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Jeremi Suri. ***The Impossible Presidency: The Rise and Fall of America's Highest Office.*** New York: Basic Books, 2017. 368 pp. $32.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-05173-1.

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In one of the more memorable scenes of the 1994 movie ***With Honors***, a self-described "Harvard bum," Simon Wilder (played by Joe Pesci), debates the particular genius of the US Constitution and the nature of presidential power with the arrogant Professor Pitkannan (played by Gore Vidal). After trading some insults, Wilder launches into a pointed monologue: "Our 'founding parents' were pompous, middle-aged white farmers, but they were also great men. Because they knew one thing that all great men should know: that they didn't know everything. They knew they were gonna make mistakes, but they made sure to leave a way to correct them. They didn't think of themselves as leaders. They wanted a government of citizens not royalty. A government of listeners not lecturers. A government that could change, not stand still. The president isn't an 'elected king,' no matter how many bombs he can drop. Because the 'crude' Constitution doesn't trust him. He's a servant of the people. He's a bum, okay, Mr. Pitkannan? He's just a bum. And the only bliss he is searching for is freedom and justice."[1]

Jeremi Suri's ***The Impossible Presidency: The Rise and Fall of America's Highest Office*** builds off the fictional Simon Wilder's point about the inherent limitations and roles of the presidency, despite presidents possessing raw military power that would have been unfathomable to the nation's founders. Suri, the Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Leadership in Global Affairs at the University of Texas, contends, "The presidency is the most powerful office in the world, but it is set up to fail. And the power is the problem.... Today, power elicits demands, at home and abroad, that exceed capabilities" (p. ix). It is the gap between demands and capabilities, Suri argues, that results in reactive decision making and the tendencies of presidents since Franklin Delano Roosevelt to overpromise and under-deliver on their agendas. Simply put, the nature of the presidency as an institution has evolved to the point where implementing a program like the New Deal is no longer possible.

Suri breaks the book into two parts, as the subtitle denotes: the rise ***and*** the fall of the presidency as America's highest office. There is a slight imbalance in the monograph between the rise of the office, which takes up slightly less than two-thirds of the book, and the decline, which takes up the remainder.

For the rise of the office, ***The Impossible Presidency*** explores the presidencies of George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. As the first president, Washington set the precedents and traditions, and defined the role of the office in domestic and foreign affairs. Jack-

son's democratic populism, anti-elitism, and exercise of executive authority—frequently at the expense of Congress and the judiciary—provoked a backlash, especially in the legislative branch. In contrast, Lincoln used his gift of language and his pragmatism to exercise unprecedented power to fight a bloody civil war, restore the union, and end slavery. Theodore Roosevelt used the bully pulpit to reach more Americans than ever before and embodied the positive (labor relations, health and safety standards, professionalization of the civil service) and negative (racialism, foreign interventionism) attributes of progressivism. Franklin Roosevelt was a "national healer" who reached the apex of presidential power by transforming the relationship between the people and the government via the New Deal and beating back fascism.

Suri ends the first part of the book and transitions to the post-World War Two decline of America's highest office by writing: "Roosevelt built the postwar presidency, the one we still have today, and he was the last to master it.... The problem for Roosevelt's successors was too much power, too much responsibility, and too much temptation. Roosevelt was the last great president because the office was still small enough for him to control it, just barely" (p. 177).

In part 2, Suri examines the presidencies of John F. Kennedy paired with Lyndon B. Johnson, Ronald Reagan, and William Jefferson Clinton paired with Barack Obama. ***The Impossible Presidency*** argues that presidents have been in crisis mode almost continuously since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, and that physical, cognitive, and time limitations prevent modern chief executives from achieving their agendas. Despite their achievements in the New Frontier and Great Society respectively, Kennedy and Johnson "were unable to rise above their crises and congested calendars," Suri notes. "Their presidencies mark a turning point when the power of the modern executive grew almost unmanageable, and certainly unsatisfying—for leaders and citizens alike" (p. 224). The dearth of time to process information and consider alternatives, and the contradictory pushes and pulls of constituent groups present formidable—and, according to Suri, insurmountable—challenges for any chief executive.

Reagan's willingness to change his approach with regard to the Soviet Union—even contradicting his own earlier, anti-communist rhetoric—returned a "heroic veneer" to the presidency and allowed successful negotiations that reduced Cold War tensions (p. 253). Despite Reagan's courage, flexibility, and adaptability leading to a constructive and peaceful end to the Cold War, Suri notes, Reagan was unable to overcome the contradiction between his views promoting small government and the fact that government actually expanded during his time in office. Reagan did not show the same alacrity in changing his views on other issues, such as Nicaragua, the AIDS epidemic, and the Middle East, giving the "leading actor" president a decidedly mixed record, according to ***The Impossible Presidency***.

Two-term presidents Clinton and Obama were "magicians of possibility," who were "comfortable among diverse people and in unfamiliar places. They were high achievers and natural leaders at the top of their classes and successful in many areas" (p. 263). Rather than attempting transformative and ambitious programs like the New Deal, Clinton and Obama took an approach of gradualism and moderation. Both men had mixed records, especially in international affairs, although both achieved steady progress in domestic stability and economic growth.

There is much to admire in ***The Impossible Presidency***. It appears to be aimed at both popular and scholarly audiences and is eloquently written. The depth of Suri's research in primary and secondary sources is exemplary, and he strikes a good balance between the narrative in his voice and documentary sources, such as presidential speeches and correspondence, that give voice to

the presidents as they grappled with serious issues. Suri also uses documentary sources to good effect to reinforce his analysis, such as comparing the daily schedules between Franklin Roosevelt, Kennedy, Johnson, Reagan, and Clinton to show the profusion of presidential responsibilities and lack of time presidents have had to process information. Students who dig into the endnotes will be rewarded with leads to everything from presidential biographies to histories of foreign policy, philosophy, scandals, and other interesting subjects.

As with almost any detailed work, there are a few minor nitpicks. Suri cites the influence of Edmund Burke on the founders and the development of the presidency but cites Burke's 1790 ***Reflections of the Revolution in France***, which was published two years after the Constitutional Convention, as "the most sustained discussion of executive power in early modern Europe" (pp. 11n18, 301). Suri also states several times that Lincoln was commander in chief of the largest army in the world, presumably in 1865, which is debatable (pp. xii, 87, 100). The Qing armies during the Taiping Rebellion—the largest and bloodiest conflict of the nineteenth century by a large measure, which partially overlapped with the US Civil War—were probably larger than the Union army at its height.[2] Likewise, the first hundred days of Franklin Roosevelt's first term were remarkable for the sheer number of bills passed, but the New Deal was more ad hoc and less comprehensive and planned than viewed in retrospect.[3] Similarly, Suri may be mistaken that, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy "still allocated most of his time to many other things—a degree of executive distraction not seen before in such an intense moment" (p. 197). My understanding is that Kennedy explicitly maintained his schedule to prevent signaling the Soviets that something was amiss, to give time to deliberate over how to respond to Moscow's deployment of nuclear-armed missiles to Cuba.[4]

In addition to minor flaws of commission, a few areas were omitted that could have bolstered the arguments of ***The Impossible Presidency***. Suri does not mention the nullification crisis of 1832, during which South Carolina found the Tariffs of 1828 and 1832—arguably the most important economic and federal issue of the nineteenth century—unconstitutional and threatened to secede. Although an advocate of states' rights, Jackson threatened military confrontation, setting a precedent for Lincoln of the federal response to the threat of secession.[5] Similarly, Suri refers to Richard Nixon and Watergate only in passing, something of a curiosity since Watergate was the only scandal in history (thus far) that led to a presidential resignation. The marked decline of the office of the presidency could be traced back to Nixon, rather than Kennedy and Johnson. Or we can accept Nixon's take that Watergate was a child of Vietnam and that Nixon's predecessors, Kennedy and Johnson, were to blame for the quagmire in Southeast Asia.[6]

The Impossible Presidency's argument—that demands have outstripped the capabilities of America's highest office—is certainly thought provoking. It should make good fodder for discussions in classrooms and, hopefully, in town halls or the halls of power. In a three-hundred-page book, though, Suri dedicates less than five pages to three primary prescriptions for reform. It is also worth stressing that Suri's three pathways for reform may require a constitutional amendment to implement. First, Suri suggests broadly that new boundaries need to be defined in terms of the responsibilities and expectations of the office of the president. Second, Suri recommends reform involving "public communications aimed at ... enlightening, rather than alienating, citizens" (p. 291). Rather than encouraging confirmation biases—whereby people seek information that confirms rather than challenges their existing views—Suri recommends objective research that would be publicly funded and disseminated to avoid being held hostage by interest groups. This concept

evokes Daniel Patrick Moynihan's adage, "You are entitled to your opinion. But you are not entitled to your own facts."[7] Suri's third pathway for reform is rather intriguing but would be the most challenging to attain: dividing up the responsibilities between a president and a prime minister.

Suri does not say how to divide up the responsibilities between a president and a prime minister. Thinking aloud here, perhaps the vice president could, as president of the Senate, take a more active role in setting a legislative agenda. Likewise, cabinet officials—who already figure into presidential succession scenarios—could be empowered to act more independently. The problems in the United States today defy easy solutions. Still, circling back to Simon Wilder's scene in ***With Honors***, perhaps the particular genius of the US Constitution is its inherent ability to be updated to reflect the evolution of the United States and its institutions if the popular will or Congress demand it.

Notes

[1]. Video available on YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGacD-rvXRY. Quote available on Internet Movie Database (IMDB), http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0111732/quotes/qt3661996.

[2]. Jonathan Spence, ***God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan*** (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

[3]. David M. Kennedy, ***Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 104-159.

[4]. "The World on the Brink: John F. Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, http://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct16/.

[5]. The classic study on the nullification crisis remains William Freehling, ***Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Crisis in South Carolina, 1828-1836*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965). See also Charles Sellers, ***The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 326-331; and Robert V. Remini, ***Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom***, 1822-1832, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1981).

[6]. Monica Crowley, ***Nixon in Winter: The Final Revelations*** (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1994), 143-144.

[7]. Quoted in "An American Original," ***Vanity Fair*** (2010): https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2010/11/moynihan-letters-201011.

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