

# **TENURE REFORM AND PRESIDENTIAL POWER: THE SINGLE, SIX-YEAR TERM PROPOSAL.**

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## *Introduction*

During the twentieth century, a series of rapid changes transformed the office of the presidency, affecting not only its raw power and influence upon other political institutions but also, crucially for an office defined as much by image as by constitutional authority, its status in the eyes of the American public and news media. From the turn-of-the-century administration of Theodore Roosevelt to the Lyndon Johnson presidency in the 1960s, George Reedy notes, “commitment to the presidential concept” by politicians, voters and the news media became so pronounced that Americans were "virtually incapable of thinking of the United States in other terms."<sup>1</sup> Progressives frequently encouraged the trend toward greater presidential influence as a useful means of bypassing entrenched conservatism in national and state legislatures but many on the political right were disturbed by the expansion of executive power, viewing it as both cause and consequence of liberal interventionism and as a threat to the equilibrium of constitutional government.

The experiences of Vietnam and Watergate created a broad, albeit temporary, consensus across the ideological spectrum that presidential power should be restrained. Achieving this goal, however, proved problematic. In the unstable political and economic

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<sup>1</sup> George Reedy, "The Presidency in 1976: Focal Point of Political Unity?" *Journal of Politics*. Volume 38, No.3. August 1976. 229.

environment of the late 1970s, the damaged institution inherited by Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter struggled to function effectively. Weak party organisations, decentralisation of power in Congress, a newly-aggressive and cynical media, disengaged voters and interest group hyperpluralism combined to generate widespread perceptions that the political system was failing to deal with the nation's problems. Calls for a renewed sense of national purpose, starting with more inspirational and effective leadership from the White House, showed that the 'president-centric' approach to national politics was alive and well in the late 1970s, but no identifiable consensus existed as to the nature or extent of the changes required to improve the quality of executive leadership. Whatever their impact, intended or otherwise, upon executive authority, legislated reforms in the last quarter of the century, such as the 1974 Budget and Impoundment Control Act or 1996 Line-Item Veto Act were invariably limited in their impact by the narrowness of their scope. Reformers on both sides of the ideological divide believed more fundamental change was needed to enhance the authority of the presidency and restore its capacity to provide clear and creative leadership.

A perennial favourite among the proposals for executive branch reform is the proposal for a constitutional amendment replacing the current arrangement of two elected four-year terms for the president with a single, non-renewable, six-year term. To its supporters, this offers the opportunity to recalibrate some of the dynamics of executive power, bringing the office closer in concept to the original designs of the nation's founders while repairing the damage done to public esteem for the office by some of its recent occupants. Additionally, ending the president's preoccupation with reelection and diluting the impact of partisanship on decision-making would, it is claimed, remove two

of the major systemic obstructions to bold and imaginative leadership. To critics of the reform, such notions are not only unworkable but blatantly anti-democratic. A single, non-renewable term, they argue, would isolate the presidency by de-coupling it from the traditional sources of political legitimation upon which it relies for its authority. It would reduce the president's ability to engage on equal terms with other political institutions and actors and destabilise the traditional checks and balances of the constitutional system by removing the presidential re-election cycle while leaving the congressional cycle intact. Finally, it is suggested, the reform idea is underpinned by a focus on presidential authority and independent initiative which moves the nation further away from, not closer to, the ideals of the Founders.

### *Background*

The single-term proposal, described by Theodore Lowi as "the panacea that will not die", has been debated for over two centuries.<sup>2</sup> Delegates to the Philadelphia convention indicated their early approval for the principle of tenure limitation by voting in favour of a single, seven-year term for the new national executive in May 1787. Subsequently, however, they endorsed the proposal for perpetually-renewable four year terms which emerged from the Committee on Unfinished Business later in the convention. In 1826, Representative Joseph Hemphill of Pennsylvania became the first of many members of Congress to reinstate the idea via a constitutional amendment.<sup>3</sup> The constitution of the Confederate states adopted the formula for its presidency in 1861 and

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<sup>2</sup> Theodore J.Lowi, "Presidential Power: Restoring the Balance." *Political Science Quarterly*. Vol. 100. No.2. Summer 1985. 195.

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of the legislative history of the single six-year term see: [CRS Report for Congress. Presidential and Vice Presidential Terms and Tenure.](#) Thomas H Neale. Government and Finance Division. Congressional Research Service. 23 August 2004. 2.

call to remove the president's re-election prerogative were supported by numerous U.S. presidents, including Jackson, Polk, Cleveland and Harrison in the nineteenth century, and Taft, Johnson and Carter in the twentieth.<sup>4</sup> After the principle of constitutionally-limited tenure was adopted in 1951 through the Twenty-Second amendment, which restricted the president to two elected terms in office, the frequency with which single, six year term proposals appeared in Congress declined. During the 1980s, the Committee For A Single Six Year Presidential Term, whose founding members included former Attorneys General for the Eisenhower and Carter administrations, Herbert Brownell and Griffin Bell as well as former Nixon Treasury Secretary William Simon and Carter's first Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance continued to press for reform.<sup>5</sup> Although the committee made little headway in persuading Congress to take up a constitutional amendment, the concept of term limitation continued to provoke discussion among politicians, historians, political scientists and reporters, fuelled, in part, by the Republicans' 1994 midterm election pledge to introduce term limits for Congress members.

The appeal of the six-year term rests partly in its simplicity - the deployment of one structural reform to counter a range of perceived faults in the contemporary political system - and partly in its advocates' capacity to adapt their arguments to differing political environments. Tenure reform is recommended as a remedy for the unchecked expansion of executive power, against presidents who push resentfully at the boundaries of their constitutional authority (the Johnson, Nixon and George W. Bush

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<sup>4</sup> Harding and Eisenhower are sometimes (and Nixon frequently) added to this list by reformers. However, both Harding and Nixon later changed their minds (Nixon issued a public retraction) while Eisenhower expressed sufficient reservations over the motives and wisdom underlying the Twenty-Second amendment to raise questions over the depth of his commitment to a single, six-year term.

<sup>5</sup> Also active on the committee's behalf were the actor Charlton Heston and senior executives from AT&T, Ford, PepsiCo and the New York Stock Exchange.

administrations). Yet, it is also prescribed for 'weaker' presidencies beset by external pressures or internal contradictions (the Carter, Bush Sr. and, arguably, Obama administrations). This latter condition is, in fact, the main concern of reformers. In this, their campaign differs, both in nature and design, from the effort which produced the Twenty Second amendment in 1951. Where the *prima facie* purpose of that amendment was to check presidential expansion and demagoguery, six year term advocates highlight the dangers of a politically and institutionally *weakened* presidency. Their arguments, therefore, tend to focus mainly upon the perceived discrepancies between the *ideal* and the *actual* - between uplifting visions of the executive's potential and its too-often disappointing realities.

The narrative underpinning the reform case depicts a gradual erosion of executive power, occurring during the second half of the twentieth century, which restricted the president's ability to define, or exercise a controlling influence over, the political agenda. This process, the result, reformers claim, of a combination of changes in the wider political environment and certain systemic reforms, generated deadlock and instability in the American political process and weakened the presidency as a source of national political leadership and moral inspiration.

Franklin Roosevelt's twelve-year administration signalled a historic shift in the power balance between the presidency and Congress. The crises of depression and world war called for rapid, centralised and coordinated decision-making which Congress was ill-equipped to provide. Increasingly, Americans looked to the presidency as the "legitimizing center of the national political order, the primary repository of national

hopes and ambitions".<sup>6</sup> Under FDR, the 'stewardship' model of presidential leadership (a prototype for which had been trailed by the active-interventionists Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson) permanently displaced the older 'whig' concept of presidential power to become the standard by which all future presidents would operate.<sup>7</sup> As Skowronek records, however, "expectations had been heightened, but since the basic constitutional structure had not changed, modern American government appeared to have placed incumbents in difficult straits."<sup>8</sup> Despite the presidency's theoretical dominance during its post-1933 'imperial' phase, successive administrations struggled to manage their expanded domestic and international responsibilities and the needs of the federal government's greatly-enlarged client base. Other systemic factors - the volatile legislative environment which followed the collapse of the seniority system in Congress; a dramatic rise in the size and influence of lobbying operations on Capitol Hill; a decline in party-line voting and rising bureaucratic resistance to executive-led reform - further complicated the president's task of summoning order from chaos. Administrations were increasingly forced to engage in micro-bartering for their victories, altering legislation to in response to interest group demands and constructing makeshift coalitions in Congress on an issue-by-issue basis. Consequently, legislation was often flawed or unworkable.

The growth of television and the tendency of the news media to accentuate the public focus upon the presidency as the dynamic centre of national political power aggravated these problems - enhancing expectations of presidential performance and

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<sup>6</sup> Hugh Heclo, Lester M. Salamon (eds), *The Illusion of Presidential Government*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981), 287.

<sup>7</sup> The 'stewardship' approach to executive leadership was first promulgated as a theory by Theodore Roosevelt in 1913. For a fuller discussion of the 'whig' concept of the presidency, see Michael J. Korzi, "Our Chief Magistrate and His Powers: A Reconsideration of William Howard Taft's 'Whig' Theory of Presidential Leadership." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*. Volume 33, No.2. (June 2003), 305-324.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Skowronek, *Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal*. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008), 7-8.

deepening disappointment at its failure. Late-century presidents governed, as William Leuchtenburg notes, "in the shadow of FDR" but were hard-pressed to match either the dynamism of his first hundred days or the long-term impact of his policies.<sup>9</sup> By the 1970s, reformers contend, presidents' ability to define and pursue broad visions for the nation had been so obstructed that the fashionable liberal concept of 'presidential government' was, to all intents and purposes, illusory. "Far from being in charge", Hugh Heclo observed at the end of the decade, "...the president must struggle even to comprehend what is going on."<sup>10</sup>

Vietnam and Watergate generated an anti-executive backlash in the media and on Capitol Hill. New restrictions, some more effective than others, were placed upon presidential autonomy in foreign and domestic policy while confrontational media coverage eroded much of the deference previously shown to the office of the presidency. This latter development, reformers suggest, impeded attempts by Ford and Carter to utilise the unique capacity of the presidency for defining broad national goals and articulating policy choices. By the end of the Carter administration, a consensus appeared to be growing that fundamental reform would be necessary to salvage presidential authority. Shortly before Ronald Reagan's first inauguration, *Newsweek* published a lengthy article assessing the crisis facing the modern executive. The office, it noted, had "in some measure defeated the last five men who have held it" and was now "becoming a game nobody can win".<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> William Leuchtenburg: *In The Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to George W. Bush.* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Heclo, Salamon (eds), *The Illusion of Presidential Government.* 284.

<sup>11</sup> "The Presidency: Can Anyone Do The Job?" *Newsweek.* 26 January 1981. Vol.XCVII. No.4. p.25.

Neither Reagan's success in redefining the nation's political agenda nor the successful reelections of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush have muted the reform critique. Rather, its advocates claim, each administration highlighted, in different ways, the weaknesses of the modern institution - from Clinton's reliance on focus groups and sacrifice of ideological principles for electoral ends to the questionable legality of Bush's heightened national security powers and the use of divisive 'wedge tactics' to secure reelection. Before Reagan, no president since Eisenhower had completed eight years in office. By 2009, three presidents had served two full terms in office but the presidency, in the view of reformers, remained a 'broken' institution.

### *The Case for Reform*

The single six-year term proposal combines *two* changes to presidential tenure in one measure. The first - ending the president's right to seek reelection - is intended to enhance both his measurable impact upon the policy process and the less tangible, but equally important, 'moral authority' to which all presidents aspire but which relatively few, in recent years, have achieved. Reformers believe that cynicism arising from suspicions that the president's actions and speeches are motivated by electoral self-interest would be reduced, thus strengthening the executive's hand in negotiations with Congress and improving its image in the media. Public faith in the institution of the presidency would rise as presidents were associated more with altruistic, principled leadership based upon the broader national interest.

The second element of the reform - the lengthening of the president's term from four to six years - seeks to foster stability and coherence in the political process by



permitting the executive more time to introduce, oversee and adjust key policy initiatives while also reducing the scope for bureaucratic resistance to reforms.

A closer examination of these goals allows us to understand the ways in which reformers seek to address current systemic problems, through the reshaping of political perception and behaviour. It also highlights the contentious interpretation of presidential power which lies at the heart of the reform case.

### *The Electoral Cycle*

The removal of incumbent presidents from the electoral cycle appears, at first glance, to be simply an extension of the constitutional *status quo* existing since the passage of the Twenty-second amendment. The two reforms differ fundamentally, however, in their primary aim. The amendment was passed by the Republican Eightieth Congress in 1947, after the death of FDR. Although Dwight Eisenhower considered it "in large degree an act of retroactive vindictiveness against...Roosevelt rather than the result of judicious thinking about the institutions of the Republic", the amendment's sponsors maintained that the option of perpetual reelection encouraged the cultivation of personality cults.<sup>12</sup> Further, the accumulated bureaucratic and judicial appointments of multi-term presidents threatened to extend their partisan influence for years beyond the lives of their own administrations, restricting their successors' ability to chart their own course. A heavy dose of 'institutional opportunism' certainly motivated the amendment. The Eightieth Congress was the first GOP-controlled Congress since 1931 and was hostile to the New Deal liberalism, which, under the Democrats, Roosevelt and Truman, had harnessed the presidency as a powerful motive force for liberal economic

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<sup>12</sup> Paul L. Murphy, *The Constitution in Crisis Times, 1918-1969*. (New York: Harper & Row. 1972), 254.

programmes and social reforms. Also at work, however, was a more deeply-rooted mistrust of executive power which had influenced American political development since the late eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Bowing to arguments that the right of voters to reward or reject presidents at the ballot box remained sacrosanct, reformers stopped short of eliminating reelection altogether. Heavy stress was laid, however, on the importance of respecting the precedent set by George Washington of retirement after two terms and Thomas Jefferson's expressed hope that "should a president consent to be a candidate for a third election, I trust he would be rejected on this demonstration of ambitious views."<sup>14</sup>

The single term proposal differs from the Twenty-second amendment in its intention to liberate and augment, rather than restrict, presidential power. By closing off the reelection option, reformers hope to "take the politics out of the presidency... to elevate the presidency above selfish or factional ambitions." only in order to facilitate firm, disinterested and visionary leadership.<sup>15</sup> Time and again, it is claimed, important initiatives at home and diplomacy abroad are 'warped' by the reelection imperative, with necessary sacrifices and bold initiatives shelved to placate influential voter groups. William Quandt, though unconvinced by many of the reformers' arguments, concedes that one consequence of the two-term system has been, " a foreign policy excessively geared to short-term calculations, in which narrow domestic political considerations often outweigh sound strategic thinking."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Gary L.Gregg II, "Whiggism and Presidentialism" in Phillip G.Henderson (ed), *The Presidency Then And Now*. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2000), 92.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Senator Hiram Johnson in a CBS radio broadcast, *The Third Term Issue: The Soul of America*. New York. 18 October 1940. Located at <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1940/1940-10-18a.html>

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Cronin. *The State of the Presidency*. (New York: Little, Brown. 1980), 354.

<sup>16</sup> William B.Quandt: "The Electoral Cycle and the Conduct of Foreign Policy". Political Science Quarterly. Vol.101. No.5. 1986. 826.

Illustrating this point, Jimmy Carter, who supported tenure reform during and after his occupancy of the White House, maintained that his efforts to secure the release of American hostages from Teheran in 1979-81 were hampered by the necessity to fight off Senator Edward Kennedy's challenge to his renomination in spring 1980 and by the general election campaign against Ronald Reagan. Resentment of the 'intrusion' of electoral calculations in foreign policy seems to have been widespread in the top echelons of Carter's administration. Former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance concurred that, in Vance's words, "bad decisions are made under the pressures of months of primary elections... at home and overseas, we are frequently seen as inconsistent and unstable."<sup>17</sup>

The full impact of the distorting influence of reelection campaigns was detectable, reformers contend, in American policy towards Vietnam in the last weeks of the Kennedy administration. Former JFK staffer Kenneth O'Donnell and Democratic Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield maintained the president had resolved, by the fall of 1963, to withdraw U.S. military personnel from South Vietnam but could not contemplate an announcement before the 1964 elections for fear of inviting accusations of 'weakness' from Republican opponents.<sup>18</sup> Presidential *activity*, rather than inactivity, has also been criticised for its electoral implications. The air strikes ordered by President Bill Clinton on Iraq in September 1996, were attacked in some quarters as "gratuitous military action for political reasons" reaffirming reformers' belief that crucial strategic decisions in

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 829-30.

<sup>18</sup> Bruce Buchanan: *The Six-Year One Term Presidency: A New Look at an Old Proposal*. Presidential Studies Quarterly. Vol. 18. No.1. Winter 1988. 131.

foreign policy are too often shaped by the president's concern with his election prospects.<sup>19</sup>

Identical problems, it is argued, obstruct policy formulation at home. Necessary decisions are often deferred by administrations because of their electoral implications. Treasury Secretary William Simon recalled a preparatory session for the 1976 State of the Union address, at which bold tax and welfare proposals were considered. President Ford initially approved the proposals, "Boy, I agree with this one hundred percent. We're going to do it." Immediately, Simon noted, "the political advisors' heads snapped around, and he added, "Next year." Of course, 'next year' never came for us."<sup>20</sup> Equally significant, during the Ford period, was the president's announcement of his intention to pardon Richard Nixon, within weeks of succeeding the disgraced former president in August 1974, and his subsequent decision to pardon Nixon. Ford's reelection announcement was made on the advice of Dick Cheney, who argued that an early announcement would prevent Ford being viewed as a 'caretaker' leader. The Nixon pardon, in this context, appeared to some as a deliberate effort to clear the way for Ford's reelection bid by preventing the former president's trial from dominating newspaper headlines in 1975-6.<sup>21</sup>

The manipulation of legislative agendas to suit reelection timetables is also held to obstruct innovative policy-making by encouraging a rushed, *ad hoc* approach to governance. Under a single six year term, it is claimed, the 'Task Force' established by

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<sup>19</sup> French President Jacques Chirac claimed the air-strikes were designed to help Clinton "look tough before the presidential election." Taylor Branch, *The Clinton Tapes: A President's Secret Diary*. (London: Simon and Schuster Ltd., 2009), 394.

<sup>20</sup> *So Great A Power To Any Single Person: The Presidential Term and Executive Power*. (Philadelphia: Jefferson Foundation, 1984), 12.

<sup>21</sup> For Ford's explanation of the reasons for the pardon and reelection announcements, see Barry Werth, *31 Days: Gerald Ford, The Nixon Pardon and A Government in Crisis*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2006).

Bill and Hillary Clinton in 1993 to examine options for a radical overhaul of the healthcare system would have had more time to explore viable legislative strategies, consult cabinet officials and cultivate public opinion. Instead, to save time and debate, it deliberated *in camera*, cut corners by failing to coordinate cost estimates with Treasury forecasts and spent relatively little time canvassing grassroots public opinion. Officials later attributed this strategy to the need to push a cohesive package through Congress as fast as possible before the midterm elections. For the sake of speed, the chance for major reform of healthcare provision during a period of (theoretically) unified government was lost.

President Clinton's capitulation to congressional Republicans on welfare reform in 1995 and the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996 are presented as further evidence of the negative consequences of reelection pressures. In both cases, reformers were less disturbed by the president's abandonment of core liberal principles, since the notion that presidents should be able to "do what is right even if this meant that their party would lose votes...or their own political future would be damaged" is, in fact, central to reform arguments.<sup>22</sup> Rather, the issue was Clinton's *motivation* for the abandonment and the subsequent cost to public trust in the presidency. Two senior liberal advisers to the president resigned in protest at White House backing for the welfare bill while Clinton's approval of DOMA undermined years of work by Democrats cultivating the trust of gay voters. In both cases, reformers claim, public faith in principled presidential leadership suffered for Clinton's knee-jerk responses to election pressures.

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas E. Cronin & Michael E. Genovese: *The Paradoxes of the American Presidency*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 329.

These pressures have accumulated over time and now threaten to divert the attention not only of presidents but also of other political actors and the news media from important policy issues. Nomination rules reforms in the 1970s, for example, increased the number of presidential primary contests held by Republicans and Democrats, forcing candidates to start exploratory committees and fund-raising initiatives years, rather than months, in advance of the convention. This backward momentum often distracts the media from its responsibility to inform the electorate of key political developments and debates. As Burke notes, "the situation is increasingly debilitating for a sitting president as attention now focusses on the upcoming presidency earlier and earlier each election cycle."<sup>23</sup> As a consequence, reformers contend, innovative leadership from the White House and the implementation of key policy goals must be squeezed into an eighteen-month 'window of opportunity' or risk being lost altogether.

#### *Term Extension and 'Moral Authority'*

In calling for a presidency "more scrupulous and less prone to self-interested political motives", Jimmy Carter emphasises the potential of tenure reform as a solution to the dilemmas confronting Clinton and other presidents seeking reelection.<sup>24</sup> Increased public respect for the office, he contends, would confer on the president "greater moral authority and credibility, and perhaps greater influence on...policy formulation"<sup>25</sup>

Presidents would, by implication, feel more confident in promoting their core beliefs and

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<sup>23</sup> John P. Burke, "The Evolution of the George W. Bush Presidency" in Mark J. Rozell & Gleaves Whitney (eds), *Testing the Limits: George W. Bush and the Imperial Presidency*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc. 2009), 4.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence L Schack, Note: A Reconsideration of the Single, Six-Year Presidential Term In Light of Contemporary Electoral Trends. *Journal of Law and Politics*, Volume 12, (1996), 757.

<sup>25</sup> *Presidential Terms and Tenure: Perspectives and Proposals for Change*. Thomas H Neale. (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 19 Oct 2009), 22.

defending administration priorities against pressures from Congress or special interests. Reformers stress Franklin Roosevelt's maxim that the presidency is "pre-eminently a place of moral leadership" and it is this belief, not simply the aim to save the president time and angst in policy-making, which constitutes the radical core of the case for a single, six-year term.<sup>26</sup> Reformers do not seek merely to tinker at the margins of executive influence but to effect a fundamental change in presidential behaviour and in responses to, and perceptions of, executive power by other political actors.

It is, perhaps, unsurprising that Carter's arguments dwell particularly on notions of credibility and moral authority. His 1976 election campaign, conducted in the aftermath of Watergate, criticised the corruption and patronage endemic in Washington and attacked the 'old politics' of power-bargaining with party bosses and special interests. In office, he rejected the combative partisanship and free use of patronage characteristic of his two Democratic predecessors, Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson. Instead, Carter sought to emphasise the national and moral, rather than sectional or partisan, aspects of executive leadership. As Rep.Barber Conable (R-NY) put it, less than sympathetically, the president often "just decided what was right and announced it".<sup>27</sup> Some senior Carter administration officials, including Griffin Bell, later attributed much of the blame for the ultimate failure of this approach to the reluctance of Congress and the media to separate Carter's actions as president from his electoral interests as titular head of the Democratic party. Carter himself complained that journalists and Congress members were too

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<sup>26</sup> F.D.R. quoted in Edward S. Corwin, *The President: Office and Powers. 1787-1957*. (New York: New York University Press, 1957), 273.

<sup>27</sup> *Newsweek*. January 26 1981, 29

inclined to "dispute or contradict the president on the issues for strictly political reasons."<sup>28</sup>

Ineligibility for reelection, from this perspective, improves the president's ability to frame policy debates in broader national and moral terms, making more egregious acts of political self-interest, such as Clinton's approval of DOMA, unnecessary. 'Trust' and 'moral authority' are regarded by reformers as equal in importance to the popular vote as a power resource for the presidency. As Schack notes, "A President who is not trusted cannot be effective. If reelection pressures subvert credibility and foster skepticism, the presidency is continually undermined, thereby precluding effective government."<sup>29</sup>

A second important benefit claimed by supporters of tenure reform is the extension of the minimum term for presidents from four to six years. As Godfrey Hodgson observes, "It is always election year in Washington."<sup>30</sup> Under current arrangements, the constraints of presidential and congressional election cycles cut deep into the time available to pass legislation. By the spring of an administration's second year, members are increasingly distracted by primary challenges in their home district. They are less receptive to presidential initiatives unless these carry some tangible electoral benefit and may be overtly hostile to them if they carry significant risk. Even if the campaign does not produce an opposition-controlled Congress (an outcome which had serious implications for Clinton after 1994 and Bush after 2006) the president's own political capital is still likely to have fallen sufficiently by the third year of the

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<sup>28</sup> James W. Davis, *The American Presidency: A New Perspective*. (New York: Harper & Row Inc. 1987), 435.

<sup>29</sup> Schack, "Note: A Reconsideration...", 758.

<sup>30</sup> Godfrey Hodgson, *All Things To All Men*: (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980), 210.



administration to embolden his opponents in Congress to delay or defeat administration bills in order to diminish the president's reelection prospects.

As Lyndon Johnson told a staffer in 1965, "You've got to give it all you can, that first year... You've got just one year when they treat you right and before they start worrying about themselves."<sup>31</sup> Yet, the first year of a new administration is often fraught with problems and most require a 'settling in' period as presidents and their cabinet secretaries, particularly those with little or no experience of Washington, learn 'on the job' - locating the levers of power, testing media management strategies, developing congressional liaison operations and staffing their departments. During this phase, mistakes are often made, from which, under a four-year term, there is little time to recover. The early months of both the Carter and Clinton administrations were marred by the early bungling of congressional relations and tactical errors in dealing with legislative priorities such as energy and healthcare.

Compounding these problems is the inevitable bureaucratic 'drag' on the president's policy agenda - a resistance to change which hardens as a four year term progresses. Since federal government agencies are generally more "loose confederations of semi-autonomous bureaux", than monolithic, centrally-coordinated structures, it is difficult for the president, within a four-year time span, to control their activities.<sup>32</sup> By the middle of the third year, the rate of policy implementation tends to slow, pending the outcome of the next election. During this time, presidents focus on achievable, short-term gains rather than radical reforms, regardless of their importance to the nation.

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<sup>31</sup> George C. Edwards: *The Strategic President: Persuasion and Opportunity in Presidential Leadership* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 121.

<sup>32</sup> David A. Marchand, "Carter and the Presidency" in M. Glenn Abernathy, Dilys M. Hill, Phil Williams (eds), *The Carter Years: The President and Policy-Making* (London: Frances Pinter Publishers Ltd. 1984), 201.

In summary, the six-year term is presented by its advocates as an empowering and facilitating device, not a restricting one, with the potential to raise the president above partisanship, providing him with both the time and the tools to govern in the national interest. This re-empowerment of the presidency, resulting from its enhanced 'moral authority' and longer time-frame, would, it is claimed, make a substantial difference to the dynamics of national politics and the quality and dignity of executive leadership.

#### *The Case Against Reform*

The proposal for a single, six-year term traditionally draws strong opposition from a majority of politicians as well as political scientists, historians and journalists, who contend that institutional or behavioural 'dysfunction' cannot be corrected by a single, structural adjustment. The radicalism of the reform, moreover, is criticised as excessive - "tantamount to an argument," Buchanan suggests, "that the only solution to a broken arm is amputation" - and more likely to *diminish*, not increase, the stature of the presidency.<sup>33</sup> The idea, critics contend, fails to account for the complexity of political and institutional relationships, misconstrues the role of the presidency in those relationships and is, at base, a fundamentally anti-democratic measure.

#### *The Electoral Cycle*

Critics broadly accept that reelection pressures can negatively impact upon foreign and domestic policy-making, but argue that the prospect of a second encounter with the electorate - and the reward or punishment of the administration for its successes or failures - also exerts a positive influence over executive behaviour. Presidents are compelled to re-examine their priorities, recalibrating policies in response to shifting

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<sup>33</sup> Bruce Buchanan, "The Six-Year, One-Term Presidency". 134.

trends in public opinion or to regain the trust of alienated voter groups. Examples of positive recalibration, it is claimed, are as numerous as the negative examples identified by reformers. Fischer suggests, for example, that the 1984 reelection campaign induced an unexpectedly conciliatory tone in the foreign policy statements of the Reagan administration, beginning with the president's 16 January radio broadcast which called for "greater cooperation and understanding" between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.<sup>34</sup> This departure from the aggressive Cold War rhetoric of the first three years of the Reagan presidency, Fischer suggests, was partly influenced by the need to "appeal to moderate voters who had been disturbed by the president's hardline rhetoric."<sup>35</sup> The motivation behind other 'positive' foreign policy actions, such as Nixon's visit to China or the Clinton peace mission in Northern Ireland, could also be attributed to both presidents' desire to bolster their foreign policy records for electoral gain. More importantly, critics note, definitions of 'positive' or 'negative' outcomes are, in any event, a matter of partisan or ideological perspective. The early withdrawal of troops from Vietnam by President Kennedy, for example, would have represented a 'negative', not a 'positive', policy outcome to Republican conservatives and to supporters of traditional containment theory across both major parties. Similarly, Reagan's softened rhetoric, which paved the way for arms reduction treaties with the Soviet Union in the later 1980s, attracted praise from moderates and liberals but was deplored by neoconservatives such as Irving Kristol, as a misguided strategy which threw away valuable military and strategic advantages over the communist bloc. On a related point, as David Karol points out, some of the most controversial executive decisions on foreign policy, including the 1961 Bay of Pigs

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<sup>34</sup> Beth A. Fischer: "Toeing the Hardline? The Reagan Administration and the Ending of the Cold War." *Political Science Quarterly*. Volume 112, No.3. 1997, 487.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 496.

invasion, the 'secret bombing' of Cambodia in 1969 and the 1989 invasion of Panama, occurred during the first year of the presidential terms of Presidents Kennedy, Nixon and Bush Sr.<sup>36</sup> None of these actions could realistically be ascribed to 're-election pressures' but none would have been prevented under a single, six-year term.

While opponents of reform do not necessarily disagree with Quandt's contention that "foreign policy issues are likely to be assessed at the White House in terms of whether or not they can help advance the incumbent's re-election bid", they regard the problem as exaggerated. Re-election inevitably affects strategic planning to an extent, but is not necessarily the decisive factor in every case.<sup>37</sup> Instead, as Buchanan argues, the influence of the re-election campaign is "sometimes bad, sometimes good and sometimes irrelevant"<sup>38</sup>

Another flaw in the reform case is its tendency to overlook the potential impact of re-election, which projects not only backward into the first term but also *forward* into the second. Clinton's re-election in November 1996, for example, was instrumental in providing the president with fresh leverage against members of Congress who opposed compromise with the White House on the issue of deficit reduction. House Republicans had attempted to wrest the initiative on fiscal policy from the president after the GOP victory in the 1994 midterms, resulting in a stalemate and partial government 'shutdown' in 1995. Clinton's re-election and opinion polls indicating that a majority blamed Republicans for the impasse, persuaded senior Republicans to accept a negotiated compromise which produced the first budget surplus for nearly three decades in 1999.

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<sup>36</sup> David Karol, in Richard J. Ellis and Michael Nelson (eds), *Debating the Presidency: Conflicting Perspectives on the American Executive*. (Washington D.C.: CQ Press Inc., 2010), 53.

<sup>37</sup> William Quandt, "The Electoral Cycle and the Conduct of Foreign Policy", 832.

<sup>38</sup> Bruce Buchanan, "The Six-Year, One-Term Presidency", 135.

Re-election, therefore, has the capacity to re-energise administrations, providing fresh political capital and impetus for their legislative agenda and sometimes stimulating a 'realism' in Congress which enhances political stability.

Reformers are inclined to dispute this point, arguing that the record of presidential failure or corruption during second terms (from the weakened political clout of Eisenhower and George W. Bush to the Watergate, Iran-Contra and Monica Lewinsky scandals) undermines the case for re-election. Critics point out, however, that the seeds of all three second-term scandals were planted during the *first* years of the Nixon, Reagan and Clinton administrations, a problem unlikely to be avoided by introducing a single, six-year term. Further, opponents of reform lay most of the blame for the 'lame duck' status of second-term presidents squarely upon the negative impact of the Twenty-Second amendment and suggest repeal of the amendment would go some way to removing the need for passage of a second, more draconian, term limitation measure.

### *President and Party*

A non-renewable term, critics argue, would also be likely to increase the political isolation of the president as a consequence of the *de facto* electoral divorce of the executive branch from the party organisation. The prospect of re-election serves as a constant reminder to presidents of the realities of institutional and political interdependence. Notably, two prominent supporters of the single six-year term - Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter - were among those presidents least inclined to welcome such reminders. Both frequently resisted pressures to engage in party-building activities and mediate intra-party disputes. Re-election staff at the Committee to Re-elect the President

(CREEP) maintained a contemptuous distance from the Republican National Committee and congressional campaign committees throughout 1972, in accordance with Nixon White House directives. "The Nixon people," Stephen Ambrose records, "grabbed all the political contributions for CREEP, leaving little or nothing for congressional or state candidates."<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Carter "did not encourage new Democratic talent or ideas" and "neglected both the mechanism and the vision of the party."<sup>40</sup> The apathy generated among Democratic activists by White House disinterest in party priorities was a key factor driving Edward Kennedy's challenge to the president's renomination in 1980. It also ensured that, after Reagan's landslide victory in November, the party would wash its hands of the president. "As far as the party is concerned," TIME observed after the election, "Carter will disappear like dew on a hot day."<sup>41</sup>

Despite the impact of reforms to candidate selection rules, growth of interest groups and the executive's use of modern media tools to connect directly with voters, party organisations remain powerful bulwarks, helping administrations to weather voter hostility, media antagonism and congressional investigations. Partisan loyalty was essential in shoring up Democratic congressional support for Bill Clinton during the 1998-9 impeachment hearings and helped protect Ronald Reagan's support base at his administration's low point during the 1986-7 Iran-Contra scandal. This was partly due to the efforts made by both presidents to maintain the semblance of a working relationship between the White House and the national party. Although strategic synchronisation was often erratic in the Reagan and Clinton eras, both presidents remained committed to

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<sup>39</sup> Stephen Ambrose, *Nixon: The Triumph of A Politician 1962-1972*. (London: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 498.

<sup>40</sup> "Is There Life After Disaster?" TIME. Vol.116. No.20. 17 November 1980. 28.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*

traditional partisanship as the lynchpin of democratic politics. Perhaps coincidentally, both men served two full terms and both publicly opposed adoption of the single, six-year term.<sup>42</sup>

Carter, conversely, treated the national Democratic party as "an albatross around my neck".<sup>43</sup> For its critics, tenure reform threatens multiple repetitions of the Carter experience. National and state party organisations would feel less obliged to remain loyal to presidents who declared their 'independence' from party interests after their election to a single term. This reconfiguration of the party-executive relationship would also embolden party leaders in Congress to take greater control of policy-making and deprive the White House of its traditional influence over the party's machinery, patronage and nominating conventions.<sup>44</sup> The significance of this weakened influence was not lost on Richard Nixon, who switched sides in the single, six-year term debate some years after leaving office. Justifying his reversal, Nixon argued that a single term would only accelerate the weakening of respect for the president's authority since other political actors "will know that the day will soon come when he can no longer do something to them or for them."<sup>45</sup>

The president-party relationship would, therefore, be radically weakened by tenure reform, compelling presidents to rely more heavily on plebiscitary leadership via the mobilisation of public and media support. This argument, of course, runs directly counter to reformers' claims that ending presidential re-elections would *decrease* the

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<sup>42</sup> Reagan publicly opposed *any* form of term limitation and, after leaving office in January 1989, became titular head of a campaign to repeal the Twenty Second amendment.

<sup>43</sup> McCleskey and McCleskey in Abernathy et al., *The Carter Years*. 140.

<sup>44</sup> Paul G. Willis, George L. Willis, "The Politics of the Twenty-Second Amendment". *The Western Political Quarterly*. Volume 5, No.3. September 1952, 480.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Nixon, *In The Arena: A Memoir of Victory, Defeat and Renewal*. (New York: HarperCollins Inc. 1990), 209.

destabilising influence of constantly-changing trends in popular and partisan opinion. Tenure reform, critics suggest, would be "freeing the president from party but not from popularity", a development which could not guarantee enhanced public respect or political effectiveness for the presidency<sup>46</sup>. As Edwards points out, President Clinton discovered, to his cost, the limits of the president's ability to "use public support as leverage to overcome known political obstacles" during the 1993-4 healthcare reform debates.<sup>47</sup>

Abolishing presidential re-election, of course, would not remove the influence of partisan campaigning on Washington politics. Despite the security of tenure enjoyed by a six-year president, the congressional re-election cycle would continue unaltered, with all House members and one-third of the Senate facing re-election every two years. This new disjunction could only increase the political and psychological distance between Congress and the White House. Senators and Representatives would continue to renew or lose their mandates at regular intervals, permitting Congress to claim closer adherence to changing trends in public opinion. The president's mandate, however, would age irreversibly from the moment of his inauguration - a process that could only work to his disadvantage as his term progressed. Midterm elections are generally seen as referenda on incumbent administrations but also have an energising impact upon Congress. Where some midterms (1998, 2002) may inflict minimal damage on the president's party, and may even strengthen it, others (1994, 2006, 2010) can substantially undermine presidential support in one or both chambers, encouraging opportunistic resistance to administration policies in the new Congress. Under the system of renewable four-year

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<sup>46</sup> Lowi, *Presidential Power*, 196.

<sup>47</sup> George C. Edwards III, *The Strategic Presidency: Persuasion and Opportunity in Presidential Leadership*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 196.



terms, the possibility of the president's re-election will afford at least a modicum of protection against the problem of the 'ageing mandate'. Without the ability to match the legislature's mandate-renewal cycle, however, the president would quickly appear out of touch with public opinion, lose essential bargaining power and seem less 'relevant' in policy debates than the parties and interest groups who had consulted repeatedly with the electorate. The 'lame duck' status already afflicting post-1951 second-term presidents could, therefore, begin even earlier in a six-year, non-renewable term.

Reformers' faith in structural manipulation, therefore, seems badly misplaced. Congress, still working to its own electoral calendar, would be less inclined to comply with White House requests or directives which conflicted with its own, more partisan, goals and could hardly resist asserting the superiority of its 'updated' mandate. Enhanced 'moral authority' would not compensate the White House for this new disadvantage. As Hargrove and Nelson note, "New rules will not cause legislators to follow presidents."<sup>48</sup> Instead, the unreformed congressional election cycle would present presidents with an uncomfortable dilemma - either to remain above the fray during midterm campaigns or to campaign for their allies in Congress. The first option would simply reinforce a general perception of the presidency's isolation from current political debate. The second would require it to engage in precisely the kind of partisan activity which, reformers argue, eroded executive credibility in the first place.

In summary, to opponents of reform, the single, six-year term is a bad 'fit' for America's political system as currently constituted. Without further, substantial constitutional changes to address the string of unintended consequences which, critics

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<sup>48</sup> Erwin C.Hargrove, Michael Nelson, *Presidents, Politics and Policy*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 270.

believe, would follow tenure reform, the office of the presidency would lose much of its political clout, becoming still more dependent for its continued influence on focus groups and media support.

### *Politics and the Presidency*

Underlying the debate over the impact of re-election campaigns on policy and institutional relationships, critics identify a more fundamental difference of opinion over the nature of politics itself - labelled by Buchanan the "politics is good" versus "politics is bad" argument.<sup>49</sup> Reform advocates aim to increase the president's 'moral authority' through careful cultivation of a dignified, non-partisan image which elicits respect and trust from the public. They exhibit a distaste for the obligations of routine partisan politics, at least to the extent that these involve the executive. During the Carter administration, Press Secretary Jody Powell admitted the president "enjoys building a consensus with the public more than with the legislature".<sup>50</sup> White House relations with Congress in the Carter years were notable for the "inadequate use of the carrot-stick trade-off", the combination of arm-twisting and inducement which the president considered demeaning to executive dignity.<sup>51</sup> Carter's reelection campaign 'Rose Garden strategy' was instead designed, probably unwisely, to transmit the message that the president was too busy governing the nation to indulge in the 'distraction' of appealing to the electorate. This negative view of the participation of sitting presidents in election campaigns reaches back to the early days of campaigns for the single, six-year term. In

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<sup>49</sup> Bruce Buchanan, "The Six-Year, One-Term Presidency", 135.

<sup>50</sup> Clifton McCleskey, Pierce McCleskey, "Carter and the Democratic Party" in Abernathy et al. *The Carter Years*. 133.

<sup>51</sup> Q.Whitfield Ayres, "The Carter White House Staff" in Abernathy et al. *The Carter Years*. 155.

1913, California Senator John D. Works, an early reform supporter, denounced the spectacle of a president running for re-election as "degrading to the President himself...(it) brings his great office into disrespect."<sup>52</sup>

For opponents of reform, however, Schack suggests, politics is 'good'<sup>53</sup> The fundamental premise underpinning modern liberal democracies is assumed to be the duty of elected officials, from the president downwards, to maintain close contact with the electorate, from whom power and legitimation are drawn. To ensure executive leadership remains responsive, presidents must continually interact with public opinion on many levels - through elections, focus groups, websites, press conferences and opinion polls as well as through other institutions and agencies such as Congress, political parties and interest groups. Schlesinger, observing the importance of re-election, notes, "Few things have a more salubrious effect on a president's...sensitivity to public concerns than the desire for re-election."<sup>54</sup> The efforts presidents must make to engage with the modern electorate are arduous and time-consuming but escape from this interaction is deemed neither practical nor desirable. They must persist or forfeit altogether their claim to represent the active electorate or the broadly defined 'national interest'. Placing the presidency above politics, Schlesinger concludes, is "plainly hostile to the genius of democracy."<sup>55</sup>

Opponents of reform often base this part of their case upon Alexander Hamilton's claim, in Federalist 72, that "desire of reward is one of the strongest incentives of human

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<sup>52</sup> *Presidential Term. Speech of John D. Works.* Washington: Congressional Record 49. 10 December 1912. 404.

<sup>53</sup> Schack, "Note: A Reconsideration...", 767.

<sup>54</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency.* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2004), 388

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*

conduct".<sup>56</sup> For Hamilton, the very concept of term limitation is potentially harmful to the practice of democracy. The obligation to submit to regular interim judgement by the electorate encourages presidents to conduct themselves in ways which attract sufficiently broad public approval to secure re-election. Buchanan concurs this "power of anticipated approval" should never be regarded as a distraction, still less a burdensome by-product of modern mass politics, but as a crucial means by which "democratic control is most tangibly, consistently and meaningfully exercised."<sup>57</sup>

The prospect of re-election acts as an efficient method for constraining leaders who may be tempted to behave irresponsibly or corruptly in their conduct of the nation's affairs. Here, Hamilton notes, the founders' agreement upon a constitutional arrangement of *renewable* four-year terms for presidents was necessary in order "to make their interests coincide with their duty".<sup>58</sup> If presidents no longer feared repudiation at the polls, those "inducements to good behavior" which, he freely admits, spring from the selfish hope of political reward, would be eliminated. Once released from such worries, presidents "might not scruple to have recourse to the most corrupt expedients to make the harvest as abundant as it was transitory."<sup>59</sup>

Contemporary writers reiterate Hamilton's fears of the corruptive potential of term limitation but go further, expressing concern at the possible consequences of increased isolation of the Oval Office from the stimuli of interaction with the electorate. Negative psychological traits, such as petulance, paranoia, arrogance and stubbornness, would be

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<sup>56</sup> Alexander Hamilton, "72: The Same View Continued in Regard to the Reeligibility of the President" in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*. (London: Penguin Group, 1987),414.

<sup>57</sup> Bruce Buchanan, "The Six-Year, One-Term Presidency",. 138.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Alexander Hamilton, Federalist 72. 414.

magnified by further distancing the president from the electorate. Term limitation has already clearly demonstrated its inability to mitigate this problem. As Schlesinger points out, Congress, in passing the Twenty-second amendment, ignored the warnings of Hamilton by institutionalising the 'lame duck' second term. The amendment did nothing, however, to prevent the three major late-century political scandals which followed.

Equally disturbing to critics is the implication that American government requires the services of a 'philosopher-king' in the Oval Office. Conflicting perceptions over the ideal *character* of the presidency, like those concerning the nature of democratic politics outlined above, lie at the heart of the debate over reform. Reformers and their opponents adhere to starkly differing interpretations of the ideal role for the chief executive within the American political system, a difference hinted at in Weeks' 1913 attack on presidential electioneering and more fully expounded by Jimmy Carter. Underpinning the entire reform critique is an urge to return the presidency to a more 'dignified' phase of its history, before the rise of competitive party systems compelled presidents to rely upon partisanship, patronage and political bargaining to achieve their objectives. Under early presidents, particularly Madison and Monroe, aloofness from political street-fighting was considered an essential virtue - enabling presidents to retain public confidence by avoiding the appearance of partisan bias or preference in sectional rivalries. The 'popular presidency', as defined by Ralph Ketcham and exemplified, in more recent years, by Dwight Eisenhower, cultivates and stores public approval by avoiding divisive issues, facilitating compromise between rival groups and rhetorically downplaying the importance of narrow ideological perspectives or party agendas in favour of appeals to

altruism and national unity.<sup>60</sup> Rather than behaving as the victor in a contest between bitter rivals, the 'popular' president "gains office...by seeming not to have a partisan program at all".<sup>61</sup>

Diametrically opposed to this model, the 'partisan presidency', exemplified by Andrew Jackson and later presidents such as Wilson, FDR, Reagan and George W. Bush, embraces and pursues party interests, often treating partisan goals and the national interest as synonymous. The strength of this approach, and its success in eclipsing the 'popular' model, derives from its willingness to *spend*, rather than simply accumulate, the authority and credibility gained through popular support. This willingness constitutes a recognition that, as the American political environment changed rapidly through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, absorbing far higher levels of mass participation, the presidency was forced to abandon its aloof stance and accept *competitive* coexistence with other political actors and institutions. As suggested earlier, the expansion of federal authority elevated the status of the executive until much of the nation's political dialogue appeared to be framed and directed entirely by the president. Nevertheless, critics point out, the political system is not, and was never intended to be, president-centred. To reorder institutional relationships for the convenience of the president's 'moral authority' not only overestimates the power of a single structural change but places undue emphasis on presidential performance as a measure of the health and fitness of the system as a whole. Without a wholesale redesign of the constitutional balance of powers, scaling back, particularly, the role of parties and interest groups, there can be no return to the

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<sup>60</sup> Ralph Ketcham, *Presidents Above Party: The First American Presidency, 1789-1829*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 226.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*

days of Monroe. "If we have learned anything in recent years," Cronin and Genovese note, "it is that the doctrine of presidential infallibility has been rejected."<sup>62</sup>

The complex challenges facing all presidents must be confronted and overcome through the exercise of superior political skills. Some presidents have aspired to rise above the partisan fray but, Burns reminds us, "They have failed because the office is political in every sense of the word".<sup>63</sup> By a combination of luck and judicious husbanding and deployment of political resources, some presidents will succeed in pushing legislation through Congress and maintaining healthy opinion poll ratings. Others will fail. It is difficult to conceive that a single, six-year term would have tempered the vicious mindset of the Nixon White House, changed Jimmy Carter's attitudes toward patronage and bartering or offset George H.W. Bush's flawed communication skills. The moral authority prized by Carter, critics contend, must be earned, spent and, if possible, renewed. It cannot be conferred by a constitutional amendment which, to many political scientists, remains nothing more than "an illusory quick fix" for a complex, deeply-rooted set of institutional and political problems.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Thomas Cronin and Michael A. Genovese in James Pfiffner & Roger H. Davidson (eds), *Understanding the Presidency* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 469.

<sup>63</sup> James MacGregor Burns: *Presidential Government: The Crucible of Leadership* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1965), 270.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Cronin, cited in Mark P. Petracca: "Predisposed to Oppose: Political Scientists and Term Limitations". *Polity*, Volume 24, No.4. (Summer 1992), 660.

### *Conclusion*

There is something strangely 'un-American' about the proposal for a single, six-year presidential term. Indeed, the deployment of term limits at any level of the American political system often seems incongruous in a political culture which thrives on *mano a mano* combat and celebrates the power of the ballot in rewarding or punishing elected officials. The nature of the single, six-year term proposal itself reflects this contradiction. Term limitation reflects a thread of suspicion toward executive authority which runs through the American political psyche, yet reformers' seek to *enhance*, not to restrict, that authority. Support for this reform, unlike support for the Twenty-second amendment, derives from frustration that presidents appear more powerless than dictatorial. The only practical solution to this problem, it is suggested, is to re-invent the presidency as an essentially non-partisan force dedicated to conciliation and visionary leadership and less susceptible to the destabilising influences which complicate modern mass politics. As such, the reform is far more radical than it appears at first sight. As a solution to the problems afflicting contemporary American politics, however, it is badly flawed. Its interpretation of the nature and purpose of presidential leadership is idealistic but entirely out of step with modern public and media expectations of the office. The experiences of Jimmy Carter and, more recently, Barack Obama suggest that a sober, 'above the fray' stance has limited utility as a power resource. Public support, unfiltered and unorganised by political parties or special interests, remains an unstable commodity and a poor substitute for an ideologically-committed base. Moreover, severing the electoral connection between presidents and voters would inevitably increase the sense of psychological isolation which has plagued holders of the office since George



Washington. In some respects, reformers' preoccupation with 'detachment', 'respect' and 'moral authority' as the ideal foundations of executive influence reflect an urge to return the presidency to its paternalistic, early nineteenth century roots but the nature of modern mass democracy makes such a project not only impossible but also ill-advised.

"Stripped of its romance," *Newsweek* observed in January 1981, "the history of the American Presidency is a record of long passages of muddling through and intermittent episodes of greatness."<sup>65</sup> Advocates of tenure reform overlook this fact in their persistently negative view of conventional political activity and their in habitual tendency to identify 'good' government with the president's ability to get his own way. As Quandt notes, "frequent elections and the concept of popular sovereignty were all meant to limit abuses of power, not to make it easy for a president to govern."<sup>66</sup>

Opponents of reform acknowledge that much is wrong with the modern American political system and with the theory and practice of executive power. A single, six-year presidential term - embodying antiquated concepts of leadership and bringing with it a string of unintended consequences - would do little to solve these problems and could only be a backward step for American democracy.

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<sup>65</sup> *Newsweek*, January 26, 1981.

<sup>66</sup> William Quandt, "The Electoral Cycle and the Conduct of Foreign Policy. 835-6

