COMMENTARY

Presidential Studies Meets Public Administration: Discussion of “The President and the Bureaucracy in the United States”

CHARLES M. CAMERON

Joel Aberbach and Bert Rockman’s gracefully written chapter addresses many of the great themes in the study of American executive politics: the tension between leading and managing, the challenge of controlling bureaucrats who serve many masters, the difficulty of structuring organizations to fit presidential goals, the struggle to harness bureaucratic expertise in the face of bureaucratic inertia, and the painful necessity of learning one’s goals through imperfect action in a messy world. Many of these themes receive a distinctly “Abermanian” twist, appropriately reflecting the authors’ deep contribution to the empirical study of executive politics in the United States and western Europe. Yet the chapter wears its impressive scholarship lightly, never once invoking ostentatious “theory” or lapsing into obscure jargon. The result is an essay that can be read with profit by extraordinarily diverse audiences.

At the same time, though, the essay’s silence on the status of the field itself is so insistent—indeed, so stubborn—that it becomes a kind of methodological point. Is the field of executive politics only a series of judicious, even wise, observations upon a series of important themes? Or might there be a logic to bureaucratic delegation, or to the problem of multiple principles, and so on? Might we view these logics as the core of the field, supplying its theory and the scaffolding for empirical studies?

I strongly favor the latter view, perhaps not surprisingly as I am a committed “rational choice institutionalist” (there is some jargon!). Unfortunately, though, given the current state of rational choice institutionalism in presidential studies, I cannot simply list a group of studies and say “Here they are: these provide the theoretical core for the field.” Nonetheless, I can list some studies and point to intriguing but underexplored topics suggested by others. Thus, I hope to suggest the outline of an emerging rational choice approach to the presidency and the bureaucracy. Space limitations prohibit more.

The Subject

What is the domain of study? Aberbach and Rockman’s essay lies at the intersection of presidential studies and public administration. What sort of terrain is this? The key actors are: the president, the president’s own bureaucracy (the
people lodged in the White House and Old Executive Office Building), federal agencies—themselves complex bureaucracies—Congress, the courts (especially the D.C. Circuit), interest groups, and citizens. Needless to say, huge literatures address each of these actors and their relationships. But occupying the intersection of presidential studies and public administration are two activities: (1) Presidential management of the vast executive apparatus, and (2) Presidential management of the president’s own bureaucracy. I take these as the relevant domain of study.

**Job One: Managing the Executive Establishment**

Here, the key issue is: getting the Washington establishment—the standing bureaucracy—to do what the president wants rather than what the bureaucrats or someone else wants. This is the fundamental “principal-agent” formulation of the president’s job as bureaucratic manager and leader. To some extent, Aberbach and Rockman contest this formulation by questioning whether the president actually knows what he wants. But this is perhaps too preemptory. A powerful analytical move, aimed at the same problem, is to introduce a wedge between means and ends: the president may have a clear idea about ends (his broad objectives) but a rather poor idea of how to get there. In fact, as shown in Figure 5.1, one can discern three types of means-ends situations, which inevitably grade into one another in practice.

**FIGURE 5.1: Presidential-Bureaucratic Relations and Means/Ends Relationships**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ends Clear, Means Clear</th>
<th>Ends Clear, Means Unclear</th>
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<tr>
<td>Multiple Principals</td>
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<td>Micro-man.: Hidden</td>
<td>Micro-man.: Hidden</td>
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<td>Information</td>
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<td>Ends &amp; Means Both Unclear</td>
<td>Delegation Signaling and Strategic Info Transmission</td>
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Clear Ends, Clear Means

In this case, the president knows what he wants and what the bureaucrats have to do to get him there. Two different situations have received attention. In the first, the goals of the bureaucrats (the agent) are broadly in alignment with the president’s but the bureaucrats are subject to the pulling and hauling of other players. These are sometimes called multiple principals or separation of powers (SOP) games. Second, the goals of the bureaucrats are distinct from those of the president, and the bureaucrats can take hidden actions. These are sometimes called moral hazard games.

SOP games are hard-wired into American politics by the Constitution and basic statutes like the Administrative Procedures Act. Understanding SOP games is fundamental for understanding federal policy making. Fortunately, over the last decade or so, political scientists have made substantial progress in analyzing SOP games (Ferejohn and Shiplan 1990; Krehbiel 1998; Brady and Volden 1998; Tiller and Spiller 1999). The studies can be quite complex, but all rely on a close analysis of the logic of sequential action. For example, an agency run by a presidential appointee issues a regulation; an administrative law judge may strike down the regulation as incompatible with the agency’s statutory authority; a congressional committee may write a bill to overturn the regulation or change the agency’s authority; the bill may be modified by amendment on the floor and passed; the president may veto the bill; Congress may override the veto. In this environment, how far can the agency go in devising a sustainable regulation that advances the president’s agenda? The models cited above make quite specific predictions, some of which have received substantial empirical support. Recent analyses in this vein make the president a more active player, showing how executive orders effectively change the status quo facing the players (Howell 2003; Moe and Howell 1999).

Appointment games can be seen as a special kind of SOP game. Unfortunately, outside of Supreme Court nominations, theoretical analysis of appointment games remains rather sketchy (the empirical side is far better developed, see e.g., McCarty and Razaghian 1999). Are there conditions when the president must nominate someone who leans somewhat toward Congress rather than himself? When will the president go all out for a nomination? What are the administrative consequences of delay in confirmations? To a large extent, these questions remain theoretically underexplored.

Moral hazard games tend to abstract from the dynamics of the separation of powers system to focus instead on the problem of hidden actions by bureaucratic agents. Consider micromanagement schemes, such as FDR’s and JFK’s calls to lower level bureaucrats to find out what was really happening in their agencies. When will presidents use this “spot auditing”? When will it be more effective,
COMMENTARY ON ABERBACH AND ROCKMAN

and when less so? When will presidents instead use systematic reviews, like OMB’s review of agency regulations? When will they rely on interest groups to sound “fire alarms”? Unfortunately, congressional scholars have devoted more energy to analyzing moral hazard games than presidential scholars (see, e.g., McCubbins and Schwartz 1984; McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast 1987, 1989). But clearly, the informational problems that plague Congress also bedevil the president. Moral hazard games remain understudied from an executive perspective.

**Clear Ends, Unclear Means**

The main issue is created by bureaucratic expertise: the president may know what he wants, but only the agents (the bureaucrats) really understand how to make it happen. The result is a dilemma for the president: Should he delegate the task to the agency, in essence trusting them to do the right thing? Or should he try to micromanage the job using his own staff, even if he sacrifices expertise to gain loyalty? Under what circumstances will the president choose delegation over micro-management, and when not? The empirical literature offers relevant studies (e.g., Nathan 1983 plus the extensive literature on executive budgeting), but again presidential scholars have been slower than legislative scholars in thinking through the problem’s logic (see e.g., Banks 1989; Bawn 1995; Epstein and O’Halloran 1999; Huber and Shipan 2002; for a broader review of the delegation problem, see Bendor, Glaser, and Hammond 2001). But many insights and methods from the congressionally oriented studies ought to transport readily to the executive branch.

**Uncertain Ends**

In this case, the president is unsure what he should want. Understanding what to want in technically difficult and politically challenging areas, such as health care financing or agricultural policy, may indeed be difficult. In some respects, though, by identifying sufficiently broad goals for the president (“national security and economic prosperity,” “a lasting ideological mark on policy,” “reelection”) this case can be redefined into the previous one: certain goals but uncertain means. Accordingly, the delegation dilemma will reappear: when should the president trust an agent like a cabinet secretary or domestic policy advisor to pick his goals for him, and when should he work harder to define them himself? Also prominent will be problems of strategic information transmission: What information can the president extract from messages and signals sent him, attempting to persuade him to adopt one set of goals rather than another? Again, the logic of how the president should treat policy advice has been underexplored theoretically.
Job Two: Managing the President’s Own Bureaucracy

Here, the key issues are hiring, organizing, motivating, and supervising the president’s own men and women in order best to serve the president’s interests. These issues are the meat and potatoes of what in business schools is taught as “personnel economics” (Lazear 1998). To the best of my knowledge, though, perspectives from personnel economics have yet to enter presidential studies. Whether they would be useful remains speculative but intriguing (to me, anyway). This observation is not meant to undervalue the extensive empirical literature on presidents as personnel managers (see e.g., Dickenson 2000 and the references therein). Rather, it is to acknowledge that this subject remains largely terra incognita for rational choice institutionalists.

Note

1. Given this, the distinction between ends and means is less important than in the next case.
COMMENTARY

Presidential Power and the Power of Theory

TERRY M. MOE

Joel Aberbach and Bert Rockman are two of political science’s most respected students of the presidency, and in this theme paper they set out a perspective on the president’s relationship to the bureaucracy, reviewing along the way a vast range of literature. In this comment, I could focus on particular issues that they bring up or claims that they make. But I would rather step back and offer some observations on the bigger picture.

How do we understand the president’s relationship to the bureaucracy? We need to have the facts, of course, and Aberbach and Rockman do yeoman work here in acquainting us with what is currently known. But ultimately we need to have a theory. In social science, as opposed to history or journalism, it is through theory that we make sense of the facts, and through theory that we arrive at explanations worthy of the name.

It is appropriate, then, that Aberbach and Rockman begin their analysis with an emphasis on theory, contrasting two very different perspectives—Richard Neustadt’s and my own—that claim to shed light on the question at hand (see, e.g., Neustadt 1990; Moe 1993, 2002; Moe and Howell 1999). Their intention is to use these theories to motivate a literature review, and then to employ the literature review to evaluate the theories themselves and point the way toward future progress. I am a big fan of these guys, and I hate to be a curmudgeon. But I have to say that, while they offer a number of interesting ideas here, their paper is not as useful as it might have been.

From the start, they mischaracterize the two theories that frame their analysis. The fundamental difference between these theories is that Neustadt argues for a very personal view of the presidency while my own theory is decidedly institutional. More specifically, Neustadt argues that presidents have precious little formal authority, thanks to the American system of “separated institutions sharing powers” (Neustadt 1990, 29), and thus are thrown back on their own resources: their personal skills, experience, and political acumen, their active personal involvement in all facets of decision making, and their personal ability to persuade others to go along with their objectives. Presidential power is personally determined, requiring a man of “extraordinary temperament” (Neustadt 1990, 163). My own theory could hardly be more different. I argue that presidential power is grounded in formal authority and institutional capacity; that most of what we call “presidential” behavior, including most of the persuasion and bargaining so
central to Neustadt’s theory, is carried out by the presidents’ many agents within the institutional presidency; and that, precisely because formal authority and the institutional presidency are so crucial to presidential power, presidents have pushed to expand their authority and build their institution over time, seeking to change the institutional context that Neustadt’s presidents find so constraining.

Aberbach and Rockman fail to capture these bedrock differences between the two theories. They also misconstrue them. They argue, for instance, that Neustadt is properly viewed as an institutionalist too, because he sees presidents as constrained by their institutional context. But this is hardly helpful. Yes, Neustadt recognizes the constraining role of institutions, but that is true of almost all political scientists regardless of what they are studying. What is the point of saying that we are all institutionalists? The essence of Neustadt’s perspective is not that he recognizes institutions as constraining, but that he focuses on the president’s personal characteristics and relationships as the keys to presidential behavior. As Neustadt himself puts it, “My theme is personal power and its politics” (Neustadt 1990, xx).

Instead of spotlighting the personal/institutional distinction, Aberbach and Rockman make it appear that the two theories are mainly different on other, less fundamental grounds—which (to compound matters) they misportray. In drawing their contrasts, they describe Neustadt’s president as a politically astute compromiser who seeks out bargaining opportunities, is content with incremental success, and accepts the reality of having to accommodate Congress and the bureaucracy. He’s a reasonable, politically sophisticated guy who does the best he can under difficult circumstances. The Moe president, on the other hand, comes across as a political idiot and a bull in a china shop. He is not only aggressive in pursuit of his own agenda: he is so aggressive he is downright impolitic in dealing with other political actors. His maxim is “to shoot first and ask questions later.”

In their view, moreover, I claim that this oafish presidential behavior is extremely successful, because presidents have extraordinary power while legislators and bureaucrats are virtually impotent. “A president presumably can get what he wants by being as domineering as he can. The system is not so tough after all. The Hobbesian world in which the president is embedded can be tamed because the president has more guns than any of his competitors. . . . Presidents can dominate the bureaucracy when policies or personnel are in contest because they must. They will find the means necessary to do that, and in the end cannot be effectively resisted.”

This is not what I say. Indeed, it violates the central logic of my theoretical analysis. I do argue that presidents act aggressively to pursue their agendas and expand their powers when strategically attractive opportunities arise, and that they have certain advantages over the other branches in the political struggle.
But I also argue that they are heavily constrained by the powers of other actors, and that they proceed in a rational, politically sophisticated way that takes due account of the very real costs that these actors can impose on them for going too far. The results, moreover, are hardly impressive in any absolute sense. They get bits and pieces of what they want, and they are incrementally able to shift the balance of power slowly in their own direction over time. But they do not dominate the other players, and they remain underpowered and highly constrained. “The best presidents can do,” I have consistently argued, “is make a bad situation better” (Moe 2002, 426).

So my first beef with Aberbach and Rockman is that they get the theories wrong. This effectively undermines the rest of their effort, as the theories are supposed to frame everything that follows. My second beef is that the paper really doesn’t do what they said they were going to do anyway, which is to think through issues about the president and the bureaucracy by bringing evidence to bear on competing theories. Even were the theories correctly depicted, the fact is that the authors don’t put them to any systematic use. After discussing them in a long introduction to the analysis, they do a radical turnabout and move into a theoryless review of a wide range of empirical evidence. This review covers a great deal of territory and is often quite interesting. But it doesn’t go anywhere. There is no theoretical point to it.

To be fair, the nature of their discussion probably reflects a distinctive perspective on what theory is and how it is best pursued. Throughout much of social science, a common view (but not one that I share) is that theoretical progress requires discovering as many relevant variables, conditions, and qualifications as possible and compiling them into increasingly complicated theories. The goal is essentially to explain everything, at least within some social realm, and to do it by taking everything of relevance somehow into account. From this standpoint, it is a good thing to proliferate countless new variables, a good thing to intricately qualify every general statement, and a good thing to show that the world is complex and multifaceted, for these are what theory building is all about.

Aberbach and Rockman’s attempt to bring evidence to bear on theories of the presidency does not really meet these criteria, as most of their literature review seems to be undertaken because the topics are interesting and not because they have something to tell us about theory. Indeed, the theories are hardly mentioned once the review gets underway. Still, the basic underlying notion of theory-building-as-complication seems to be at work here. And the authors, despite their theoryless detours in reviewing the evidence, ultimately want to make a statement about what it all means for theory.

So what does it all mean? This brings me to my third beef. This is a theme paper that doesn’t seem to have a clear theme. In the end, they have little of real consequence to say about either Neustadt’s theory or my own. If there is a theme
here, it is essentially that the relationship between the president and the bureaucracy is complicated. The authors point along the way to a number of factors—like party or divided government or whether the president has clear policy goals—that bear on the president’s success in dealing with bureaucrats. But these factors are part of a huge constellation of factors that seem to be somehow relevant, and that collectively ensure that no simple, coherent theory could possibly be correct or even useful.

As I have argued elsewhere, I think this sort of unenlightening bottom line is inevitable given the methodology that underlies it, and that its exaltation of complexity doesn’t get us anywhere (Moe 1993). It never has, and it never will. If we want to do a reasonable job of explaining presidential (and other social) behavior, we need to see complexity as an obstacle to progress, and we need to be willing to simplify. Among other things, this entails stripping away many variables—even though we know they are relevant—in order to create coherent, parsimonious models that capture the essence of what is going on, and that have the analytic power to generate a range of expectations about behavior.

This methodology is characteristic of rational choice theory. There are, of course, plenty of political scientists who are hostile to rational choice, and who are wedded to the kind of empirical richness—of personality or culture or social embeddedness or whatever—that rational choice tends to assume away. But the fact is that, over the last twenty years or so, rational choice theories have revolutionized the way political scientists think about political institutions and politics more generally. They have become the dominant theories in the discipline and have generated a body of theory that is increasingly integrated across substantive fields of study, so that students of American politics, comparative politics, and international relations are frequently using the same basic theoretical notions—of delegation, asymmetric information, commitment, and collective action problems, for example—to explain what might otherwise appear to be very different institutional phenomena. Decades ago, political scientists only dreamed about this kind of progress. Now it has happened, and it is growing.

The presidency was among the last fields to be affected by these developments. The bulk of presidential scholarship has always been heavily shaped by history, personality, and idiosyncracy. And Neustadt’s very personal take on presidential power, an enormous influence for more than forty years (and counting), has long reinforced the field’s resistance to rational choice and institutional theory. But the barriers are breaking down. Progress began as students of Congress—outsiders, in effect—included bureaucrats and presidents in their models of political control in order to gain a more balanced understanding of institutional dynamics and relative power (e.g., McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast 1987; Ferejohn and Shiplan 1990). And it accelerated with the emergence of a new generation of presidency scholars—people like Charles Cameron,
Brandice Canes-Wrone, William Howell, David Lewis, and Nolan McCarty, among others—who are specifically concerned with issues of presidential (and bureaucratic) behavior, speak the same theoretical language, and are busy transforming the way the presidency is understood (see, e.g., Cameron 2000; Canes-Wrone 2001; Howell 2003; Lewis 2003; McCarty 2000b).

These are momentous changes, and a theme paper on the president’s relationship to the bureaucracy offers a perfect opportunity for evaluating and gaining perspective on them. But Aberbach and Rockman let the opportunity pass by. They began on the right foot, with a contrast between Neustadt’s personal theory and my own institutional theory (which is one variant of the rational choice theory of institutions). But there is no sense of the larger analytic struggle that these two approaches represent, no sense of the tectonic shift that is currently underway, and no sense of whether this transformation of the field is a good thing for the study of the presidency. Their theme paper, as a result, misses much of what is truly important about the clash of theories. At the end of the day, the key desideratum is not that Neustadt and I disagree on whether presidents are bargainers or political aggressors. What really matters is that we—and those that each of us can count as allies—are in fundamental disagreement on the methodology and analytics that ought to guide a theoretical understanding of the presidency. That’s what all this is about.
COMMENTARY

Has “Centralization” Helped Presidents?

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT

The essay by Joel Aberbach and Bert Rockman addresses relations between presidents in the United States and the federal bureaucracy. In so doing it is interesting, subtle, and comparative, all virtues. It also is very generalized, proceeding at a relatively high level of abstraction. That might be thought a vice, except that it has forced all would-be commentators to choose and then pursue some element or item in particular. So that’s what “theme” means, not a bad idea!

For me, the choice follows, inevitably, from the distinction on which the essay turns. This is a distinction between “Neustadt’s” means of getting others to do what any president wants done and “Moe’s,” with Neustadt advocating “persuasion,” while Moe is said to advocate “shoot first and ask questions later” (Aberbach and Rockman 2001). Both Moe and I are identified as “structuralists” but he is said to have more faith than I in the malleability of structure to serve presidential wants. And that, not the distinction as such, is what I now wish to pursue.

More precisely, I shall pursue three further, underlying, differences between Moe’s perspective and mine, as best I understand both. To judge from his writings in 1985 and 1993, cited in the essay—which may not capture fully his contemporary view—Moe regards the entire development of presidential staff, from FDR’s time on, as a rational response to perceived weakness in the White House. He sees a progressive centralization aimed at shoring up the presidency’s capacity to exercise control over bureaucratic, indeed governmental, outputs.

This Terry takes to be a structural response regardless of particular administrations. Further, he considers it successful, on the whole, shoring up the presidency’s power in the very act of stretching its powers. Moreover, not only does Terry seem to think that power always follows powers, he seems to reason that the president is indistinguishable from the presidency, or, at least, that what is done in the president’s name by aides is indistinguishable from what is done by him. Finally, Moe conceives, I think, that the Executive Office of the President must continue to expand until congressional, departmental, partisan, and interest-group resistance literally force a halt. That seems to be the logic as he sees it.

With none of that do I agree. Moreover, I emphatically disagree that all the aides who run around the White House, nowadays, and the Old Executive Office Building, too, are necessary to effective presidencies. Moe evidently assumes so. I do not. I think them, rather, symptoms of institutional elephantiasis.
To introduce my argument, I offer a small story. In April 1994 my Harvard colleague, Ernest May, and I engaged in a silly, but irresistible, piece of tourism. We accepted an invitation to address a White House dinner for the cabinet at the start of a two-day president-and-cabinet interchange on their mutual relations. We were supposed to offer useful insights from the history of those relations! Someone on the staff—assuredly not the president—had evidently read or skimmed Ernie’s and my joint book, and fancied that some good might come of us. So, after dinner in the Family Dining Room, he and I were seated in two tippy gilt-edged chairs and told to speak.

I went first. Conscious of how little our auditors might like the history as we knew it, I sought to lighten the atmosphere, recounting John Ehrlichman’s comment on cabinet members, namely that they weren’t much use to the White House because they all went off to their departments and “married the natives.” None of the department heads in front of me cracked even a smile. Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, laughed. A bit later, I pointed out that tensions between cabinet members and presidents had sharpened with the growth of White House staff, especially among those members who now rarely saw their presidents. Several broad smiles appeared; President Clinton frowned. Ernest then took over and brought us to safer ground early in the nineteenth century when no one stood between the cabinet and the president except one private secretary and a few clerical people. End of story.

As late as the 1930s, cabinet members and their departmental associates did most of the things now done by Executive Office aides, or if they didn’t, the things didn’t get done—or from the sitting president’s perspective got done wrong.

Nowadays, most of that work is done inside the Executive Office of the president, with partial exceptions for one or more members of the so-called inner cabinet—State, Defense, Treasury, Justice—depending on events and personalities. The EOP is now, in truth, a “president’s department.” As late as 1952 the White House Office, as such, contained but twenty-two civilian aides who could be said to have some share or voice in public policy. Bill Clinton’s comparable number ran over one hundred. War agencies aside, when Harry Truman became president, the only other component of the Executive Office was the Bureau of the Budget, with but two politically appointive aides among 600-odd civil servants. It’s successor agency, the Office of Management and Budget, is headed now by twelve or more political appointees, and works alongside a Council of Economic Advisers, a National Security Council, a Council on Environmental Quality, an Office of Science and Technology, collectively containing at least another one hundred appointive aides backed up by as many or more civil servants, as well as military officers on detail. (I omit STR and the “Drug Czar” as being only nominally staff agencies.)
None of those components save the OMB itself was established on the initiative of a sitting president. All owe their existence in some degree to congressional initiatives that the then president did not choose to resist. If one examines into the particulars of these creations—the change-points, so to speak, in Executive Office evolution—it becomes plain that these were due, respectively, to accidents of timing, inattention, legislative bargaining, or short-run partisan considerations, far from the rational logic posited by Moe. The only clear exception of which I am aware in EOB outside the White House proper is the regulatory review function in OMB, foreshadowed as early as Jimmy Carter’s time, I gather with his enthusiastic assent. This, like expanded legislative clearance under Truman, has persisted in successive administrations, apparently because it serves congressional as well as administrative purposes for both major political parties.

As for the White House Office itself, the explosion of professional staff within it is, in part, attributable to the communications revolution since the 1950s and the demands for service from a press corps and from local radio and TV transformed out of recognition. In part, staff growth reflects continued groping by successive administrations to effectively run interdepartmental groupings which might do for economic and for social policies what NSC staff seemed to have accomplished in defense and diplomacy, namely degrees of real coordination, planning and control (albeit varying from one administration to the next). Here there does appear to have been operating something of Moe’s logic over time, although, if change-points are examined, much more raggedly and less successfully than such an overview as his suggests. And in two important instances staff innovations undertaken by Dwight Eisenhower, personally—importing to the White House what was customary at the Pentagon—have been renewed or sustained ever since: a White House Chief of Staff and a Congressional Relations Office. But these encompass only some sixteen of Clinton’s one hundred.

The great growth of the White House Office came in Richard Nixon’s time, and reflects more the naïvete and newness to government of Robert Haldeman, his chief of staff, and Roy Ash, his organizational adviser, than it tells of Nixon personally. They seemingly believed, unquestioningly, in the dubious analogy between their president and a corporate CEO, and tried to staff him up accordingly, recklessly assigning staffs to every function they conceived of, including “public liaison” and a White House Counsel’s office (a law firm, in effect, not to be confused with the Special Counsel under Roosevelt, Truman, or Kennedy). What was created in 1969–70 was a tall hierarchy of politically appointive officials reaching down from a few at the top whom Nixon knew and had chosen personally, through middle-ranking White House appointees of their choosing, not his, and on down to a largely new level of the same sort in
the rest of the Executive Office. That’s where the thickened number of OMB political appointees came from. Only underneath them did the “White House” in effect leave off and civil servants start. Identifying the whole of EOP as “White House,” which the media now do, stemmed naturally from this.

But I find it highly significant that after four years of experience, Nixon, with Haldeman alongside him, sought something very different, ideally a cabinet reduced to six departments by consolidation, along with three White House coordinators for economics, national security, domestic welfare, and a handful of personal aides, under Haldeman, to help with media, congressional, and political relations. The rest of the first-term White House staff—perhaps half or even two-thirds of it—should be farmed out to upper reaches of the remaining departments, helping to assure administration loyalty. The president himself would deal with nine people, while hierarchy, for the most part, took care of the rest. That’s what this president in person wanted—the most experienced man to formulate such wants since FDR told Louis Brownlow what to write in 1936!

Persuaded that the Democratic Congress would not give him reorganization powers to consolidate departments, Nixon proceeded to create a close equivalent by administrative means. He gave his Secretary of the Interior primacy over Agriculture, and his Secretary of Welfare primacy over Labor, and the like. He gave his Secretary of the Treasury an added White House hat as coordinator of economic affairs. He made plain that Haldeman’s close associate, John Ehrlichman would continue to stand astride domestic agencies for other purposes, while Henry Kissinger continued to do the same, emphatically, in the national security sphere. Nixon also had Haldeman and Ehrlichman begin the reassignments to departments. Then Watergate broke open, and by April 1973, Nixon felt constrained both to fire them and to repeal his reorganization.

Gerald Ford, accordingly, inherited the first-term-Nixon model. While Ford did not overhaul it wholesale as Nixon had sought to do, he did change it in some respects and did endeavor, with some success, to cut the size of the White House Office. He was the last to make a serious effort of that sort. The successive Democrats, Carter and later Clinton, did make some cosmetic cuts, mostly of clerical people, which they came to regret. The Republicans, Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, followed more nearly in Nixon’s earlier style. George W. Bush now appears to do about the same, taking his cue from Reagan. It becomes a matter of course.

Setting the new Bush aside, as presently too new for assessment, what has this administrative history produced by way of enhanced power in the presidency? Shifting the staff work from the upper reaches of departments to Haldeman’s hierarchy has brought presidents what? More assured capacity to carry their desires through the government? In one sphere of action the answer is perhaps yes, namely regulation, although it often is unclear whether the results of
regulatory review represent what a sitting president may have sought as against what associates or interests chose, on their account more than his. In other spheres the record seems to me mixed, too much so for Terry Moe’s conclusions—too much so, indeed for the theory building he would draw from them.

Lest we drift away from the concrete, let me offer some examples. Everything depends, of course, on how one reads them. I am too historically minded to read them in other than an historical way, shaped by sequence and context.

To begin with, take the Marshall Plan of 1947–48. This was one of the main case studies in the original edition of *Presidential Power* (Neustadt 1990, 40–49). Subsequent scholarship has not altered my view of it. I regard it, simply, as the nearest thing imperfect humans can create to a flawless piece of policy making and implementation on the president’s behalf and with his participation (though not overtly out front, part of the beauty of the thing in Truman’s circumstances). This was almost wholly a departmental enterprise, in the old-fashioned way. State was at the forefront, led actively by General Marshall, with his deputy, Robert Lovett, in constant communication to the powers-that-were on Capitol Hill, while his British counterpart, Ernest Bevin, rounded up the Europeans to make an effective case. Their efforts were supplemented with special studies and reports, made at useful junctures, by the Secretaries of Commerce and Interior and by the Budget Director, all with presidential orchestration. Truman also helped by sitting on the Secretary of the Treasury, the Cabinet’s strongest potential opponent. On State’s initiative, with White House backing, a public “Committee for the Marshall Plan” came into being to mobilize the private sector.

Once the Plan was enacted, Truman chose to lead it the distinguished Michigander wanted by the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, thus assuring a smooth start and continuing congressional responsiveness.

White House aides were certainly in the picture, kept abreast and helping to keep the president so. Along with the Budget Director they consisted mainly of the then Special Counsel, Clark Clifford, and his remarkable assistant, George Elsey. But in their number and supportive role, they resembled the traditional link of tiny White House staffs to large departments, crucial but subordinate assistants to the president.

To keep the story straight, consider a piece of cabinet-dominated staff work from nearly the same time period which was an abject failure, assuring that the president got nothing of what he wanted. This is the attempted repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1949. Truman had vetoed that act two years before and had campaigned for its repeal after it was passed over his veto. With his surprise election and restored Democratic control in both Houses of Congress, the time seemed ripe for advantageous compromise. But shortly after the election, Truman and his chief aides decamped for a deserved vacation in Key West. While they were
there, the Secretary of Labor, pressed by the AFL-CIO, obtained agreement from
the congressional leadership for an early attempt in the coming session of Con-
gress to obtain outright repeal. By the time the White House staff returned from
Florida the deal was done. That spring the attempt failed, ending Truman’s hon-
eymoon, such as it was, and in such terms as to preclude any revision of the Act.
The interest-groups concerned were left with nothing but the issue. Truman got
nothing at all (Neustadt 1954).

Here is an unalloyed success and a commensurate failure from cabinet-cen-
tered staff work half a century ago. Moving right along, what can I offer that
seems comparable from more recent White-House centered, hence by definition
“centralized,” staff work? On the side of success I offer Ronald Reagan’s eco-
nomic program in 1981, especially its three-phase tax cut. To be sure, Reagan
paid a price for his third phase, an extra 100 billion dollars’ worth of cuts by way
of “Christmas-tree ornaments” to gain marginal votes. Moreover, his success
was certainly alloyed by the enormous budget-deficits it soon set off, a consid-
eration tempered after 1996 when, as he’d predicted all along, the country grew
its way out of them. Further, the near-term effect of those tax cuts was exacer-
bated by a trick the Secretary of Defense had played on the Budget Director. Yet
by the time the latter worked that out sufficiently to warn the president, Reagan
was too committed publicly to reduce his own program (and maybe didn’t want
to, regardless). Finally, Reagan’s success owed much to the shock for Democrats
of unexpectedly losing the Senate in 1980, and probably more to his personal
gallantry when shot two months after his Inaugural—an event that permanently
changed his public image. It is understandable, if wretched taste, that in the
spring of 1994 I heard a current White House aide exclaim, “Where is Hinckley,
now that we need him?”

But situational advantages are always found in such successes. In the in-
stance of the Marshal Plan they can be summarized under the rubric “Stalin.”

As for centralized failure, let me but invoke the famous case of Iran-Contra,
in 1985–86, where Reagan was led on by staff ineptitude in NSC and the en-
couragement (I think) of his CIA director, along with his own emotions, to ex-
plicitly contradict his own policy, on the one hand, and a congressional
prohibition on the other. That story I have told, as best I can, in the last edition
of Presidential Power (Neustadt 1990, 279–94). There, and here as well, I lack
room to tell the further story of Reagan’s remarkable recovery, arranged by
changing staff while letting it all hang out.

Presidents, of course, are very often mere reactors to events and to the issues
framed by others, which are dumped upon them late with most options fore-
closed. Decisions in such cases, and their implementation or its lack bear only
shadowy comparison to initiatives entered into voluntarily by presidential
choice. Yet reactions fed by deadlines and the dates or heat behind them—heat
now generated almost instantly by television images—are staples of the presidential diet, encountered willy nilly most weeks of most years. With privileged access on government assignments, I have researched two such instances as closely as I can, and have now been able to publish both, for the edification, I hope, of the profession. One dates from 1962, the Skybolt crisis, so called, with the British (Neustadt 1999). Then, staff was relatively passive until after State and Defense between them had thoroughly messed things up. The other was the swine flu scare of 1976, where an aggressive bureau chief, abetted by his cabinet superior, so framed the issue that the presidential staffs essentially just fell in line. (This was a case, however, when those staffs were temporarily bereft of expertise. Nixon had abolished the Office of Science and Technology and while Congress had restored it, Ford had yet to fill it in.)

Even so, the presidents themselves made far from incidental contributions of their own. In 1962 Kennedy thought up a clever “out”—alas, three weeks too late. In 1976 Ford thought up a procedural innovation, meeting ad hoc with the country’s experts. That alas was minimized by insufficient advance staff work.

Neither of these instances shows staffs to particular advantage over departments in helping presidents. There is quite enough blame to go around. And both show the presidents struggling to help themselves, with near-success, leaving them less blameworthy than their helpers of both other sorts. The search for self-help seems to me quite characteristic of all presidents I have studied, at least some of the time. For the final edition of Presidential Power I tried to balance my account of Eisenhower, by reviewing his consideration of assistance to the French at Dienbienphu in 1954, a case initially researched in depth by Fred Greenstein (Burke and Greenstein 1988, 295–302). As Fred showed and I emphasized, Ike’s crucial first decision was to act only with approval of the congressional leaders in both parties. There is no evidence that either staff or cabinet sources had suggested this to him (although once voiced by him they hardly could object). Nor is it known whether he was aware in advance that his Democratic friends, Speaker Rayburn and Majority Leader Johnson would condition their consent for U.S. intervention on British support and a French grant of independence to Indochina. Ike promptly sent Foster Dulles to London and Paris to take soundings. It is not known whether Ike was aware in advance that each would say no. It is only clear he must have known that if they did so and he then forbore to act, and if Dienbienphu then fell, as it shortly did, no blame could fall on him.

Whence came Eisenhower’s inspiration? He evidently sucked it out of his own thumb. Kennedy and Ford did the same with less success, though JFK had a great success indeed the previous October, in the Cuban missile crisis (May and Zelikow 1999). Others have sucked in vain, like Lyndon Johnson during 1965, faced with repudiating either the Eisenhower-Kennedy commitment to an independent South Vietnam or the Eisenhower-Kennedy stance against
Americanizing the war, all while his Great Society legislation was moving through Congress, not yet assured. Johnson’s thumb then failed him in precisely the way Ike’s had not. But just as in those other cases, neither staffs nor Cabinet offered him a substitute effectively to shield his Voting Rights and Medicare and other treasured measures. So he chose to be deceptive—and for that, in later years suffered the tortures of the damned.

Thus the personal contributions of the man—someday the woman—to his (or her) choice-making may matter quite as much as other sources of advice. Nor does this exhaust all the effects upon the presidency of the personal idiosyncrasies of sitting presidents—Bill Clinton surely reminds us of that!

Staffs, of course are larger now than in any of my examples, while most department heads become still more removed from intimacy with the president. “Thickening” shoves civil servants, for the most part, too far down to help with institutional memory. So presidents and their top aides are often thrown upon the memories of associates from one or two or even three terms back, when they, their partisans, or parents were last in power. Yet times change, they really do. While institutionalized expectations now keep any president from adapting to “political time” with the freedom of a Thomas Jefferson or Andrew Jackson—a point made as emphatically in Stephen Skowronek’s last chapter as in Presidential Power’s first—this does not mean that contexts are constant, far from it (Skowronek 1995). American society and politics were not the same in 2000 as in 1950 and in numbers of respects the Presidency shows it. But can it be said that presidential prospects for effective execution of their heart’s desires, or even of more routine wants, have been decisively improved in the interim? Coordination stronger, control tighter, taking the government whole? Even if the definition of “the President” is stretched to include aides, as Terry Moe perhaps would do? I think not, and regulatory review, still in its infancy in terms of institutionalization and congressional reaction, does not persuade me otherwise.

A “President’s Department” has arisen in the fifty years, no doubt of that. But congressional and departmental staffs have thickened too, as have the staffs of organized interest groups, political parties and, emphatically, political consultants. Meanwhile the old power-centers on the Hill and in the cities and the courthouses have fragmented, while TV costs tempt wealthy parachutists to drop in on nominating contests of all sorts. Safe seats are psychologically, at least, things of the past. So the thickened staffers, in their swollen numbers have plenty to do and no assurance anywhere that they can actually get it done. The APSA has got what was once its heart’s wish, nationalized political parties, with the unanticipated result that two sets of activists, deeply divided, joust for advantage all across the country and in both Houses of Congress, leaving President Bush no more assured than President Truman was that what he wants is what he’ll get from Congress in the longer run. These comments, of course,
date from before we began to experience short-run effects of warfare against terrorists.

Since executive officialdom still tends to heed a president in rough proportion to what it sees Congress doing, his congressional relations have immediate impacts on administrative relations. Under present political circumstances both are fraught, and bound to be—a president’s department or not.

What logic then sustains it? Not, I think, the logic of effective centralization, à la Moe, but rather the logic of bureaucratic inertia, combined at the top with periodic “newness,” faulty memory, and the tendency of each official to want one assistant more. Look at the change-points and see for yourselves. Will Terry himself do that? How I wish he would! I am not against theory building, but I have the old fashioned notion that evidence comes first and theory after. If the “evidence” from tracing out a very general trend is not sustained by its detail, I would be chary of deducing theory from it, or of understanding institutions through it. At our present state in presidential studies, induction impresses me more.

Why not go back, as Matthew Dickinson has done, to FDR (Dickinson 1997)? Why not go back, as no one I think has done, to Nixon in the planning after his reelection? In the whole last century, those two are the most experienced observers of the presidency, by being in it, who have formulated views about effective implementation. They strike me as having something to add to our arguments today.

Notes
1. For Terry M. Moe, Aberbach and Rockman cite “The Politicized Presidency” (1985), and “Presidents, Institutions, and Theory” (1993).
2. Many years later, Louis Brownlow, who had chaired the 1936 President’s Committee on Administrative Management, told me FDR himself reviewed and edited preliminary versions of the Committee’s Report and “went over every word” of the final draft.
3. For detail see David A. Stockman (1986, esp. 79–135).
4. For an elaboration of this story—which assumes a reasonable degree of rationality on Reagan’s part—see Neustadt (1986).
COMMENTARY

Comment on “The President and the Bureaucracy in the United States”

STEPHEN SKOWRONEK

Joel Aberbach and Bert Rockman have given us an essay that is spirited in its argumentation, encompassing in its concerns, and likely to engage all students of the executive power. Its quality is hardly a surprise. I can think of no two scholars better suited to the task of summing up the state of our knowledge about executive branch politics in the United States, and all of political science is in their debt for their having executed it with such insight and aplomb. Commentary invites criticism, but in this case the greater service has been performed by analysts themselves.

The authors juxtapose three approaches to the American executive. The first two, encapsulated by the views of Richard Neustadt and the views of Terry Moe, identify for Aberbach and Rockman the central question in the presidency literature as it stands today: does the constitution mandate executive persuasion and bargaining or unilateralism and presidential imposition? The problem as Aberbach and Rockman see it is that both of these perspectives present the problem of executive branch politics in the United States in purely “structural” terms. The third perspective, the Aberbach and Rockman view, disavows “structural determinism” and urges us to think more broadly about the executive-bureaucracy relationship. The authors invite consideration of “generic tensions”—between leaders and bureaucrats, and between delegation and control—that widen the range of relevant issues and complicate the debate as the “structuralists”—that is as Neustadt and Moe—have presented it. They point out, quite rightly, that “a unified theory of the presidency . . . is not yet within reach,” and they treat theory, quite sensibly, as a guide to empirical questions that have yet to be adequately answered.

What remains unclear, at least in my reading of the essay, is whether these more generic considerations do much heavy lifting in the end, whether they actually get us closer than the “structuralists” to executive branch politics in the United States. It seems to me that the real work of the essay is done with reference to factors that narrow rather than broaden structuralist claims, and that this work is done largely in the passing commentary. To some extent, the same might be said of the work of Neustadt and Moe. All three strive for some essentialist claim but implicitly they all combine more specific structural, historical, and political considerations in their analyses of executive branch politics.
Rather than collapse these different aspects of the problem in order to facilitate theory building, or invoke these different aspects willy-nilly as complications that impede theory building, it might be worth stepping back to sort them out and consider the different puzzles posed by each. A sorting technique resists the simplifications that Aberbach and Rockman find objectionable in the views of Neustadt and Moe, but it does so by moving away from essentialist claims and tackling the American case more directly. In this brief commentary, I propose reorganizing the material presented, not as Neustadt versus Moe versus Aberbach and Rockman, but in a way that distinguishes factors that, in one way or another, they all jumble together: the presidency as a constitutional formation, the presidency as a historical formation, the presidency as a political formation. Each is a large topic itself, but with the essay as a guide, some major issues should be easy to spot.

The presidency as a constitutional formation is, I think, as close as we are going to get to a purely structural view of the matter. It is tempting to generalize more broadly about “presidentialism,” but scholars have questioned whether that is a meaningful form that can be abstracted from the particular constitutional and historical arrangements in which presidential offices are embedded (Linz 1994; Shugart and Carey 1992). Moreover, those scholars who do refer to “presidentialism” as a meaningful construct for generalization tend to question whether the American presidency is a good example of the type (Linz 1994; Jones 1995). We are left then to deal with what is, for all practical purposes, a unique structure, one in which the principal authorities are equal, independent, and limited in their powers, a formation Richard Neustadt famously described as separate institutions sharing powers.

All great works on the American presidency are, at some level, commentaries on the operation of this peculiar arrangement of offices. The studies of Neustadt and Moe are leading cases in point. Neustadt suggested that modern presidents were being called upon by the times to act more like prime ministers, and he reminded us of the imposing structural impediments to their doing so. Moe reminded us that presidents are not prime ministers and might thus be expected to act differently altogether. The two arguments move in very different directions—a different formula for leadership generally, and for bureaucratic relations, in particular is extrapolated from each, but, as Aberbach and Rockman emphasize, these differences are rather narrowly conceived: they reference the same basic structure and the same basic comparison. Indeed, with Neustadt and Moe as our guide, the whole discussion of structure remains pretty close to the original formulation of the presidency problem as formulated by Woodrow Wilson a century ago (Wilson 1885, 1908): it is still America versus England, the separation of powers form versus the Westminster form, the president versus the prime minister.
As Aberbach and Rockman point out, this formulation simply does not get us very far. Neustadt and Moe both present reasonable extrapolations from the basic constitutional design, and there is no a priori reason to think that one is truer to that design or superior to the other as an analytic tool. They remind us as well that there is as much variation among parliamentary systems as among presidential systems and question whether a form as idiosyncratic as Westminster provides a proper standard for evaluating the peculiarities of the American executive. On reflection, specific extrapolations drawn directly from the constitutional structure have never fared very well: in the late nineteenth century, Wilson pronounced the American executive the product of a flawed constitutional design, and argued that the president could do little more than gum up the works in what was essentially a system of “congressional government;” by the early twentieth century, he was arguing that the Constitution was ingenious for its flexibility and perfectly compatible with a presidency-centered system of governing.

What I take from all this is that external comparisons to altogether different systems have overreached in looking for alternative behaviors and outcomes that our constitutional structure proscribes, and that the field might benefit from a greater sensitivity to the different kinds of behaviors and outcomes that our constitutional structure allows. Harvey Mansfield’s commentary on the executive power stands out among those of recent years for its attention to the range of possibilities implicit in America’s constitutional presidency (Mansfield 1989). Mansfield turns traditional comparisons on their head by arguing that the design of American constitutional forms anticipates and allows for a far wider range of behaviors than those of parliamentary arrangements. The passive and well-rested Calvin Coolidge, who relied heavily on the energy of his chief ministers, is no less a model of the constitutional presidency than the commanding and ultimately exhausted Franklin Roosevelt, who insisted on placing himself at the center of things. The essence of the structure in Mansfield’s view is that men attuned to the needs of their times can expand or contract the powers of the presidency with equally good effect. Mansfield seems to be saying that what makes American structure distinctive, and superior, is that it is less determinate of executive action than its competitors.

Of course, Coolidge’s style of clerkship may no longer be an option. That was one of Neustadt’s central claims. But this is a historical not a constitutional claim. Moreover, as Fred Greenstein reminded us in his analysis of Eisenhower’s hidden hand, FDR is still not the only alternative even in a postclerkship world (Greenstein 1982). Unfortunately, arguments extrapolating from constitutional structure spin around in insights like these, providing partial and incomplete sketches of the boundaries and behaviors set by separate institutions sharing power and the range of leadership alternatives they allow. On this score the central point made by Aberbach and Rockman deserves to be underscored: the options for presidents
are more and varied and more interesting than any analysis extrapolating a single formula from a static structure will convey.

Political science has done much better with the presidency as a historical formation. Indeed, if Neustadt and Moe are understood to be commenting on specific historical formations rather than on a structural constant—and I think there is a good case to be made that they are—then much of the heat goes out of the debate between them. Neustadt described the presidency as it operated at the middle of the twentieth century. In his update of Neustadt, Sam Kernell reminded us that the “modern presidency” as it had evolved to 1960 was categorically different from the modern presidency as we know it today (Kernell 1986). Neustadt was describing a world in which elite bargaining and persuasion made sense, a world in which there was a general consensus on the purposes of government, on the formulas to be employed in economic policy making, on the value of bureaucratic solutions to political problems. This was also a world with stronger institutional connections among elites, one in which incumbents on all sides could be expected to deliver on the bargains they negotiated. Today’s world is very different. There is less of a consensus on the purposes of government, on the formulas to be employed in economic management, on the value of bureaucratic solutions to political problems. Institutional connections among elites have weakened and the resources available to incumbents in all institutions to act as independent political entrepreneurs have grown exponentially. This is a world less amenable to bargaining and more likely to foment the “politicized presidency,” as Moe has described it, with the president more interested in imposition and immediate advantage than with gradualism, bargaining and negotiation.

There is every reason to believe that presidents will act differently in different historical formations, that even if the underlying constitutional structure remains the same different rules and strategies will apply to different periods of time. Neustadt and Moe may invite the kind of essentialist readings of their interpretations that Aberbach and Rockman provide, but it seems to me that each analysis is stronger when considered as a period piece. Periodization makes the discussion of structure less indeterminant; it replaces the irresolvable “debate” between Neustadt and Moe with real historical insights, and suggests that we may actually know a bit more than Aberbach and Rockman let on.

Aberbach and Rockman themselves make some interesting observations about history in passing. I was especially struck by their comment about the different paths taken in bureaucratic development in northern Europe and the United States, and their suggestion that these distinctive histories might be implicated in important differences in how executives approach bureaucracy here and there. Still, by not clearly distinguishing structural from historical variation, Aberbach and Rockman end up making assertions that strike me as more essentialist in nature than is warranted, and they end up making more out of
COMMENTARY ON ABERBACH AND ROCKMAN

the differences between Moe and Neustadt than may actually be there. It may be, as they say, that there is some inherent tension between leaders and administrators—that leaders seek to change things and that administrators seek stability and continuity. But the rise of the modern presidency, between say 1900 and 1970, corresponds to a state-building phase in American political development in which that relationship was substantially different. That is, for most of the twentieth century American bureaucrats played a formidable role as advocates and agents of change, often pushing presidents to do their bidding, and American presidents indulged them across a number of domains from the post office to land management, from agriculture to the army, from atomic energy to affirmative action. Inherent hostilities notwithstanding, understanding the American executive as part of a historical formation calls overarching generalizations extrapolated from ahistorical institutional purposes or roles into question and focuses attention on the variability of the executive-bureaucratic relationship, in particular on what most clearly distinguishes that relationship in our own time from other times in our own past.

Finally, to the presidency as a political formation, which I take to refer to the substantive commitments that presidents bring to power and attempt to realize in office in the face of the substantive commitments of others. If I read Aberbach and Rockman correctly, they are saying that where these commitments come from and how they are pursued are themselves significant sources of variation in presidential leadership, and that neither Neustadt nor Moe tells us much about how political commitments affect the presidency-bureaucracy relationship. Their own remarks on this score, however, are so highly nuanced and hedged as to suggest that scholars have thought less systematically about this aspect of the American executive than any other. I think they are correct, so I would just make two short comments.

First, Aberbach and Rockman invoke party as a placeholder for political commitments and leadership goals, but even as presented, this is largely an admission of the rudimentary state of our reasoning on this score. To say that party underlies presidential preferences is to raise again the question of structure, that is of the difference between the political commitments as generated and acted upon by executives in a system of separated powers and political commitments as generated and acted upon by executives in parliamentary systems. It is also to raise questions of historical development. As Aberbach and Rockman point out, the bureaucracy as a political issue in America is inseparable from its association with the New Deal coalition: Democrats, and the left, are perceived to be its friends; Republicans and the right are perceived to be its foes. But this historical peculiarity is complicated by others: the American presidency is itself the product of a “pre-party” past, presidents in all periods are notorious for playing fast and loose with their own party’s commitments, and party organization is probably less of a
constraint on incumbents today that at times before. Consider George W. Bush, a Republican president committed to strengthening the role of the federal government not only in defense and internal security but also in education and in corporate regulation, or Bill Clinton, a Democratic president who ended welfare entitlements and took on his own party’s labor base in defense of free trade. If party is somehow at the heart of the presidency as a political formation—and I am willing to concede that it is—the relevant political dynamics are likely to be deeply impacted by structure, sequence, and history.

A final point picks up the quite sensible extrapolations that Aberbach and Rockman venture with regard to presidential politics. They suggest a trade off between political commitments and political flexibility: presidents who come to power with firm commitments and goals are likely to encounter greater resistance from bureaucrats and others and end up with less room to maneuver in office than presidents whose commitments and goals are vague. That seems reasonable enough in the abstract, and yet, I can think of distinct and recurrent political formations in the American presidency in which that logic is scrambled. The most obvious perhaps is the party-building presidency. For the likes of Jackson, Lincoln, FDR, and to some extent Reagan—that is for our most significant political leaders—resistance to the president’s commitments seemed to facilitate their maneuverings; it not only allowed these presidents to move with unfolding events, it proved a resource for sharpening and radicalizing their original commitments. Far from being boxed in by the threat of a strike by air traffic controllers, Reagan was liberated by it take more radical action. Were it not for their resistance, Lincoln said of the Confederate army in the aftermath of the Civil War, “I would never have been able to do what I have done.” The fact that the presidency-party-bureaucracy relationship gets configured in such distinctive and recurrent ways in the American system cautions against any single formula to capture the presidents’ political relations with other actors and argues for closer attention to the distinctive and highly variable political forms that adhere to our peculiar constitutional arrangements (Skowronek 1995).