was not the view of Calvin Coolidge or the American Founders or Abraham Lincoln—or even Franklin Roosevelt for that matter. Indeed, whatever else might be said about Franklin Roosevelt’s court-packing escapade, it showed that the executive could directly contest the judiciary over constitutional interpretation. This contrasts sharply, and unfortunately, with George W. Bush, who when he was presented with the McCain-Feingold campaign finance bill said that he believed the bill to be unconstitutional, a violation of the principle of free speech in the

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

First Amendment, but that he will sign it anyway: the constitutionality of the bill is for the Supreme Court to decide. Bush seemingly overlooked the oath of office of preserving, protecting, and defending the Constitution, which earlier presidents would have taken as their duty to compel them to veto the bill.

Page | 5

I'll close with one current example out of today's news—one more example of how this ought to be got right. Either yesterday or this morning, the Department of Transportation issued new guidelines calling on the auto industry to disable GPS devices in cars so that they would only operate if a car was parked on the side of the road and the transmission was in park. The Department is worried about the safety of drivers being distracted by GPS devices. Right now, this is a guideline, but, as we know, today's guidelines are tomorrow's mandates. Any counter-intuitive economist will say the guidelines may result in a net reduction in auto safety for the simple reason that most people, if they cannot use their GPS devices, will then use their smart phones and juggle them by their steering wheel as they are driving down the road. Coolidge would have known what to do with this idea. One example that I like was when he vetoed a bill to expand crop subsidies. Coolidge said that this was a really bad idea: If we start with crop subsidies, what will happen is that farmers will start growing more crops instead of fewer, and if we start growing more crops, that will put more downward pressure on prices and that will increase demand in increased subsidies further. He ended by saying that the "most decisive [reason to vote against this bill] is that it is not constitutional."

If we could wish for a reform of the modern presidency and some kind of restoration or even partial approximation of Washington's republican sensibilities, it would start with presidents and aspirants for the office who might revive Eisenhower's self-restraint and Calvin Coolidge's constitutionalism.