



BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE:

Has the Presidency Become Impossible to Manage?

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Summary

In his latest book, "The Impossible Presidency," Jeremi Suri looks at the history of the presidency and asks whether it is still possible for a president to succeed. We've gathered six scholars and policymakers to weigh in.

1. Introduction: The American Presidency in the 21st Century: Too Much Even for a Stable Genius?

Celeste Ward Gventer

Can Donald Trump handle being president? This is a question that has been on the minds of many in Washington, the mainstream media, and perhaps some world leaders, since the 45th president took office. The question re-emerges with striking frequency, usually in the wake of the president's latest tweet, questionable claim, or impolitic remark.

But few observers have raised the larger, more significant question: Can *anyone*, regardless of background, talent, preparation, mental faculties, rhetorical gifts, or other qualities, successfully manage what has become an overwhelmingly difficult job? Jeremi Suri argues in his new book, *The Impossible Presidency, the Rise and Fall of America's Highest Office*, that the demands have come to exceed the capabilities of any one human being.

Suri looks to five of America's celebrated chief executives to understand the personal qualities and circumstances that allowed them to achieve their feats of leadership — Washington, Jackson, Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and, as Suri sees it, the best of them all, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR). The first four of these presidents, he argues, added something substantial to the office — majesty, populism, rhetorical virtuosity, strenuous engagement — which FDR fully leveraged to accomplish his unrivaled achievements. The apotheosis of presidential mastery, FDR "...was the culmination of one hundred and fifty years of growth in the reach of the presidency, the personal role of the president, and the

public expectations surrounding the office and the man in it...The country never looked back.”¹

FDR’s successors, on the other hand, each failed in some way to deliver a remarkable presidency. According to Suri, they have fought losing battles against the U.S. government bureaucracy, which often works at cross-purposes with the Oval Office. Overscheduled victims of the in-box, these men have lurched from crisis to crisis while shouldering expectations that are simply more than one person can handle. Gone is time for considered thought or the opportunity to focus on a few strategic priorities. Post-WWII presidents have been engaged in a pell-mell race against time, pitched battles against intractable Congresses, and faced a mountain of obstacles that even the most exceptional personal gifts could not help them to surmount.

Our six contributors — academics, practitioners, and some who straddle both worlds — generally agree that each occupant of the Oval Office since 1945 has faced great burdens. They have operated at an increasingly breakneck pace in order to keep up with whatever might cross their desks. Our reviewers concede that the American president is certainly the subject of great (possibly inflated) expectations on the part of the public. Indeed, as Jeff Engel notes, most of our recent presidents have left office looking careworn, exhausted, and distinctly older than they did at their first inaugural balls.

But the contributors also ask hard questions about the fundamental planks of Suri’s argument. Is the narrative of progressive decline credible, or is it simply nostalgia for imagined glory days? What is the standard by which historical presidencies should be

¹ Jeremi Suri, *The Impossible Presidency: The Rise and Fall of America’s Highest Office* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), xii.

judged? Is the president the only causal agent that can explain outcomes? If the presidency has indeed become impossible, what can be done about it? Finally, is Donald Trump the perfect exemplar of Suri's impossible presidency thesis or a refutation of it?

Robert Cook and Kori Schake point out that American history is full of unexceptional presidents. Suri's narrative of deterioration after FDR does not account for the parade of middling chief executives earlier in American history. What about Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, or Calvin Coolidge? Schake notes that the founders would likely have been far more comfortable with a limited presidency than an FDR-like figure, and that perhaps the brilliance of their original design is precisely that unexceptional people can do the job.

David Adesnik asks what the standard is for the "success" and "failure" of presidencies, whether we might better grade their tenures on a curve, and how to appraise the performance of presidents who had both great accomplishments yet also presided over historic disasters. He and Luke Hartig both note that assessing any president's performance is impossible without an examination of the composition and outlook of Congress. Several of Suri's "successful" presidents enjoyed great support on the Hill, while the disappointments he cites — Clinton and Obama among them — faced largely hostile legislatures. Schake, too, notes that engaging with the literature that explores causal factors beyond the presidency would have improved the book's argument. Hartig reminds us that there are forces acting on the presidents of today that their predecessors did not face, or at least not to the same degree: political polarization exacerbated by shadowy donors and gerrymandering; a media landscape in which sensationalism and playing to the public's worst instincts brings in revenue; and an electorate seemingly uninterested in holding their leaders accountable.

Derek Chollet largely agrees with Suri's premise, and places the book in the canon of prior histories of the presidency by Arthur Schlesinger, Richard Neustadt, and Theodore Lowy. Chollet had a front row seat to the challenges President Obama faced in the White House. He notes that, to some extent, the difficulty of the job is inherent to it, because all the hard decisions get made before they reach the president's desk. But he also underscores one of Suri's key conclusions: A core problem of the modern presidency is the outsize (and unrealistic) expectations of the public.

Jeff Engel is also sympathetic to Suri's argument, and points to the author's consistent and admirable willingness to tackle the big questions in all of his work. But he argues that the problem has less to do with how presidents manage their time or the international commitments they make on America's behalf, than it does with the overall pace of events in the world today as a result of communication technologies and media.

What to do about the impossible presidency? Suri suggests perhaps breaking the job into two parts, separating the ceremonial from the leadership and policy duties, along the lines of some European models. He also argues that presidents must do a better job of prioritizing and focusing on the most important strategic issues, thus allowing them time for much-needed thought and contemplation. Suri further urges the development of mechanisms to help the American public return to fact-based debate and become better informed through, for example, greater funding of educational and research institutions.

There is a consensus among our contributors that changing to a European model is unrealistic in the imaginable future. A formal change of that magnitude seems a long reach indeed in today's polarized politics. While it is also perhaps desirable to have a more informed public, the contributors have a hard time seeing how that problem is readily solved, even if educational and research organizations were better capitalized. As

Hartig points out, it is the distrust of just such “elite” institutions that seemed to have helped usher Donald Trump into the White House. Of course, several of our writers note, any president could theoretically choose to focus on a few key issues and take better control of an overburdened schedule. This brings us to Trump.

There is divided opinion on whether or not he is doing exactly what Suri suggests. Schake points out that Trump is, in fact, focusing on a few key issues — immigration, trade, taxes. Engel notes that he is leaving himself plenty of white space on the calendar for golf and “executive time.” But just because Trump is not tackling all the tasks that consumed his predecessors, Engel argues, does not mean that the need to deal with them has disappeared. And even if the job has become unmanageable, Robert Cook points out that the president retains one power in particular that should perhaps worry us more than his overburdened schedule: the ability to deploy a massive nuclear arsenal, largely on his own orders.

All of the contributors seem to agree with Suri on at least one count. No solution to the problems he identifies is possible without the American public setting realistic expectations and holding *all* of their leaders to account. How to make this happen, one hopes, is the subject of Suri’s next book.

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inter-service rivalry, and the New Look strategy. She was a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense in the George W. Bush Administration and served two tours in Iraq as a civilian.



2. Grading on a Curve: Adjusting Expectations for Presidential Success

David Adesnik

If Harry Truman ranks as a failed president, then the bar for success must be exceptionally high. On Truman's watch, the United States implemented the Marshall Plan, orchestrated the Berlin airlift, desegregated the armed forces, established NATO, and put Japan on the path to democracy. The stalemate in Korea undermined Truman's popularity, yet he correctly saw the invasion of the south as a war of aggression. As president, Truman put in place the pillars of containment that lasted until the end of the Cold War. He deserves a generous share of the credit for a victory that cemented America's place as the lone superpower. Nevertheless, Jeremi Suri concludes that the office of the presidency experienced "a rapid decline, and ultimate fall, after 1945," an era in which "strategy became a lost art in the White House", thus ensuring that "American power has underperformed."²

The difficulty of reconciling these judgments with Truman's actual achievements highlights important gaps in Suri's new book, *The Impossible Presidency*, in which he argues that "the inhuman demands of the office [have] made it impossible to succeed as president."³ One crucial problem is that the book does not lay out a clear threshold for distinguishing success from failure. Post-WWII presidents may not have achieved the greatness of Washington, Lincoln, or the Roosevelts. But it is not clear that they should all be branded as failures, let alone that it is no longer possible for a president to succeed.

² Jeremi Suri, *The Impossible Presidency: The Rise of Fall of America's Highest Office* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), xiii-xiv, xxi.

³ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 289.

Another problem is that, by focusing so intently on presidents as protagonists, the book misses an important opportunity to consider whether factors beyond the control of the president, especially the balance of power in Congress, may impose substantial limitations on what a president can achieve. In a system of government composed of three co-equal branches, it is vital not to confuse the absence of dramatic achievements by a president with the dysfunction of the system as a whole. Finally, these two analytic gaps raise questions about one of the book's main prescriptions for reviving the presidency by "restoring facts to public discussion" so that Americans can begin to have "the rigorous, fact-based dialogue envisioned by the Founders."⁴ Understandably, Suri decries the partisanship and rancor of today's public debate, facilitated by social media, yet slander and conspiracy theories have remained depressingly integral to public discourse since the time of Adams and Jefferson.

There are five case studies of failure in *The Impossible Presidency* that profile the tenures of Presidents Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Reagan, Clinton, and Obama. It's a list of supposed underachievement that runs directly counter to the collective assessment of 91 presidential historians who participated in C-SPAN's Presidential Historians Survey for 2017.⁵ On that list, Kennedy, Reagan, and Johnson occupy positions number eight, nine, and ten, respectively. Obama debuted on the list in 12th place, while Clinton holds on to position fifteen, which he also occupied in the 2009 survey. While significant inadequacies marred the tenure of each of these presidents, the C-SPAN Survey suggests that presidential effectiveness reached a peak, not a trough, in the postwar era. Notably, the survey ranks Truman fifth and Eisenhower sixth, just ahead of Thomas Jefferson.

⁴ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 291-292

⁵ National Cable Satellite Corporation. "Presidential Historians Survey 2017." C-SPAN.org. <https://www.c-span.org/presidentsurvey2017/?page=overall> (accessed January 31, 2018).

Suri declares that Lyndon Johnson, by “(t)rying to serve as chief legislator and chief executive turned an inhuman job into an impossible leap of folly.”⁶ Yet Johnson’s legislative success was extraordinary. Suri concedes that he played an instrumental role in the success of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and thus “had done more for racial inclusion in American society than any president since Lincoln.”⁷ But the author omits any mention of Medicare and Medicaid, the establishment of Head Start, or the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, all of which had a significant impact on American society. Advocates of limited government have made the case that Johnson’s triumphs were a prelude to eventual tragedies — witness today’s entitlement-driven \$20 trillion debt — yet they do not question that Johnson was a success in terms of achieving what he set out to achieve.

Johnson’s greatest failure — Vietnam — raises another difficult question for Suri’s argument: How does one evaluate a president who has extensive entries on both sides of the ledger? Perhaps a case like Johnson’s should lead to a reconsideration of whether any given presidency *on the whole* can be labeled as a success or a failure (and whether it is productive for historians to assign numerical rankings).

It is similarly unclear why Suri concludes that the tenures of Barack Obama and Bill Clinton exemplify the decline and fall of the office of president, rather than illustrating the extent to which the chief executive cannot advance his agenda if the opposing party wins control of Congress. An alternate title for *The Impossible Presidency* might have been *The Invisible Congress*, since it gives so little consideration to the role of the

⁶ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 211

⁷ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 220

legislative branch. While the book has many harsh words for Clinton's and Obama's Republican opponents on Capitol Hill, it identifies other causes for the failure of the two most recent Democratic presidents. While praising both for their empathy, inspirational power, and impressive intelligence, the author argues that "those qualities did not substitute for deep-thinking about how to shift the behavior of a massive government and a sprawling, diverse country."⁸ As a result, they were "harried, overstretched, and reactive executives," whose record was one of "limited accomplishments, frequent haste, and emerging fatigue, rather than big and enduring New Deal-style transformations."⁹ It seems unfair to indict Clinton and Obama for their inability to measure up to Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR). This may be a sign that *The Impossible Presidency* has not fully internalized its own warning that outsized expectations are responsible for persistent dissatisfaction with modern presidents.

More significantly, the book does not compare the political situations faced by Clinton and Obama with those of the five presidents held up as examples of success, all of whom benefited from deep wells of support in Congress. While Washington and Jackson saw some erosion of legislative support in their later years, Lincoln and the two Roosevelts enjoyed commanding majorities. The achievements of Johnson's Great Society would also have been unthinkable without a dominant position in the House and Senate. Clinton faced Republican majorities on the Hill from 1995 onward, whereas Obama lost his majority in the House after just two years and his majority in the Senate four years later.

⁸ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 271

⁹ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 271-272. There is some ambiguity on the subject of Clinton and Obama's alleged failure. At one point, the book condemns Republicans whose "partisanship and a virulent political attack culture prohibited legislative compromise." Yet presumably even the most fair-minded and civil Republicans would not have agreed to a New Deal-style transformation (see Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 275).

Perhaps Clinton and Obama occasionally wondered what they might have accomplished with the seventy-percent majorities on the Hill that FDR enjoyed.

With good reason, Suri is concerned about the corrosive effect of today's media landscape. He argues that, "in the highly individualized social media space, the absence of traditional editorial standards means that information circulates as truth with very little accountability to evidence."¹⁰ While granting that such challenges are not entirely new, the author writes, "The contrast with the rigorous fact-based dialogue envisioned by the Founders, and later generations, could not be greater."¹¹

Yet the experience of Dwight Eisenhower, to cite just one example, suggests that stunning lies and character assassination are not the products of twenty-first century technology alone. As president, Eisenhower endured ferocious calumnies, notably accusations that he was soft on communism or even a communist himself. McCarthyism flourished long before Twitter or talk radio.

While the founders may have hoped for better, they knew first-hand that freedom of the press can be dangerous. The partisan publications of the 1790s promoted the ideas that John Adams was a monarchist and Thomas Jefferson was a Jacobin. A half century later, American politics had to contend with the Know Nothing movement. In the late 19th century, yellow journalism abounded.

Eisenhower's experience, and that of the founders before him, suggests that this problem may have less to do with media technology than it does with more deeply rooted

¹⁰ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 291

¹¹ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 292

impulses. Yet, this sordid history should give rise to optimism and pessimism in equal measure. On the one hand, prospects for a cure are remote if the problem has always been with us. We cannot return to an idealized past. On the other hand, many presidents have achieved greatness despite having to contend with the corruption of public debate. Eisenhower, for example, helped to end the Korean War, prevent violent conflict with the Soviet Union, and steer the Republican Party away from isolationism. The economy grew while debt and deficits remained under control. To that list, one might add the establishment of the interstate highway system and the deployment of federal troops to ensure the peaceful integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

The Impossible Presidency deserves ample praise for advancing a bold hypothesis that directly challenges conventional wisdom. When leading scholars like Jeremi Suri take on received opinion, they prevent the field from becoming stale and complacent. No doubt, there are many reasons to be pessimistic about the state of American politics, the tenor and quality of public debate, and the capacity of modern presidents to get things done. Even so, the road to recovery may be easier to identify if we recognize that the challenges we face today are not altogether new, and stem in part from the structure of American government, rather than treating them as unprecedented obstacles we have not previously overcome.

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dissertation focused on President Reagan's rhetoric and his administration's approach to democracy promotion.



3. Can the Presidency Be Saved?

Derek Chollet

“It’s like middle management.”

-Barack Obama

The job of President of the United States is usually characterized in more heroic terms, like Commander-in-Chief or Leader of the Free World. But this workmanlike description is how Barack Obama summed up life in the Oval Office to Marc Maron in 2015, while recording a podcast in the less august surroundings of the comedian’s Los Angeles garage. “Sometimes your job is just to make stuff work,” Obama explained, “to make incremental improvements or try to steer the ocean liner two degrees north or south so that ten years from now, suddenly we’re in a very different place.”¹²

Yet, as Obama experienced, this kind of slow, steady, sensible pace of progress requires patience and persistence that is in short supply nowadays. “At the moment people may feel like we needed a fifty degree turn,” he told Maron. But the danger is capsizing. “If I turn fifty degrees, the whole ship turns. And you can’t turn fifty degrees.”

Being president is not easy. All modern ones have had to grapple with high expectations and shared powers, and at some point every White House occupant has expressed frustration with how difficult it is to get things done. While they all enter office with great confidence that, unlike their predecessors, they have the secret sauce for success, every outgoing president would likely agree with Harry Truman’s oft-quoted observation about

¹² See Marc Maron interview with Barack Obama, June 22, 2015,

http://www.wtfpod.com/podcast/episodes/episode_613_-_president_barack_obama.

Dwight Eisenhower from over sixty years ago. “He’ll say, ‘do this! Do that!’ And nothing will happen,” Truman predicted. “Poor Ike – it won’t be a bit like the Army. He’ll find it very frustrating.”¹³ Or, as Jeremi Suri observes in his insightful new book, *The Impossible Presidency*, most presidents “die from a thousand cuts.”¹⁴

Building his case by exploring several of America’s most consequential presidents, Suri provides a useful historical overview. His biographical sketches are vivid and revealing, recalling a classic work of political history, Richard Hofstadter’s 1948 *The American Political Tradition*.¹⁵ Suri shows that while the scope of presidential power and ambition evolved from George Washington’s commanding modesty to Andrew Jackson’s fiery populism to Abraham Lincoln’s soaring poetry, it grew exponentially in the 20th Century, thanks to both Roosevelts.

Theodore Roosevelt brought unprecedented energy and ambition to the office, broadening the reach of the presidency into almost every aspect of American life, forging the bully pulpit, and spreading American influence in the world. Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) took the reins at a time of profound national and global crisis, and transformed the government more than any other president, building an office with a tremendous span of control — a system with powers so vast that political scientist Theodore Lowi called it America’s “Second Republic.”¹⁶ Suri argues that while FDR was the most successful president — describing him as the nation’s healer — his legacy gave

¹³ Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 10.

¹⁴ Jeremi Suri, *The Impossible Presidency: The Rise and Fall of America’s Highest Office* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), xvi.

¹⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).

¹⁶ Theodore Lowi, *The End of Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 1969).

his successors “too much power, too much responsibility, and too much temptation.”¹⁷ After presidential accomplishment reached its zenith with FDR, Suri shows how subsequent occupants of the Oval Office became over-extended, over-scheduled, and overwhelmed. The expectations are now so high, the scrutiny so crushing, there is little time for innovation or strategic thinking.

Scholars have been exploring the dilemmas of the modern presidency for decades. Perhaps the most famous of these was Richard Neustadt, who substantially influenced how presidents think about exercising power. His 1960 book, *Presidential Power*, became mandatory reading for the incoming John F. Kennedy team.¹⁸ Reflecting the frustrations of the Eisenhower years, Neustadt’s angle was presidential weakness. He portrayed the constitutional duties of the job as inherently those of a “clerk.” Because of this structural disadvantage, a president needed to generate power from public authority and persuasion.

Just thirteen years later, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. worried about the opposite problem, warning of the ills of the “Imperial Presidency,” in which presidents use secrecy, a monopoly of information, and the power of decision to give the White House a span of control that is dangerously undemocratic.¹⁹ Derived from the management of foreign policy — the argument was built on the ashes of Vietnam and Watergate — Schlesinger cautioned that a president will exploit a persistent sense of threat to accumulate power at the expense of accountability.

¹⁷ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 177.

¹⁸ Neustadt, *Presidential Power*.

¹⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

Then, at the height of the Reagan Revolution in the mid-1980s, Theodore Lowi took things a step further, acerbically describing the modern presidency as a “plebiscitary” office, arguing that this “Personal Presidency” created a no-win situation.²⁰ As presidential power blossomed with the growth of a massive executive branch bureaucracy, congressional abdication, legislative sclerosis (which has led to the increased use of executive orders), and the ability of leaders to engage directly with the public through mass media, so did the expectations for what a president could achieve. This created a pathology: presidents would habitually over-promise and under-deliver, which only fueled disillusionment. “As Presidential success advances arithmetically,” Lowi argued, “public expectations advance geometrically.”²¹ Or to use Obama’s analogy, people want one of those fifty-degree turns.

The Impossible Presidency fits nicely in this canon, and should be read as a successor to these earlier works. Suri’s book combines the historical wisdom of Neustadt and Schlesinger with the biting analysis of Lowi, and his core insights are made persuasively. By detailing the shared struggles of presidents whose talents he admires — Kennedy, Johnson, Reagan, Clinton, and Obama — Suri leaves the reader with a sense of despair, resigned to the fact that even the most capable leaders are stuck in a job so big they are destined to fail. Like these other works, this book reflects the frustrations (and worries) of its time — including the grim conclusion that as important as the presidency has become, succeeding in the job has become, well, impossible.

Are things really so bad? Suri makes a compelling case, explaining how the demands of the daily grind — as well as the expectation that the White House will respond to

²⁰ Lowi, *The Personal President* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

²¹ Lowi, *Personal President*, 20.

everything, immediately — makes presidential success unachievable. Anyone who has served at high levels in government knows how important daily calendars can be, and Suri helpfully shows how a president's days have only become more packed. The pace of events can be unrelenting, and it is increasingly difficult for presidents to maintain control over their workday, let alone their broader policy agenda.

In many ways that's the nature of the office. All the easy decisions get made before they reach the president's in-box, so all that's left are choices without clear answers or those that require difficult trade-offs. Most presidents understand this — consider the messages they send with the inspirational plaques they place on their Oval Office desk. Harry Truman's famously declared where the buck stops, whereas Reagan's had a characteristically optimistic "It CAN Be Done," and Obama's reminded "Hard Things are Hard." All reflect the burden, and occasional loneliness, of the job. Yet Suri shows how things have only gotten worse.

Suri's analysis makes our leadership crisis today more comprehensible. He wrote most of this book before Trump was elected, but in many ways the 45th President is the natural culmination of the pathology Suri describes.

The Trump presidency is like a vast social science experiment to test the outer limits of democratic presidential power, and one wonders whether the office will become even more imperial or if, in response to Trump, the system will self-correct with congress, the courts, the media, and yes, the "deep state," acting as antibodies to constrain the president further. Trump himself will never change. So, as his presidency evolves, one can envision two outcomes, neither of which is good for the future of American democracy: an increasingly autocratic, "Trumpist" system, with democratic checks and

balances eroded; or a president detached from the mechanics of governing (or hemmed in by senior aides) whose only real weapon is a Twitter account.

In explaining how we got to this point, Suri's sour conclusion is that the problem has less to do with any particular officeholder or institution of government. The problem is us — with our inflated expectations and, as the founders feared, susceptibility to demagogues.

Over forty years ago, journalist Elizabeth Drew made a similar observation. In her *Washington Journal*, a detailed diary of Nixon's downfall in 1973-74, she remarked that we have a "totemic" view of the presidency. "Societies need symbols, and the Presidency has been ours," Drew wrote. "Our well-being is involved with it.... In Nixon's frequent reminders that he is the President, he speaks to something in us."²² In other words, our expectations for the presidency must change — as well as our susceptibility to the ills Suri so eloquently describes.

So what are we to do? What reforms could make the job more manageable? Suri offers some common sense ideas that are hard to disagree with, but none of them seem achievable at the moment. A president should focus only on "vital" national interests and urgent needs, communicate with the goal of "enlightening, rather than alienating" citizens and, most radically, move away from a single executive and divide responsibilities along the lines of the systems in France and Germany.

This all sounds good, and to a certain extent, recent presidents have tried to act along the lines Suri suggests. For example, Obama worked vigorously to impose rigor on his

²² Elizabeth Drew, *Washington Journal: Reporting Watergate and Richard Nixon's Downfall* (New York: Overlook Press, 2015), 121.

agenda, going to great lengths to explain complex policy issues and future challenges. His last State of the Union address is a textbook example.²³ He reached out to audiences in the new media landscape, which is how he ended up doing a podcast in a comedian's garage. He tried to divide the labor with his vice president and senior cabinet officials and built a "team of rivals." But even someone as skilled and disciplined as Obama, who I think would agree with this book's analysis and conclusions, failed to overcome the ills of the impossible presidency.

While Obama played a long game and was able to accomplish many significant policy objectives (on health care and on the Iran nuclear deal, to cite just two examples), he struggled to meet expectations. Even Suri admits that he found Obama's acknowledgement of the limits of presidential power — when much of the job can seem like a middle management grind of getting things done — to be "wise but deeply unsatisfying."²⁴ Obama left office enormously frustrated by the political ecosystem defined by, as he described in his farewell address, the "rise of naked partisanship, increasing economic and regional stratification, the splintering of our media into a channel for every taste."²⁵

Which brings us back to Obama's ship metaphor. Over a century ago, another astute Washington observer, Henry Adams, himself the direct descendant of two presidents, argued that the American chief executive "resembles the commander of a ship at sea. He

²³ Barack Obama. "State of the Union Address." <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama---prepared-delivery-state-union-address>.

²⁴ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 286.

²⁵ Barack Obama. "Farewell Remarks." <http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-pol-obama-farewell-speech-transcript-20170110-story.html>.

must have a helm to grasp, a course to steer, a port to seek.”²⁶ Future presidents can certainly do better at navigating their course. But after reading Suri’s book, one might add that a president must also have a populace who will give him (and someday her) a chance to succeed.

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²⁶ As quoted by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “Editor’s Note.” In Josiah Bunting, III, *Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2004), xviii.

4. It Is the Possible Presidency that Should Worry Americans

Robert Cook

Jeremi Suri is an academic with a mission. He wants to repair the political system in the United States by persuading readers that the American presidency is no longer capable of delivering on the voters' mandate to execute coherent policies tested in the fires of electoral democracy every four years.²⁷ He regards this situation as profoundly worrying because the president is the one person who, in theory at least, has the capacity to advance the public good, yet operates in a federal system designed to limit powers in order to minimize the danger of tyrannical rule. "The presidency is the world's most powerful office," he contends, "but it is set up to fail."²⁸

Suri's wide-ranging historical assessment demonstrates that American presidents have not always failed. His sketches of truly great leaders like George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), as well as those of two arguably lesser presidents, Andrew Jackson and Theodore Roosevelt, provide evidence of considerable success. Washington, for example, carefully fostered the growth of a stronger central government capable of generating national prosperity and, crucially, defending the interests of the new republic in a menacing geopolitical climate. Jackson created the spoils system to undermine the influence of established elites and Theodore Roosevelt used his bully pulpit to promote a number of progressive reforms. Lincoln created a

²⁷ Jeremi Suri, *The Impossible Presidency: The Rise of Fall of America's Highest Office* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 297.

²⁸ Suri, *Impossible Presidency* ix.

national army to prevent the destruction of the Union and FDR expanded the reach of the federal government in order to protect ordinary Americans from the most serious consequences of the Great Depression. Wisely, Suri offers a balanced appraisal of these achievements. He rightly chastises Jackson for his ethnic cleansing of Native Americans, and criticizes FDR for his inattention to the plight of African Americans. However, he does not allow his subjects' flaws — their limited racial vision in particular — to distract him from his central thesis: These men succeeded where other presidents failed, not only because they had exceptional personal qualities (Jackson's military experience, Lincoln's poetic speeches, FDR's sunny radio voice, and so forth), but also because each of them possessed a clear strategic vision, set achievable goals, and maintained a close connection with the people.

Suri argues that these presidents enjoyed a large degree of success because American society was less complex before 1945 than it is today. These great or nearly great men achieved as much as they did, he suggests, because the country's population was relatively small and ethnically homogeneous and because industrial capitalism and bureaucracy were in their infancy. He regards the United States' entry into World War II and its subsequent involvement in the Cold War as watershed moments in American history. No president after 1945 could match or surpass the towering achievements of FDR because their own efforts to act decisively were limited by a range of factors linked to historical change in the modern era. These included an expansion of executive business (which Suri illustrates usefully by comparing the crowded calendars of modern presidents with that of FDR), the stultifying operation of entrenched government bureaucracies, mounting domestic and foreign policy crises, growing tension between the president and his military advisers, social and political polarization that triggered a disastrous decline in bipartisan cooperation, and a proliferation of information spawned by technological innovations like the internet.

To illustrate his thesis, Suri shows how energetic liberal presidents like John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson quickly became frustrated by their descent into crisis-management (though he does credit Kennedy for his ability to overrule his military advisers during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, and Johnson for his decisive action on civil rights). Instead of being able to follow through purposefully on a focused political agenda, they found themselves reacting to events on a day-to-day, sometimes hour-to-hour basis. Even Ronald Reagan, the hero of the American right, disappointed many of his conservative supporters by vastly inflating the national debt in order to combat the Soviet Union. His presidency ended in scandal, with Iran-Contra, a crisis born of his attempt to pursue his own foreign policy goals without the necessary congressional oversight. Suri acknowledges that Reagan's Democratic successors, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, did achieve some things: economic growth in Clinton's case and the Affordable Care Act in Obama's. But overall, he claims, both of these highly intelligent presidents failed in their attempts to remake the country and the wider world in their own image. While Clinton permitted genocide in Rwanda and unwittingly spawned an energized conservative movement at home, Obama was unable to mend fences with Russia and left a power vacuum in the Middle East that was filled by Islamic State terror. In the case of both men, Suri concludes, "tactical brilliance crowded out strategic focus."²⁹

As a result of the packed calendars, inflated expectations of U.S. power in the world, and the tyranny of the in-box, Suri claims, Americans are now confronted with the "impossible presidency." Presidents are charged with the task of promoting the national good within the constraints of a federal polity but, regardless of their personal qualities, they no longer have the ability to get the job done.

²⁹ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 272.

One can quibble with various aspects of what is, essentially, a declension narrative — a story of something becoming progressively worse, or declining, over time. Profound national crises empowered Lincoln and FDR, rendering them exceptional figures in American history. They would not have achieved as much as they did without seizing and being granted extraordinary powers to deal with civil war and economic collapse. One could make a plausible case for regarding Jackson and Theodore Roosevelt as failures, certainly in terms of their ultimate inability to stem corporate power in the United States. And even FDR, perhaps the greatest of all modern presidents, was thwarted in his efforts to foster progressive reforms by the emergence of a bipartisan conservative bloc in Congress in the mid-1930s. The truth is, there has been no golden age of American presidents. Even granting the successes of the great and not-so-great, the “achievements” of many 19th- and early 20th-century incumbents were decidedly negative. Take, for example, Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan.³⁰ Both were men of narrow vision whose actions contributed unwittingly to the dubious accomplishment of southern secession. Or how about John Tyler who succeeded only in thwarting the economic program of his own party, or Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge who helped to lay the foundations for the Wall Street crash?³¹

While his declension thesis is far from watertight, Suri is right to insist that constraints upon effective executive action have increased greatly in the modern age. Donald Trump

³⁰ For judicious assessments of Presidents Pierce and Buchanan see Michael F. Holt, *Franklin Pierce* (New York: Times Books, 2010), and Jean H. Baker, *James Buchanan* (New York: Times Books, 2004).

³¹ On Tyler, Harding and Coolidge, see especially Gary May, *John Tyler* (New York: Times Books, 2008) and William E. Leuchtenburg, *The American President: From Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), chapter 3.

joins a growing list of presidents frustrated by their inability to put their policies into practice as quickly and as decisively as FDR did. Trump may be the most powerful man on the planet on paper, but he has struggled to translate his much-touted abilities as a business tycoon into tangible political achievements. This said, contemporary liberals should be wary of congratulating the Founding Fathers for limiting the powers of the president. What is remarkable is the extent to which Trump has achieved his objectives thus far *in spite of* the obvious constraints on his power, including intense opposition from Democrats (and a handful of Republicans) in Congress, state and municipal opposition to his travel ban, sustained negative coverage of his presidency in the mainstream media, and deep social divisions generated by the ongoing culture wars. His signature policy of a border wall with Mexico remains an aspiration, but during his first turbulent year in office Trump has nonetheless put some points on the board. He appointed a conservative Supreme Court justice, significantly reduced the size of the federal government's regulatory regime, has taken steps to unravel Obamacare and his predecessor's nuclear deal with Iran, and secured passage of a conservative tax bill that he hopes will stimulate the American economy. He has accomplished these things by using his legal powers as president and by dealing with pragmatic Republican leaders in Washington. These successes indicate that Suri may underestimate the power of the modern president to get things done in the face of the many obstacles that he identifies.

One policy area, to which Suri alludes only occasionally, clearly uncovers the limits of his thesis: the president's enormous power to unleash nuclear weapons on the world. Donald Trump stands at the apex of a short chain of command that essentially gives him sole control over America's vast nuclear arsenal. Procedures require him to seek confirmation from the secretary of defense, but ultimately the decision to order nuclear attacks is his alone. Therefore, if Trump determines, for whatever reason, that American nuclear weapons should be deployed against an enemy state like North Korea or Iran, his decision

will be acted upon. The results would be catastrophic, both in terms of human casualties and environmental damage. Jeremi Suri rightly highlights the many constraints on the modern presidency, but on this critical subject his thesis is unconvincing. Readers of this roundtable should hope that this power of the *possible* presidency is not tested in their lifetime.

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5. Thinking Big, About the Biggest Job in the World

Jeffrey A. Engel

Jeremi Suri does not write small books. Designed to reveal, prompt discussion, and ultimately serve as vehicles for offering solutions, his thoughtful works are not for intellectual shrinking violets. His first explored the international turbulence of 1968, a year remembered too often in our own tumultuous era simply as a point of comparison.³² Having taken on a topic no smaller than the world, he then turned his eye towards perhaps the most influential, and surely the most controversial, American policymaker of our era: the oft-discussed yet perennially confounding Henry Kissinger.³³ Suri's account ranks among the top works on Kissinger for its insightful portrayal of how the young boy's exile and upbringing affected his older self's Metternichian fascination with order and power. Turning from the question of what fueled intertwined protests or made a single man tick, Suri next put all of American history on the analyst's couch, identifying an impulse for democratic missionizing and ultimately nation-building, which he considers essential to the nation's culture and history.³⁴

These are not small topics, nor are they incontrovertible. That is, in part, the purpose of making a large argument: to generate thought (perhaps even controversy), pushback, and debate, within, and ultimately beyond, the ivory tower.

³² Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

³³ Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009).

³⁴ Jeremi Suri, *Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

Each of Suri's books has aged well, remaining as relevant to contemporary discussion as any historian's work today. The questions he has raised in each bubbled below the surface of American life and politics for generations: the implications of globalism's reach and the interwoven lives of disparate peoples and states; explorations of America's self-proclaimed mission and responsibility to the world; and yes, the influence of Jewish intellectuals (foreign-born no less!). These questions have become even more relevant with the election of President Trump, who disdains everything Suri has devoted a lifetime to studying — protesters, internationalism, nation-building, and experts — making his new book all the more timely.

Written mostly before Donald Trump's election to the nation's highest office, Suri's latest work shines a new light on the 45th president and the state of the office today. *The Impossible Presidency: The Rise and Fall of America's Highest Office*, explores the past and future of the nation's chief-executive and Commander-in-Chief. It is a position that, from 1943–2017, had no real rival for the title of world's most powerful ruler. But along with the rise of Trump, there is a growing sense that the leadership of the free world and beyond no longer automatically accompanies the Oval Office. That virtually every major issue on earth once flowed across a president's desk, as Suri describes, largely explains the office's decline in effectiveness, thoughtfulness, and ultimately influence. If Trump's election brought the presidency's deterioration into sharp relief, Suri shows that it had been sick long before.

Tracing the history of the presidency from its first occupant to its most recent, Suri argues that such a fall from power was inevitable, as the demands of the job became too great for any one man (or woman) to fully master: "Today, power elicits demands, at home and abroad, that exceed capabilities... Power pulls the president into mounting

commitments, exaggerated promises, and widening distractions—‘mission creep,’ in its many infectious forms.”³⁵

The presidency itself has become an impossible job, his latest book concludes, whose burdens, being at once global and omnipresent, leave little time for reflection, strategizing, evaluation, or even governing. Given the size of today’s federal bureaucracy, and the breadth of the nation’s global commitments (both wise and imprudent), there is no issue capable of appearing in a newspaper that could not in some way fall under the president’s purview (for comment if not for coordination of policy). Yet, at the same time, there is no way for any human being to coordinate everything said, done, or committed in his name and under his presidential seal. The problem is not a new one: “[Ronald] Reagan’s presidency ended in scandal,” Suri concludes, in one of eight episodic chapters exploring a sample of historically-popular presidents, when his “strong beliefs empowered zealous staff members...to push beyond the legal boundaries of their authority.”³⁶ Reagan was a hands-off visionary, unconcerned with nuance or detail. No one would ever reasonably call him a micromanager, whether of his office, his administration, or even his own daily schedule. Yet, “even if he had tried” to exert more personal control, Suri writes, “Reagan could not have maintained the same direct control over the larger, more complex, and more international government bureaucracy” that Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) did.³⁷

FDR was not only Reagan’s political idol, he is also the fulcrum on which Suri’s book hinges. Every predecessor to FDR he discusses contributed something to the office that

³⁵ Jeremi Suri, *The Impossible Presidency: The Rise of Fall of America’s Highest Office* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), ix.

³⁶ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 257.

³⁷ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 258.

FDR, beset both by global economic depression and then world war, found useful and empowering. George Washington’s “vision of a focused executive set the standard for his successors.”³⁸ Andrew Jackson, a self-styled man of the people with all the attendant contemporary fascist resonances embedded in that term, “rooted his presidency in the interests and expectations of ordinary citizens, rather than the refined institutions and ideas that had guided his predecessors.” As Suri writes, Jackson “made the presidency anti-elitist.”³⁹

Abraham Lincoln pushed the boundaries of presidential power still farther, yet not so far that it could not be focused and controlled. By the time Lincoln passed from this earth and into history, he’d commanded the world’s largest military, overseen a broad expansion of the federal government’s promotion of education, infrastructure, and industry, and retooled the nation from a collection of conjoined states into one national union. He’d also overseen more American blood spilt than any of his presidential peers before or since. Lincoln was neither perfect nor without his critics, being in Suri’s portrayal more controversial saint than unquestioned savior. The presidency under his mantle “became more powerful not because he could always achieve his aims, but because he managed to imbue his centralizing efforts with legitimacy through the force of his actions, and especially his words.”⁴⁰

As American power grew from its 18th century origins across the 19th century, so too did the president’s. By the 20th century, the power centralized in the White House was employed by progressive leaders to rein in other, more nefarious, centers of influence

³⁸ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 46.

³⁹ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 69.

⁴⁰ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 100.

over American life, be they Wall Street financiers or corporations more concerned with profits than with the lives of their workers or the safety of their products. Theodore Roosevelt created a “strenuous presidency,” increasing “the speed, range, and impact of the nation’s executive as a catalyst for domestic and international change.” He was a “progressive,” Suri writes, determined to employ the power of his office to reform what ailed America’s modernizing economy and society, “but he was also hyper-interventionist in all areas of policy.”⁴¹

By FDR’s time, the presidency had thus become prestigious (Washington’s influence); personal (Jackson’s); powerful (Lincoln’s); and potentially omnipresent (Theodore Roosevelt’s). A man of remarkable temperament and charm, capable of delegating in order to reserve time to socialize, think, and thus strategize, FDR employed all these attributes when facing and ultimately overcoming two of the three greatest existential threats the American republic has ever faced: the Great Depression and World War II (Lincoln’s Civil War was both the third and the direst). Suri writes that “Roosevelt was the last great president because the office was still small enough for him to control it, just barely. After him, the continued increase in presidential power exceeded executive capacity.”⁴²

It was all downhill from there, as leaders such as John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Reagan, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama soon found. During and after the Cold War, required to patrol and police the global reach of Roosevelt’s nascent leviathan, each of his successors discovered too much on their desk — and in particular, too much on their daily agenda — to truly prioritize their energy and efforts. Diffused by circumstance and

⁴¹ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 135-136.

⁴² Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 177.

driven more by crisis than by design as the necessity of responding to events outpaced a president's ability to truly shape them, their effectiveness waned. There is, Suri ultimately concludes, too much on any president's plate to expect success. The system is simply overwhelmed. So too the man.

This is a hard argument to refute in the 21st century. The manic pace of events denies any president, let alone any citizen, the quiet and intellectual solitude afforded in previous generations. We all respond to crises, represented by beeps and buzzes emanating from the electronic tethers we keep in our pockets or by our bedsides, never straying far from their grasp. Donald Trump's infatuation with the instantaneous reach of his influence is undoubtedly a key to his electoral success. Where would his campaign have been without Twitter, and a willingness to use it at all hours, and without restraint?

It is worth noting that this proximity does not appear to make the electorate's heart grow fonder. From Clinton to Trump, technology has brought Americans ever closer to their presidents, erasing much of the majesty and mystique Washington originally infused into the office. Trump, in particular, is omnipresent, dominating the news cycle and thus the electorate's attention as no predecessor, while simultaneously receiving an equally unprecedented disapproval for any modern Commander-in-Chief at the close of their first year in office.⁴³ Trump notes his "ratings" are up, but counting views and clicks might work for reality television, where the difference between infatuation and revulsion matters not so long as eyeballs are transfixed. But in actual reality, one must take account of quality as well as quantity. Presidents have always longed to directly engage their

⁴³ Rebecca Savransky, "Gallup: Trump's First Year Job Approval Ten Points Lower than Any Predecessor." *The Hill*, January 22, 2018. <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/370154-gallup-trumps-first-year-job-approval-10-points-lower-than-any>.

constituents with immediacy and without intermediary. Woodrow Wilson traversed the country in order to sell his internationalist wares directly to voters. FDR's voice could simultaneously flow into every business and living room, while, from Truman until today, presidents' faces have routinely filled television and computer screens. With the Oval Office now connected directly to the miniature display of any citizen's phone or even wrist-watch, the presidency today appears smaller than ever before.

Pace and proximity are not the only problems the office confronts. No single leader could do all that is expected of a president today, Suri argues. In some sense, the current occupant does not even try. Trump's post-FDR predecessors bemoaned being buried in paper. This president eschews reading. Television is less taxing. Roosevelt's successors aged at a terrifying speed in office, its pressures etched into every premature wrinkle and gray hair. Trump's coif appears untarnished. Perhaps golf helps. He hit the links one out of every three days, on average, during his first year in office. "I don't have time for golf," he complained when campaigning for office, and certainly won't once "working for you," the American voter. Inauguration left other presidents drowning in information and responsibility, Suri shows in great detail, their every movement and minute scripted, parsed, and occupied. Trump's daily schedule, conversely, contains primarily "executive time," his office's in-house euphemism for further television viewing.

Donald Trump is therefore not the ideal example of the burdens of office that Suri accurately describes, being particularly unburdened by them. This does not mean the problems Suri identifies have been solved or reached their nadir merely because they are going unattended. How then might more conscientious presidents, presuming there are more to come, contend with the overburdening of their post? Suri offers only two brief solutions — all too brief a payoff for a reader who has followed his long story of decline and yearns for a glimmer of hope. First, Americans might rework their constitution to

separate the sovereign's governing and ceremonial responsibilities, following a British or German model (one hereditary, the other elected) wherein the duties of head of state and of policymaking are divorced. Think how much more work a president might achieve if relieved of the awesome burden of greeting Super Bowl winners and spelling bee champs?

Alternatively, the presidency's plight might be improved by improving the electorate. "Instead of serious, fact-based debate, an increasingly segmented media landscape encourages citizens to receive information that confirms their biases, often without attention to contrary facts or perspectives."⁴⁴ If better educated, more widely informed, and ultimately wiser, Suri essentially posits, voters would more likely hold their leaders to a higher standard. By "restoring facts" to public discussion, a president might more effectively lead. In 1931, ironically just before FDR's election, the famed historian Carl Becker observed that "every man is his own historian."⁴⁵ Suri in 2017 calls for each American to be his or her own fact-checker as well. Would that it were so easy.

In the *Impossible Presidency*, Suri has thoughtfully identified the problem of an overworked and overextended presidency, and done a great service by sparking discussion and debate on the topic, even if he has failed to identify the root cause of that problem. Why are American leaders from Washington's time forward busier than their predecessors, why has their pace of work increased as has America's power and global reach (and thus global responsibility)? It is not merely because FDR took up a burden others dared not set down. Their pace has increased merely — and yet profoundly — because the world's overall pace has quickened, along with its intertwinement. This is not

⁴⁴ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 290-291.

⁴⁵ Carl L. Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review*, 37, no. 2 (1931): 221-36.

simply because of new global responsibilities Americans have undertaken, but because of the technologies they employ. Washington and Jackson never had to allot time for consuming and composing telegraphs or emails. Their missives could take weeks (if not more) to arrive, and an equal period for a response to return. Lincoln would hear telegraphed reports from the battlefield and manage demands for a decision multiple times a day. Theodore Roosevelt's words could be read across the country within minutes. Woodrow Wilson's circled the globe in less than an hour. And by the 1930s, FDR's constituents could hear him, in real time, simultaneously. The pace of connections and the reach of a president's office and influence only increased in the decades that followed, not just arithmetically but geometrically. Today our Commander-in-Chief can instantaneously communicate to the world merely by tapping his thumbs.

This is the real problem of the overburdened presidency, and one that is impossible to imagine retreating from or improving. Separating the ceremonial and the governing elements of the job would help. So too would a more educated and informed electorate who could afford policymakers the opportunity for a more elevated public square in which to debate policies.

Ultimately though, the presidency is not such an impossible task for a leader who understands the basic elements of power in the 21st century — the speed and reach of that power in particular. But it *is* impossible to do well without fully recognizing when to put that power down. That one can reach the world within milliseconds in order to express every passing whim or fury does not mean one should. Suri has skillfully identified what makes the presidency difficult. The solution lies not in dividing the office or in limiting its scope, but rather, in our leaders choosing to concentrate on what matters most to them and what is in the country's national interest, and not only on their retweets, ratings, and putts.

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6. The Road to the Impossible Presidency Runs Through Our Dysfunctional National Politics

Luke Hartig

At some point early in the Kennedy administration, the president’s men — the “best and brightest” of their generation — realized they faced a challenge that not even their prestigious educations and fine family lineages could help them surmount. The federal bureaucracy that their hero, President Franklin Roosevelt, had built and that President John F. Kennedy hoped to harness to unleash American greatness, had become so unwieldy and obstinate that it threatened the very authority of the president as head of the executive branch. In the words of Kennedy’s chosen chronicler, Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger, the bureaucracy “remained in bulk a force against innovation with an inexhaustible capacity to dilute, delay, and obstruct presidential purpose. Only so many fights were possible.”⁴⁶

By pointing to this observation in his new book, *The Impossible Presidency*, Jeremi Suri lands squarely on one of the fundamental challenges of the modern presidency. How can the occupant of the Oval Office serve as the chief executive of a vast establishment that may — by statute or due to political and cultural leanings — sometimes stand in the way of his or her agenda? This challenge has only become more acute in the ensuing decades, as a series of presidents, frustrated by legislative intransigence, have come to rely on their executive powers to get anything done. Suri’s treatment of the modern executive revolves around Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, both of whom he regards with admiration. He describes them as “Magicians of Possibility,” two men of humble

⁴⁶ Jeremi Suri, *The Impossible Presidency: The Rise and Fall of America’s Highest Office*, (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 189.

backgrounds and extraordinary gifts who inspired their bases and enraged their opposition.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, according to Suri, both ultimately succumbed to the challenges of the office and delivered middling presidencies to the American people.

In the end, Suri's account concludes with a whimper. Seemingly overwhelmed by the impossible circumstances he has outlined, Suri suggests changes — a restructuring of government, perhaps the creation of a prime minister — that are more fanciful than practical. In addition to leaving the reader with few realistic solutions to the problems he so compellingly describes, a major shortcoming of an otherwise persuasive book is that Suri spends so little time on the real, day-to-day methods modern presidents have used to confront those problems.

A closer look at the presidency of Barack Obama (in whose White House I served), in many ways, underscores Suri's thesis about the challenges of the office. However, unpacking some of the additional challenges Obama faced on the Hill and with the public — including major complications of modern politics that Suri omits or touches on too briefly — and how he maneuvered within the executive branch to achieve major policy wins provides practical lessons for future executives. Indeed, it was both Obama's pragmatism and his exercise of executive authority that made the things that he *did* accomplish possible. For Suri and other students of the office, the Obama presidency might serve either as a guide to what can be done about the overwhelming nature of the modern presidency, or a cautionary tale of executive overreach. It may be a bit of both.

Any accounting of Barack Obama's tenure must acknowledge his dysfunctional relationship with Congress. Many of the successful presidencies Suri cites relied on

⁴⁷ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 261.

productive partnerships with the Hill. But today's members of Congress operate in a different incentive structure from their predecessors, making the kind of wheeling and dealing of days past an impossibility. For Suri, the resistance Obama (as well as Clinton) faced was a result of resentment over their "non-traditional backgrounds, their remarkable rise, and the people [i.e., racial minorities] they brought along with them."⁴⁸ But a more careful examination reveals a range of forces in Washington that have poisoned and polarized the atmosphere and would complicate the ambition of any president, no matter their rhetorical gifts or partisan affiliation.

Getting elected to Congress has become almost entirely about fundraising, and districts have been gerrymandered so that the dominant party can stay in power. Serious 1990s-era legislative attempts to reform campaign finance have largely been abandoned, and the Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United* unleashed torrents of dark money. Lobbying expenditures have surged, while political mega-donors, like George Soros on the left and the Koch brothers on the right, now fund not only candidates, but constellations of political action committees, coalitions, think tanks, shadow groups, grassroots organizers, media outlets, and academic institutions that serve their objectives.⁴⁹ A throng of Beltway trade associations and special interest groups demands attention to their issues, and advocacy groups release scorecards grading the administration and Congress on how well they support priority issues and then urge their supporters to hold to account those members who are insufficiently pure. The kinds of deals cut by previous presidents and Congresses are no longer tenable. Suri has little to say about these realities, or their impact, and partisan gridlock is too often reduced to simplistic concepts like

⁴⁸ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 275.

⁴⁹ Open Secrets. "Total lobbying spending in the U.S. 1998-2016 | Statistic." Statista. April, 2017. Accessed January 09, 2018. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/257337/total-lobbying-spending-in-the-us/>.

congressional Republican desires to “reduce taxes and protect a traditional white America”⁵⁰ or “a virulent political attack culture.”⁵¹

The president also has less ability to shape public consensus than he once did. The media environment, which grew more polarized with the advent of widespread cable news and the proliferation of political talk radio in the 1990s, has only become more complex in the digital age. Web-based publications, blogs, and social media — carefully funneled to the political beliefs of the viewer and powered by a click-based revenue model that incentivizes the sensational — provide an avalanche of charged content to reinforce partisan positions. False or misleading news stories go viral on social media and partisans release 280-character streams of vitriol aimed at those they disagree with. Winning the argument has come to supplant the search for truth in our national dialogue. Here too, Suri’s treatment is far too cursory and his solutions too simplistic. While he acknowledges the role of new media and “false news” in our dysfunctional public dialogue, his prescriptions of empowering public educational institutions, public media, and non-partisan research organizations fail to grapple with the growing conservative distrust for these “elite” institutions.⁵²

Suri is surely right that governing strategically in such an environment seems impossible. But Obama took a number of steps to find work-arounds to these many obstacles, and in many cases, he succeeded.

⁵⁰ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 276.

⁵¹ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 275.

⁵² Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 291-292.

After early legislative wins on economic stimulus and health care reform, Democrats lost seats and eventually their majorities in both chambers. Republicans declared their top goal was making Obama a one-term president, and prospects for legislative victories faded. Obama, the former constitutional law professor, who had set out to work with Congress on landmark legislation, increasingly looked to executive action to fulfill his policy agenda. Often, this meant taking an expansive view of the statutory authority granted to the executive branch and pushing the regulatory machine to the outer bounds of congressional intent. In one of the more notable examples, the administration approved regulations to slash carbon emissions by fundamentally redesigning power generation in the United States — all without an act of Congress.⁵³ Other regulatory action introduced muscular reforms across industries, and contrary to Suri’s account, a great deal of them have not been easily reversed.

A similar playbook guided foreign policy. In 2011, for example, in the absence of congressional authorization, an expansive interpretation of executive authority justified U.S. participation in a months-long war against the sovereign government of Libya. After Congress failed to pass a new Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) that would have covered U.S. action against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Obama Administration justified its ISIS campaign under the 2001 AUMF that authorized military action “against those nations, organizations, or persons [the President] determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred

⁵³ Coral Davenport, “Obama to Take Action to Slash Coal Pollution,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2014. Accessed on January 31, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/02/us/politics/epa-to-seek-30-percent-cut-in-carbon-emissions.html>

on September 11, 2001.”⁵⁴ No matter that ISIS did not exist on 9/11, nor that ISIS had publicly split with al-Qaeda a few months prior.

Some of Obama’s top foreign policy accomplishments that Suri favorably cites, such as the normalization of relations with Cuba, the Paris climate accords, and the Iran nuclear deal, were similarly lawyered so that the president had maximum discretion to execute deals he believed were in the best interest of the United States. His administration engaged Congress on these issues but deftly sidestepped congressional veto of the most controversial aspects.

Also central to Obama’s approach to the presidency was mastering the mechanics of the executive branch. He appointed to his national security cabinet men and women who knew how to work the bureaucracy. At lower levels, the president appointed an army of experienced lawyers and policy wonks, most of whom had worked together for years in Washington, D.C.’s think tanks and law firms, to help him navigate complex legal and policy questions. And while some of Obama’s predecessors (and his successor) were in some ways thwarted by the career civil servants they presided over, the Obama team set out to woo the federal workforce. In many ways, Obama’s empowerment of a professional civil service harkens back not to Kennedy but to the Theodore Roosevelt ideal that Suri praises.⁵⁵

What’s more, in the post-Bush era, serving in government, especially at the White House or near the upper ranks of cabinet agencies, gained a new cachet among left-leaning

⁵⁴ United States. Cong. *Joint Resolution to Authorize the Use of United States Armed Forces Against Those Responsible for the Recent Attacks Launched Against the United States*. 107th Cong. S.J.Res 23. 115 Stat. 224 (2001).

⁵⁵ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 111.

young people, and served as powerful social currency in Washington and beyond. White House staffers associated with A-list stars and became celebrities in their own right. The *New York Times* gushed over the young Obama White House staffers remaking Washington, D.C. as if they were the young New York heirs often featured in the Sunday Styles section.⁵⁶ Top talent from Silicon Valley left high-paying jobs to serve in government. A Facebook photo with the president was the ultimate sign of insider status. For career staff, the desire to serve in the White House, always a sought-after rotation, became ever more intense, both as an opportunity to be on Team Obama and to potentially catapult oneself out of the slow, seniority-based career progression that defines the civil service.

Beyond winning over the bureaucracy, the Obama national security team sought to understand the bureaucratic process and make sure it was actually carrying out the president's priorities. As Suri notes, the modern bureaucracy tends to take on a life of its own and can stymie a president's plans by slow-rolling them or implementing them in a way that allows the bureaucracy to fulfill its institutional biases. Whether by design or circumstance, the Obama approach to taming the national security bureaucracy ran through a muscular National Security Council (where I served from 2013-2016). A large staff — the NSC ballooned to more than 400 in Obama's second term — had extraordinary reach across the government. The staff held more meetings on a wider range of issues and on more levels than many of its predecessors.

The progress the Obama team made in reducing the detainee population at Guantanamo Bay would not have been possible had the president purely deferred to the Pentagon. His

⁵⁶ See, for example, Ashley Parker, "All the Obama 20-Somethings," *New York Times Magazine*, April 29, 2010., <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/02/magazine/02obamastaff-t.html>.

drone reforms, which held operators to a higher standard and resulted in a restriction of the kinds of strikes they could take, might not have been possible if Obama had fully acquiesced to the preferences of those operators. The Iran deal might not have been possible if the White House had been more solicitous of departments and agencies dominated by those that held more hawkish views on Iran. For the Obama team, overcoming bureaucratic inertia and executing the president's priorities required both earning the trust of the bureaucracy and building a team big enough to wrangle it.

To critics, the large NSC staff became a sign of Obama's micromanagement and the insularity of the White House. National security commentators from both sides of the aisle called for greater delegation of policymaking to departments and agencies and for the NSC to focus on strategic matters. Seen through the lens of Suri's argument, it would also suggest a continued trend of a White House without clear and limited strategic priorities. But keeping the bureaucracy moving along required the intensive involvement of staff with a direct line to the president and his closest advisers.

Others impugned Obama's expanded use of executive powers. Indeed, while most of Suri's book was written before the Trump presidency got under way, he might have noted that Trump began immediately issuing executive orders and rolling back a raft of regulations, thus aggressively using the tools available to him thanks, in part, to the precedent set by President Obama. Thus, one implication of the impossible presidency, as illustrated by Obama's tenure, is that occupants of the office must now inevitably push its powers to the limit in order to accomplish any of their priorities at all.

Overloaded calendars and time famine have no doubt been a problem for modern presidents — certainly before President Trump brought “executive time” to the Oval Office. Yet many of America's business leaders face similar challenges, and anyone who

has worked in Washington or similarly demanding professional environments would view a full schedule for senior officials as the norm. Indeed, many of Suri's practitioner readers may be shocked by (and envious of) the large blocks of white space on Franklin Roosevelt's calendar, but a return to those times is hardly practical. Suri stretches the time management argument beyond its breaking point by implying that effectiveness and calendar density are inversely related. The true lesson of the Obama presidency — as well as the Bush years and the early Trump administration — is not really about the increased demands and overloaded schedules of our presidents. It is about the extraordinary power residing with the executive and the necessity of exercising that power in order to advance a president's agenda. Yet the reliance on executive power is a symptom of a broader problem, namely the dysfunction of our current politics, both among citizens and their elected representatives. The real solution, therefore, lies in having an informed populace and a responsible media that holds the government — all of it — to greater account. And it demands a serious Congress focused on solving the adaptive challenges we face as a nation rather than stirring the political pot and kowtowing to donors. It remains to be seen whether the extraordinary and appalling nature of Trump's presidency precipitates a realignment or rebalancing of powers — that would be the best outcome — or whether he manages to follow Obama's lead in using that power to the maximum extent.

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7. The Possibility of Mediocrity

Kori Schake

Jeremi Suri argues in *The Impossible Presidency* that the post-World War II American presidency is “set up to fail.”⁵⁷ The core of his argument is that “by the start of the twenty-first century, the inhuman demands of the office made it impossible to succeed as president.”⁵⁸ Expectations of the office have burgeoned such that no woman or man could master the span of control, or resist the temptation to fritter their time away. Power “elicits demands...inspires resistance...[and] pulls the president into mounting commitments, exaggerated promises, and widening distractions.”⁵⁹ And presidents “are too busy deploying their power flagrantly, rather than targeting it selectively.”⁶⁰ This is a variant of the imperial overstretch argument. Suri’s version is not a straightforward realist argument, though; it is shot through with puritan disapproval that the country “strayed from its values” and undermined its democracy.

There is much of interest in Suri’s history of the American presidency. His exploration of the origins of the term “executive” — and what its propagation in the 18th century tells us about changing political mores — is particularly compelling. But Suri uses a discussion about the structure of one branch of the American government to advance a normative

⁵⁷ Jeremi Suri, *The Impossible Presidency: the Rise and Fall of America’s Highest Office* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), xi.

⁵⁸ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, 281.

⁵⁹ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, ix.

⁶⁰ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, x.

agenda about who America *should* elect, and the foreign policies that elected officials *should* enact.

The Impossible Presidency opens with an accessible description of the evolution of the American presidency, its origins in Enlightenment philosophy and the anxieties of balancing power and restraint in the office. Suri offers insightful observations on why there is value in the office's responsibilities remaining undefined. But the book suffers somewhat from golden-ageism — the belief that there was a time when presidents were all “idealistic in their aspirations” and brilliant at their executive functions.⁶¹ In fact, there was a lot more bungling and failure by our great presidents (think Washington and the whiskey rebellion or Franklin Roosevelt's court-packing debacle) than Suri's account encompasses. As Joseph Ellis has argued in *His Excellency, George Washington*, this does a disservice to the founders.⁶² Carving them from marble leeches the real majesty of their achievements by making them Elysian figures rather than political actors. George Washington's presidency looks a lot more anxious and unmanageable with less pedestal and more tawdry politics.

Suri mistakes the aspirations of the founders — that men of civic virtue were required to hold the position — as the job description itself. Those virtues were in short supply in the 18th century, just as they are in the 21st. Jefferson's pastoral moralism wasn't shared by Hamilton or many others, and indeed Jefferson himself was a poor example of the qualities purported to be essential.⁶³ He was a romantic about power and an advocate for Plato's philosopher king because — despite his Machiavellian manipulations for partisan

⁶¹ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, xi.

⁶² Joseph Ellis, *His Excellency, George Washington* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).

⁶³ For example, Jefferson fails to meet the criteria adduced by Madison: avoid financial dependence, not live extravagantly, etc., Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, p 20.

advantage — he considered himself one. America’s third president was also astute (and arrogant) enough to reckon that few others met his standard. Suri says that “for Jefferson, the essential qualities of leadership came from the intellect of the man who occupied the office.”⁶⁴ This is another way of saying that for Jefferson, the essential qualities of leadership were those he himself possessed. Not for him the battlefield tenacity or executive humility of Washington, or Adams’ acidulous worries that gave rise to legal constraint. Our man Jefferson extolled his own virtues, which were intellectual, and imagined himself in possession of self-abnegation (a fiction which his indebtedness and personal relationships belied). Yet for all his faults, Jefferson did foresee the dangers of an imperial presidency.

The great presidents were not uniformly virtuous and capable. Nor were most presidents great: The history of America is replete with mediocre chief executives. Suri focuses his critique on post-World War II presidents and ascribes a causal link between the growth of the job and presidential ineffectualness, but fails to account for all the ineffectual presidents before the job had the dimensions it does today. The 19th century roster of American presidents reads like a parade of mediocrity — and so does the 20th. In fact, what Suri bemoans can be cast as the founders’ greatest achievement: executive direction of the national enterprise by unexceptional individuals.

Suri depicts Franklin Delano Roosevelt both as the architect of the imperial presidency and the last person to effectively wield that power. But is the reason for that structural or personal? It seems likelier that Roosevelt was an outstanding politician who effectively worked a system designed by its founders to do little; and therefore, the answer to an ineffectual presidency lies less in the structure of the office than in the deficiencies of the

⁶⁴ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, x.

politicians we've been electing to it. There exists a vibrant body of literature on the explanatory power of structural versus other causal factors (such as personal qualities and decisions, or the preferences of bureaucracies).⁶⁵ While *The Impossible Presidency* is clearly intended to be an accessible and commercial read rather than a strictly academic one, it still would have benefitted from engaging some of that literature.

What didn't come through clearly enough in Suri's account is that the president's main policy challenge comes from Capitol Hill. The chief executive can propose priorities and legislation but must ultimately cajole the Congress to act on those priorities and enact laws to support them. Suri considers it "startling how much time they [Presidents] spend fending off small demands."⁶⁶ And it is true that for the world's most powerful office, the president does spend an inordinate amount of time having his picture taken and greeting visitors. But another term for those activities is building and holding together a political coalition, and that is the sole leverage a president has over the Congress. The small-bore politicking serves a large-scale purpose of giving the president the ability to direct Congress toward his priorities. Whether presidents can effectively capitalize on that may be the more salient political question.

⁹ For example, Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (New York: The Free Press, 1990); Scott C. James, "The Evolution of the Presidency: Between the Promise and the Fear," *The Executive Branch*, ed. Joel D. Aberbach and Mark A. Peterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); George C. Edwards, III, Kenneth R. Mayer, Stephen J. Wayne, *Presidential Leadership: Politics and Policy Making*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); Fred I. Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to George W. Bush* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Morton Halperin and Priscilla Clapp and Arnold Kanter, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006).

⁶⁶ Suri, *Impossible Presidency*, xvi, and 190-191.

Suri concludes that the very power of the presidency prevents a president from being effective: Presidents are incapable of prioritization and focused activity because they are expected to do something about everything. He argues their interests would be better served, and their presidencies more consequential, by identifying a few priorities and dedicating all of their energies to advancing them. But one possible conclusion one could draw from Suri's excellent recounting of presidential history is that because modern presidents are overwhelmed by all the power at their disposal, the presidency has returned to dimensions the founding fathers would endorse. They would have been more comfortable with today's circumscribed presidency than they would have been with Lincoln or either of the Roosevelts.

A few of Suri's policy recommendations for addressing presidential enfeeblement have the advantage that any holder of the office could choose to adopt them. Other than his suggestion of dividing the functions of the office along European lines, his recommendations require only sparse legislation and no constitutional renegotiation. Presidents have in their power to establish and enforce their priorities and set their own schedules. Suri argues they should redesign the presidency to eliminate "non-necessary roles," and use the presidency to teach "agreed facts" for making policy, and provide public funding for research organizations. Leaving aside the challenge of convincing the American public to accept their president as an arbiter of truth (Jefferson would roll in his grave!), Suri's solutions seem inadequate to meet the magnitude of the problems he identifies. A president has many other levers at their disposal, and using the power of the presidency aggressively may counterintuitively solve the problem that Suri suggests an overactive presidency created.

The election of Donald Trump is, for Suri, proof in support of his argument that America has strayed from the prudence and personal restraint of intelligent leaders. Crazy

enough, President Trump may be the refutation of Suri's argument. Because while stoking the flames of the culture wars, President Trump appears to care only about economic growth, restricting trade, and preventing immigration. The only piece of legislation he's produced in a year in office is about taxes. He is scything back the administrative state, and his first executive order was an immigration ban. In his own way, he is exhibiting the focused prioritization Suri extolls. Trump seems averse to the alliance commitments and prosecution of wars that Suri considers immoral over-extensions of power supposedly irresistible to previous American presidents.

Trump also appears to have activated antibodies against his agenda in the form of both institutional constraints and a more widespread engagement of the citizenry. While Thomas Jefferson would surely be repulsed by Trump's belligerent ignorance, he would be deeply gratified to see civic forces mobilizing to constrain the president and the country prospering economically despite an ineffectual presidency. After all, Jefferson's worry about an overweening executive was because of his belief that "every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves are its only safe depositories."⁶⁷

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⁶⁷ Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia, Query 14," *Jefferson: Political Writings*, Joyce Appleby and Terrence Ball, eds., (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought), 259.

8. Smarter and Younger, Not Bigger

Jeremi Suri

Bigger is not always better. Size can distort, distract, and discourage. It elicits excessive ambitions and expectations, dooming leaders to disappoint.

These truisms of politics and strategy date back to Herodotus' account of the Persian Empire and Sallust's histories of Rome.⁶⁸ In its modern incarnation, the problem of size has underpinned two of the most influential historical studies of empire, Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher's *Africa and the Victorians*, and Paul Kennedy's *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*.⁶⁹ For these authors, and many others, the historical growth that contributed to the wealth and power of dynamic societies also contributed to their rapid decline. Landed expansion to extract resources and project power overstretched the capabilities of the metropole. Early, strategic priorities gave way to hyperactive reaction in the face of multiplying crises. Foundational interests and values were lost beneath layered commitments, complex institutions, and — the nightmare of America's founders — factionalized political communities. Most significant, the drive for growth caused the humility and focus of early leaders to be replaced with excess, militarism, decadence, and hubris.

⁶⁸ See Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Sallust, Loeb Classical Library, Number 116, trans. J.C. Rolfe (Cambridge: Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1921).

⁶⁹ See Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987).

I wrote *The Impossible Presidency* as a study of American leadership and “executive” culture, paying close attention to size and history. The presidency was the most original and uncertain part of the early American constitutional project. As the country grew from a small republic into an industrial nation and then a global power, so too did the presidency grow to steer policy, serve expanding constituencies, and manage a multitude of far-flung government agencies. With a larger, more heterogeneous space for action, the opportunities and challenges for presidents became increasingly complex. Managing war and society in the 20th century involved exponentially more moving parts and peoples, across a vaster geography, and at greater speed, than ever before. The Constitution did not prepare leaders for these circumstances; they had to adapt the office with each generation and create new patterns of executive behavior. Presidential power is therefore path dependent and determined by context.

The thoughtful reviewers of *The Impossible Presidency* have helped me to expand and refine these historical insights at a moment when the presidency is in existential crisis. David Adesnik astutely asks how we judge presidential success and what role Congress plays. He insightfully points to the accomplishments of recent presidents, especially Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower, to show that size is not always debilitating for national leadership.

Of course, this is true. My argument is not that all presidents have failed since Franklin Roosevelt, but rather that Truman, Eisenhower, and their successors found themselves responding to ever-multiplying international and domestic demands. As much as they tried — and Truman and Eisenhower tried mightily — they could not avoid the Cold War conflicts abroad and rising expectations at home that distracted them from their original goals. The Cold War conflagrations around the world that redefined communist containment during their presidencies and empowered anti-communist excesses at home,

left a military-industrial complex in place that both Truman and Eisenhower perceived as a profound threat to the democracy they held so dear. At home and abroad, size made the defense of core values more difficult, even for clairvoyant leaders such as these.

Kori Schake takes me to task for smuggling a normative judgment into this argument. She wishes for more realism; less “puritan disapproval.” (I have never been called a Puritan before!) Schake also points out that many earlier presidents, including George Washington, contended with competing demands, rising expectations, and even a fair share of personal bumbling. She is, of course, correct — but only to a point. Even the worst presidents of the 19th century had fewer opportunities to fail than their successors a century later. What’s more, failure in the 20th century meant more harm to more people in more places, with greater rapidity than before. The Civil War, for all of its mass death and destruction, pales in comparison with the repeated genocides of the 20th century. A divided, distracted, and overstretched presidency is much more threatening to the security of our nation and our world today than it was in previous generations. Leadership is harder, yet more necessary; its absence has more tragic consequences. The healthy civic “antibodies” to despotic leadership that Schake so eloquently describes, and I embrace, are not solutions to the leadership problem, but symptoms of it.

Robert Cook builds on this perspective, pointing to the existential dangers of such a sizeable nuclear arsenal in the hands of contemporary presidents. For Cook, presidential power to irradiate the world is all too possible. I fear he is correct, although the real question is why presidents who strongly wished to eliminate nuclear weapons — especially Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama — could not do so. For all their power as commanders in chief, they confronted a wide range of international threats and organized domestic interests (including a stubborn military-industrial complex) that opposed steep weapons reductions. Although presidents could make war, their range of responsibilities

made it much harder to un-make the nuclear dangers of their time. Large nuclear arsenals became an inescapable albatross for presidents as early as John F. Kennedy, limiting their strategic flexibility and freezing dangerous commitments in place. Nuclear weapons made America's traditional international aloofness — first announced by George Washington and maintained until Franklin Roosevelt — impossible.

Luke Hartig's review describes how presidents, particularly Barack Obama, create flexibility in these impossible circumstances by stretching executive authority, drawing top talent, and mobilizing particular constituencies, where possible. The pressures on presidential decision-making, especially from a dysfunctional and oppositional Congress, make these extra-constitutional actions necessary, Hartig argues, and I certainly agree. Hartig is also correct to describe the costs of these presidential efforts for the overall quality of policymaking and national unity. Presidential maneuvers to get around the impossibilities of the office make enduring leadership only more impossible. The solution is surely, as Hartig argues, to focus the power of the executive on fewer priorities and empower other institutions, particularly Congress, to contribute more substantively.

Derek Chollet reveals that Barack Obama conceptualized his presidency along these lines. He played the "long game," and sought to accomplish big things through "incremental improvements" in key areas, "so that ten years from now, suddenly we're in a very different place."

"It's like middle management" — a revealing statement from Obama. And that is the problem. The office pulls men who are elected to solve big, pressing problems into incremental roles that are prudent, but often insufficient. Incrementalism is the story of war in Vietnam and creeping inequality in the United States. Incrementalism is the excuse

for sticking with bad decisions in Afghanistan and the war on drugs, rather than abandoning obvious failure.

Chollet is surely correct that incrementalism still has wisdom, and perhaps it is the best we can do. I share his (and Obama's) frustrations with partisanship and institutional resistance. But instead of giving up, I still believe that presidents must find a creative way forward. More priorities and selective risk-taking, as in Obama's opening to Cuba, are necessary, and other daily issues must be removed from the president's calendar. This is not an excuse for laziness and pig-headedness, as exemplified by our current president, but instead a call for deep thought, broad consultation, and innovative action where they are most opportune for the nation as a whole.

Jeffrey Engel captures beautifully how different the book's historical diagnosis is from the mangled presidency of our current moment: Trump "disdains everything Suri has devoted a lifetime to studying — protesters, internationalism, nation-building, and experts." So true! The current president is not mobilizing the nation as a whole behind priorities for national security and domestic tranquility, but hardening divisions and neglecting growing vulnerabilities.

Engel makes superb points about how technology — from social media to cyberwarfare — has pushed even the best leaders to frenetic reactivity, rather than calm, considered thought. Engel is correct that *The Impossible Presidency* says too little about technology. The suggestions for a focused presidential agenda, investments in public enlightenment, and a less personalized presidency that I offer in the epilogue are indeed insufficient to counteract the pings on our phones that pull leaders' attention at all hours of the day.

The reviewers all agree that much more work is needed to chart pathways forward from our current predicament. Celeste Gventer makes this point in her excellent introduction to the roundtable. I agree, and I am optimistic. *The Impossible Presidency* is not a declension narrative. I believe that a rise and fall in the presidency can be followed by renewal in a new form of the office — devoted to creative problem solving and inspiring the best qualities in American society (“the better angels of our nature,” in Lincoln’s words).

That is the real point of my epilogue. The resources for American leadership — a dynamic, wealthy, secure nation — remain firm. The challenge is to reassemble the resources within our constitutional structure for something new. *The Impossible Presidency* shows that we have done this before in each of the presidential transformations that I describe in the first half of the book. We have an opportunity to do the same again today, at a time when the failures of the current executive institutions are so evident.

While I may not have the answers for how this will happen, I believe that asking hard questions about where the institution of the presidency came from, how it has changed, and what is needed next is the right place to start. Challenging ourselves to think about alternative models — even France! — can open our minds to other sources of inspiration.

Most of all, engaging a new generation of problem solvers — the “Millennials” — in this vital task is a golden opportunity. Institutions change when people within them seek new ways to solve real problems. That is not happening today. As currently constituted, our institutions discourage this kind of change. We need the exogenous force of youthful idealism and intelligence to enter our political institutions and wreak some havoc, tip some sacred cows, and redefine what democracy looks like. That needs to happen in the

presidency, in Congress, in our universities, and elsewhere. I wrote *The Impossible Presidency*, above all, to encourage that kind of messy revitalization. Generational change has been the engine of American executive development and democratic reform in the past, and it can be again. The presidency will be less impossible when the woman in office reinvents it to serve the most important national needs, currently lost somewhere in the crowded schedules and long hours of “executive time” spent on Twitter and television. Instead of being bigger, we should focus our leadership on being smarter.

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