

## CHAPTER ONE

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### The Modern American Presidency

He traveled from Monticello to Capitol Hill, following the same route as that of Thomas Jefferson in 1801. Following his inauguration, he opened the White House to the American public, reflecting the tradition of the nation's first people's president Andrew Jackson in 1829. In much the same style as that of John F. Kennedy in 1961, his inaugural address echoed themes of generational change and service to country:

From this joyful mountain top of celebration we hear a call to service in the valley. We have heard the trumpets, we have changed the guard. And now each in our own way, and with God's help, we must answer the call.<sup>1</sup>

On January 20, 1993, at forty-six years of age, William Jefferson Clinton, a "New Democrat" and former five-term governor of Arkansas, became the forty-second president of the United States. The inaugural atmosphere in the nation's capital was exceptionally optimistic, hopeful, and festive. According to some observers, approximately 800,000 persons were in town for the inaugural event. Compared to the inaugurations of Presidents Reagan and Bush, the crowd at Clinton's inauguration was markedly younger (perhaps "thirty something"), more ethnically diverse, and certainly more casual in appearance and demeanor.<sup>2</sup>

A generational transfer of political power had clearly occurred; a young Democrat, inspired by the great presidents of the past, now occupied the American presidency. He had a vision for America, an unlimited reservoir of energy, and a clear plan of action. The presidential election of 1992 marked the end of the Reagan Revolution and, in the rich tradition of American politics, an orderly and peaceful transfer of political power had taken place. With Democratic ma-

majorities in both chambers of Congress and a centrist Democrat now in the White House, one could not help but sense that a dynamic and perhaps even “great” American presidency was about to commence. There was even talk of yet another “first one-hundred days.”

### **President Clinton Out of the Blocks**

At the time of this writing, the Clinton presidency is approximately two years old. It would be unwise and premature for any political scientist or presidential observer to pass judgment upon a presidency so recently launched. It is not unreasonable, however, to evaluate the Clinton record to date and to inquire whether the newly inaugurated president had an impressive start. Examining evidence gathered from January 1993 to January 1995, one is faced with the inescapable fact that the nation’s forty-second president, despite legislative majorities in the House of Representatives and the Senate, governs only with great difficulty. The Clinton presidency is far from paralyzed, but it is clear that serious problems exist.

While it is unfair to compare the Clinton honeymoon with the legendary “first one-hundred days” of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, it *is* appropriate to expect modern American presidents—particularly those with legislative majorities—to begin their administrations with an impressive burst of policy accomplishments. At the same time, it is reasonable to expect American public opinion and the media to be highly supportive of the president and his governing efforts. Virtually every American president, regardless of personality and party, has enjoyed a honeymoon as part of the American political tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, the Clinton honeymoon was virtually non-existent. Consider the following data regarding public approval ratings of ten American presidents after approximately one hundred days in office.

As the data show, public support for President Clinton was extraordinarily low by the time he completed his first four months in office. In fact, support for Clinton is the lowest of all presidents included in the survey. Even President Ford, who had already issued his highly controversial pardon of former President Nixon, governed with more public support than President Clinton after his first four months in office.

Equally troubling is the extent to which Clinton’s support declined over a four-month period. In February of 1993, 67 percent

**Table 1**  
**Presidential Public Approval**  
**Ratings After Four Months**

<i>President</i>	<i>% Approval</i>
Truman	92%
Johnson	78%
Eisenhower	74%
Kennedy	74%
Carter	64%
Nixon	62%
Bush	62%
Reagan	59%
Ford	42%
Clinton	36%

Source: *Time*, June 7, 1993. 800 adults polled for Time/CNN by Yankelovich Partners, Inc.

of persons polled believed President Clinton to be a “strong and decisive leader.” By May only 38% of those polled expressed this view.<sup>4</sup> Twenty-nine percentage points is a dramatic decline in public support, coming as it did during the most critical stage of a new presidency.

Leading news magazines and political commentators, all of whom were counting to the one-hundred day mark, were quick to offer insight into what, during such an incredibly short period of time, had become a beleaguered American presidency. A May 1993 issue of *Time* described the disturbing transformation in the attitude of the American public toward the Clinton presidency in the following terms: “Perhaps most distressing for the President, for the first time since the euphoria that greeted his election, a large plurality of Americans think the nation is on the ‘wrong track.’”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, even President Clinton admitted in an interview with *Time* that the early stages of his presidency had been difficult and rather unpredictable: “There’s a lot I have to learn about this town.”<sup>6</sup>

Public perception of President Clinton’s performance over the course of approximately one year can be further evaluated by examining the results of public opinion polls conducted from January 1993 through February 1994. Throughout this period, major polling organizations asked approximately one thousand American adults: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bill Clinton is handling his job as President?” Results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Public Approval Ratings of President Clinton**  
**January 1993—February 1994**

	<b>ABC News/ Washington Post</b>	<b>CBS News/ New York Times</b>	<b>Gallup Organization</b>
	<i>% Approval</i>	<i>% Approval</i>	<i>% Approval</i>
<i>1993</i>			
January	—	—	56%
February	59%	58%	55%
March	—	55%	52%
April	59%	—	55%
May	—	43%	44%
June	45%	42%	40%
July	—	—	43%
August	45%	38%	44%
September	51%	43%	50%
October	—	43%	48%
November	49%	46%	48%
December	58%	51%	53%
<i>1994</i>			
January	59%	48%	55%
February	—	—	53%

Source: The Roper Center at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. Approval ratings for ABC News/Washington Post Poll represent collapsed responses for two categories: "approve strongly" and "approve somewhat." In months during which multiple polls were conducted, the author calculated an average percentage. Blank spaces indicate no polling data available.

The data clearly indicate a struggling Clinton presidency; regardless of poll, President Clinton's public approval ratings never once exceeded 59 percent. Indeed, during several months the ratings were often below 50 percent, suggesting considerable displeasure with the president's performance among the American public. Average approval ratings for President Clinton from January 1993 to February 1994 are: 53% (ABC News/Washington Post Poll), 47% (CBS/N.Y. Times Poll) and 50% (Gallup Poll). The data do not reflect a good first year for the "New Democrat."

While several of President Clinton's major legislative initiatives have passed Congress<sup>7</sup> (an accomplishment frequently overlooked by critics), the fact still remains that the governing process has been a painful and excruciating experience despite legislative success. Al-

though a partisan majority in both chambers of Congress does not guarantee robust presidential leadership, it is certainly fair to expect a season of relatively painless, harmonious and positive interaction between the executive and legislative branches of government.

Consider, for example, three of the president's legislative measures: the economic stimulus package, his first federal budget proposal, and the North American Free Trade Agreement. The measures were "successful" in that each eventually passed Congress. However, Clinton's \$16.3 billion stimulus package, targeted primarily to depressed urban areas, was drastically reduced to \$4 billion as the result of an uncompromising Republican filibuster in the Senate.

The president's federal budget passed the legislature, but by the slimmest of margins. The House vote was 218 in favor and 216 opposed—quite astonishing in light of the fact that the Democrats enjoyed a 259 to 176 seat margin over the Republicans. In the Senate, where the Democrats held a 56–44 seat margin Bob Kerrey, a Democrat from Nebraska, voted to support the president's budget after a long and soul-searching deliberation. With Kerrey's support, the vote was 50 to 50, thereby allowing Vice President Gore the opportunity to cast the tie-breaking vote in favor of the President's budget. It was a grueling and wrenching process that clearly threatened the legitimacy of the Clinton presidency. On June 30, 1993, the nation watched the Senate floor with great apprehension as Kerrey announced his decision at the eleventh hour:

President Clinton, if you are watching now as I suspect you are, I will tell you this: I could not and should not cast a vote that brings down your Presidency. You have made mistakes and know it far better than I. But you do not deserve, and America cannot afford, to have you spend the next sixty days quibbling over whether or not we should have this cut or this tax increase. America also cannot afford to have you take the low road of the too easy compromise, or the too early collapse. You have gotten where you are today because you are strong, not because you are weak. Get back on the high road, Mr. President, where you are at your best.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, significant portions of the president's budget were seriously compromised to the point where it appeared that the congressional version of the federal budget—rather than the president's—actually prevailed. In addition to Senator Kerrey, another chief opponent to the president's proposed budget was yet another Democratic senator, David Boren of Oklahoma. Boren's opposition to the energy tax proved a serious hurdle for President Clinton, result-

ing in considerable compromise on the part of the White House and Democratic moderates. In its description of the politics of the president's federal budget and the Boren "revolt," a June 1993 issue of *Business Week* characterized the Clinton administration as "apoplectic" over the unforeseen resistance and "political treachery" in Congress.<sup>9</sup>

The North American Free Trade Agreement also passed both chambers of Congress. It was quite clear, however, that the highly controversial agreement secured legislative support only after a series of extraordinary deals between the president and federal legislators. According to some observers, the trading of votes in exchange for pork barrel projects reached unprecedented and obscene proportions. *U.S. News and World Report* described the NAFTA vote in these terms:

White House operatives are dangling goodies in front of wavering legislators as if there were no tomorrow—and no deficit. A trade center in Texas. A North American Development Bank in California. The administration has even begun negotiating separate deals with Mexico to protect U.S. producers of sugar, citrus and other products, thus appearing to violate the spirit of NAFTA itself. And all this effort is in pursuit of about twenty votes, possibly enough to eke out a victory.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, it was interesting to find President Clinton depending more on the support of Republican congressmen to secure passage of the trade agreement than that of his own "fellow Democrats." The NAFTA vote in the House garnered "yes" votes among 102 Democrats and 132 Republicans, and "no" votes from 156 Democrats and 43 Republicans. Clearly, Republican support was central to Clinton's victory in the House. Partisan loyalty appeared to mean very little during passage of this widely debated trade agreement.

The entire second year of the Clinton presidency was also characterized by a struggling chief executive. Public approval ratings as measured through the Gallup poll were unimpressive. In January 1994, 55 percent of persons polled expressed approval towards the President's performance. Throughout the remainder of 1994, public approval declined in a fairly steady fashion: 52 percent in March, 52 percent in May, 46 percent in July, 40 percent in August, 42 percent in October, and 44 percent in December. In January of 1995, President Clinton's public approval ratings were recorded at 40 percent.<sup>11</sup>

## A Systemic Explanation

While it is expedient and fashionable to attribute President Clinton's difficulties to his legislative skills (as many political opponents have done), or to the fact that he came to power with only 43 percent of the popular vote (hardly an impressive popular mandate), or what some consider a lack of "moral authority" on the part of the president, a penetrating look at the power of the modern presidency and the political environment in which it functions suggests a broader and more systemic explanation. Indeed, the presidency and, more generally, politics "inside the Beltway" have been so radically transformed in recent decades that virtually any American president—regardless of ideology, party affiliation, and political style—will encounter unimaginable hurdles within the context of the governing process. The problem lies not with the official occupant of the Oval Office (although one cannot discount personality characteristics, philosophy of power, or legislative ability), but more importantly, with the larger system of politics and governance that has evolved over the course of the past twenty-five years.

Although some may disagree with this perspective, the evidence does not suggest any dearth of talent among individuals who have sought the American presidency, or among those who have been elected to serve as president. In fact, recent American presidents have been men of considerable distinction. Bill Clinton was five-term governor of Arkansas prior to seeking the presidency. He is a Rhodes Scholar rated by his political peers as one of the nation's most creative, intelligent and dynamic state governors. Clinton's political credentials are clearly impressive. Yet he governs the nation with great difficulty.

George Bush became president having what could arguably be called one of the most impressive political resumes in American history. Bush served as vice president for two terms under Ronald Reagan, was former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, ambassador to China, chairman of the Republican National Committee, and a former United States congressman. He had far more national decision-making experience than Franklin D. Roosevelt or Abraham Lincoln prior to being elected president. Yet the Bush presidency, particularly in the realm of domestic policy-making, was for all intents and purposes immobilized. Defeated in his bid for reelection by Bill Clinton, President Bush left office with a mere 39 percent public approval rating despite the collapse of communism during his presi-



dency and the swift and decisive military victory attained in Operation Desert Storm.

Ronald Reagan was a former two-term governor from the state of California, which, with 30 million inhabitants, is the nation's most populated and culturally diverse state. California also has the highest standard of living and the highest level of productivity in the world. (If California was a separate nation, it would rank sixth among all nations with respect to gross domestic product.)<sup>12</sup> In addition to his involvement in California politics, Ronald Reagan served as a principal spokesman for American conservatism throughout the 1960s and ran unsuccessfully for the presidency in 1968 and 1976. Prior to becoming active in politics, he was a moderately known movie actor and narrator for *Wagon Train*, a popular television western. Ronald Reagan, in other words, was almost a household name. However, despite his extensive political credentials, and despite the fact that he was reelected to a second term by an electoral college landslide over Walter Mondale (525–13), the Reagan agenda (termed “the Reagan Revolution”) was never realized. Embraced to a great degree by a significant portion of the American population,<sup>13</sup> it was victimized by a political system which inherently impedes creative and dynamic presidential leadership. In the words of presidential scholar Louis W. Koenig: “Like other change-minded Presidents, Reagan ran afoul of the system’s powerful sentinels who monitor and constrain presidential initiatives.”<sup>14</sup> In Koenig’s view, the Reagan presidency was compromised by a political system and process that thwarts effective presidential leadership.

Consider, for example, the Reagan legislative record in the U.S. House of Representatives during his two terms in office.

As the data indicate, President Reagan’s legislative success declined precipitously from 74.6% in 1981 to 32% in 1988. The eight-year average indicates that Reagan lost more legislative initiatives in the House of Representatives than he won. Even in 1985, in the immediate aftermath of his huge reelection landslide, Reagan won only 48.3 percent of his legislative measures. Leon Halpert, the author of this study, concludes: “The modern presidency is marked by a narrow ‘window of opportunity’ when it comes to experiencing success on roll call voting issues in the House.”<sup>15</sup> Halpert’s conclusion is certainly quite grim: the governing process has evolved to the point where American presidents have at best a short-lived “window of opportunity” in which to enact their policy agenda. Needless to say, the president needs more time than this.

David Stockman, President Reagan’s Director of the Office of Management and Budget, confirmed how rapidly the President’s



**Table 3**  
**House Support Score for President Reagan by Year**

Reagan's Position	Year								Average
	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	
Won	74.6	54.9	43.6	45.2	48.3	29.8	34.7	32	44.9
Lost	25.4	45.2	54.8	54.8	51.7	71.2	65.3	68	55.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N=	(71)	(73)	(56)	(73)	(60)	(57)	(75)	(101)	(566)

Source: Leon Halpert "Presidential Leadership of Congress: Evaluating President Reagan's Success in the House of Representatives" *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. XXI (fall 1991): 722. Reprinted with permission by the Center for the Study of the Presidency

legislative honeymoon disintegrated. Stockman noted: "By October 1981, political reality had nearly overtaken the Reagan Revolution."<sup>16</sup> Stockman, who resigned from the Reagan administration due to disillusionment with the policy-making process and the sacrifice of ideals to raw politics, cynically titled his insightful book *The Triumph of Politics*.

In fact, evidence continues to mount suggesting that even this short-lived "window of opportunity" is dissolving for newly elected presidents. In addition to the governing difficulties encountered by President Clinton during his first year in office, consider the evidence pertaining to the Bush presidency. Among the legislative roll calls conducted in 1989 in which President Bush staked a clear position, the President prevailed only 62.6 percent of the time. This was the lowest level of legislative success for any newly elected American President since 1953, the year in which the legislative success measure was first introduced.<sup>17</sup> Although not as vast as the Reagan landslide in 1984, Bush's victory in the electoral college was decisive, comprising 426 electoral votes to Dukakis' 112.

The decline of presidential leadership in recent years has been the topic of extensive discussion among numerous political scientists, historians, journalists and political practitioners. Rather than describe the American presidency in powerful or "imperial" terms, as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. did in his classic work *The Imperial Presidency*,<sup>18</sup> writers are now prone to underscoring the weakness of the presidency as a governing institution. Deep concern over the inability of presidents to effectively wield power is a recurring theme throughout the literature regarding presidential politics. Quite often, writers identify the nature of the political system as the principal factor behind the disturbing pattern of failed presidencies.

Forrest McDonald, one of the nation's preeminent American historians, states: "The presidency is often described as the most powerful office in the world. That is the stuff of nonsense. Power is the capacity to do things, to cause one's will to be transformed into action, and by that criterion the president has precious little power."<sup>19</sup>

Theodore C. Sorensen, a former Special Counsel to President Kennedy and author of several works on the American presidency, describes the troubled state of presidential leadership in these terms: "Each of the new presidents took office in a glow of enthusiasm and with a pledge of new solutions. Both the Congress and the opposition vowed cooperation. But each time, the glow faded, cooperation gave way to confrontation, the new solutions sank into confusion and newly shattered hopes swelled the tide of public cynicism."<sup>20</sup>

Richard E. Neustadt, professor of Government at Harvard University whose seminal work on the American presidency essentially redefined the meaning of presidential power, views presidential authority this way: "Weakness is still what I see: weakness in the sense of a great gap between what is expected of a man (or someday woman) and assured capacity to carry through. Expectations rise and clerky tasks increase, while prospects for sustained support from any quarter worsen as foreign alliances loosen and political parties wane."<sup>21</sup>

Robert Shogan, a highly regarded Washington correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*, reflects upon recent and failed presidencies: "Their combined experience suggests that the chronic failings of the presidency overshadow differences in the characteristics of our presidents."<sup>22</sup> According to Shogan, the persistent pattern of presidential failure clearly points to problems rooted deep within the context of the American political system.

Political scientist and presidency scholar, Michael A. Genovese, also attributes the failure of recent presidents to systemic variables: "A variety of built-in roadblocks create an immunity system against leadership in all but the most extraordinary of times (i.e., crisis)."<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, recent developments within this system, rather than the ability or character of the presidential incumbent, seem to be at the heart of presidential failure. Until meaningful reform aimed at the larger system of politics and governance in which presidents must function is accomplished, the country seems destined to witness one failed presidency after another. This is not a Bill Clinton, George Bush or Ronald Reagan phenomenon. Instead, the problem is deeply embedded in the new character of American politics that has emerged over the course of the last twenty-five years.

New developments within the political system have routinely vic-

timized presidencies other than those of Clinton, Bush and Reagan. In 1968, President Lyndon Baines Johnson, a man possessing extraordinary legislative skills and advocating one of the most ambitious domestic agendas in the history of the United States (including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the War On Poverty), chose not to seek a second term in office.<sup>24</sup> Due largely to Johnson's handling of the Vietnam War, his presidency had been deemed ineffective and untrustworthy by the American people. Johnson was elected in 1964 by amassing an enormous 486 electoral votes to Barry Goldwater's 52.

Following a landslide reelection victory in 1972, the presidency of Richard M. Nixon became embroiled in the Watergate scandal. Despite outstanding foreign policy diplomacy, including the establishment of diplomatic relations with mainland China, and detente with the Soviet Union, as well as several domestic accomplishments, including environmental and occupational safety legislation,<sup>25</sup> President Nixon was forced to resign from office in disgrace—the first president in American history to do so.

Following Gerald Ford's interim presidency, which in many ways was tarnished—perhaps even immobilized—as a result of Ford's connection with Nixon, America experienced yet another failed presidency: that of former Georgia governor Jimmy Carter. Carter, possibly one of the most fair-minded, ethical and decent individuals ever to occupy the Oval Office, was denied reelection as the result of a very weak economy, the Iranian hostage crisis, and, more generally, the perception of the American public that Carter was simply incapable of effective leadership.

The problematic state of presidential leadership has been further documented in the public approval ratings of recent presidents. Ronald Reagan's average public approval rating over the course of two terms was 52 percent, Jimmy Carter's 47 percent, Gerald Ford's 47 percent, Richard Nixon's 49 percent, and Lyndon Johnson's 56 percent. The average public approval rating for American presidents from 1964 to 1988 was an unimpressive 53.7 percent, suggesting considerable displeasure with presidential performance among the American people. When these figures are compared with John F. Kennedy's average public approval rating of 71 percent and Dwight D. Eisenhower's rating of 65 percent, and added to the fact that the average public approval rating from 1953 to 1963 was 68 percent, it becomes apparent that factors intrinsic in the American political system are with disturbing regularity, eroding the ability of our presidents to lead the nation.<sup>26</sup> The problem is systemic rather than personal.

Recent American presidents, by the end of their first term in the White House—sometimes sooner—have been deemed ineffective, incompetent, and unworthy of reelection by a cynical American public. Indeed, it appears that the American political system now produces failed presidencies as the norm rather than the exception. Ronald Reagan is the only president since Dwight D. Eisenhower to serve a full two terms in office.

Rather than blame individual presidents for a lack of leadership (which many have done, and which at times is terribly tempting to do), we must instead direct our energy towards examining and addressing those elements of the political system that have contributed to the impotence of the American presidency. We need to focus on the systemic impediments to presidential leadership in order to more fully understand how the presidency has reached its present state of immobility.