ONE

The President and the Rabbit

Some years back, the following news item seemed to typify for many people the shortcomings of an entire administration:

> WASHINGTON, Aug. 29 (AP) — A "killer rabbit" penetrated Secret Service security and attacked President Carter on a recent trip to Plains, Ga., according to White House staff members who said that the President beat back the animal with a canoe paddle. The rabbit, which the President later guessed was fleeing in panic from some predator, reportedly swam towards a canoe from which Mr. Carter was fishing in a pond. It was said to have been hissing menacingly, its teeth flashing and its nostrils flared, and making straight for the President. Mr. Carter was not injured, and reports are unclear about what became of the rabbit.[1]

How the mighty had fallen. Once hailed as a man of the people, as the outsider who would straighten things up in Washington, Jimmy Carter was mocked nationally for what amounted to a close encounter with a bunny. The absurdity of the situation was not lost on the press or the public. How else could one react to the image of the president "swinging for his life,"[2] in the tongue-in-cheek words of a White House staff member, against the advances of a small creature that normally doesn't swim, no less kill.

Everyone is entitled to embarrassing moments and misunderstandings. But, the "killer rabbit" incident also symbolized the apparent failings of a president who to many was seen as incapable, weak, and even inept. It is common for people to pin global labels on presidents, to assess their competence and achievements in generic fashion. It is also misleading. Although a president may accomplish much of what he sets out to do, or very little, or attain only key goals, it is hardly the case that any president is *entirely* inept and unsuccessful. Likewise, a chief executive remembered

as "great" or "strong" is not someone who got *everything* he wanted. No one gets everything he or she wants, and no one is a complete failure, images conjured up by killer rabbits notwithstanding. Our tendency to generalize about entire administrations distorts this.

The results a president gets are attributable, along with various circumstantial factors, to how he exercises power in office. If *every* president gets *some* of what he wants, it may be reasonable to assume that every president finds the right configuration for the levers of power at least some of the time. Perhaps the presidents we remember as "great" manage to do it more often or with greater impact. This is still quite different than saying they do it *all* the time, or saying an "incompetent" president couldn't do it at all. I raise the point because it is all too easy to obscure the already complex — but critical — study of presidential power by choosing to view it as something constant to or characteristic of the president. We may rank our presidents by "greatness," as scholars and journalists are wont to do, but the list will not help us understand just what that intangible quality is, even if we agree without dissent that FDR had "more" of it than did Millard Fillmore. Indeed, it might even complicate things by leading us to a mindset in which we feel it is appropriate to gloss over unsuccessful experiences encountered by even those presidents fortunate enough to head the list of America's top forty.

It is one thing to determine that a particular president was more powerful than another, or, for that matter, stronger, better, or more effective. It is entirely different, but quite important, to figure out what constitutes effective use of the office — in short, to understand the mechanics of presidential power. On this critical point our knowledge is sadly lacking. Perhaps because the subject of power seems so inextricably intertwined with the doings of the person who wields it, we have set our sights on the power wielder to understand it. From here, it is a simple matter to confuse power with the person and focus on the individual rather than the tools used. But in so doing we have clouded our understanding of presidential power by drawing upon a model that places a premium on the president's personality. This has enabled us to treat the subject in idiosyncratic fashion, and to rely on anecdotal accounts of presidential doings as evidence of the way presidential power is

wielded. The result has been no less than an entirely inadequate diagnosis of power as it operates *in the office,* as attention is directed away from a richer understanding of the mechanics of exercising power — the tools that enable the president to maximize his potential.

By tools, I do not mean the negative constitutional checks that the president may employ by virtue of his official position, but resources that provide him with the potential to move and motivate others. Indeed, to regard power as emanating from a set of tools is to treat the subject as something that exists over time, across administrations, as exercised by different individuals. The personal model of power defies longitudinal analysis because of its reliance on individual characteristics. But, tools remain for others to employ, for new occupants of the office to learn. They are transferrable, at least to the extent that they remain for new chief executives to master. If one president maximizes power through the use of favors or by refining the operation of the institutional presidency, why, then, can't all presidents do so?

Naturally, it is hard to make general empirical statements about the operation of power that will apply to many events occurring in multiple administrations. Perhaps this is why previous works have failed to do so. If power is aptly described as a machine with levers, as was suggested a moment ago, why should we believe they are the same levers over time, no less adjusted the same way for each presidential triumph? Power is the most fleeting and variable of qualities; it will require great care and some imagination to search for common threads in the ways in which it is exercised at different times.

That is the purpose of this book: to search for the elements typical of that most elusive but important of entities, presidential power. The levers of power probably are adjusted differently from moment to moment; one would anticipate a large number of possible combinations of presidential actions and circumstantial factors together could yield a particular result. It is still possible that *some* levers are curiously set the same way time after time. This work attempts to sort through the myriad actions that occur when presidents exercise power to hunt for such common ground.

I start by assuming that there are central tendencies to the exercise of power, things that increase the likelihood it will be em-

ployed effectively despite the fact that they may be obscured by the seemingly helter-skelter activities meeting the eye of the observer. Viewing power in use is a bit like watching the game of Monopoly. In Monopoly, players attempt to generate leverage over other players—something akin to the use of power—through the acquisition of money and property. There is no singular way to win the game, no strategy that will always work. Outcomes appear to be a function of chance, or trial and error; even a carefully considered game plan may fall by the wayside if poor luck or the actions of other players intercede.

Still, some elements may be common to numerous strategies that occur more often than not when the game is won, and so may be seen as being characteristic of the outcome, regardless of the way the dice roll or the number of trips you take to jail. Such things as early property development, a favorable ratio of return to investment, and specific bidding behaviors have been posited as factors likely to enhance one's chances of winning at Monopoly, as items that together with chance and circumstance will move the player toward a favorable outcome.[3] If for a moment we accept that the same may be true of presidential power, we open the possibility that it may be studied as a patterned set of characteristics, not simply as the random actions of a particular president that are ostensibly unrelated to the behavior of a different president at another time, or, for that matter, to the behavior of the same president at another time. In this analysis, I will also speak of likelihoods rather than absolutes, in an attempt to identify presidential actions that occur with great frequency when power is effectively exercised by several presidents on multiple occasions.

To say this is to assert that power per se is an entity distinct from the peculiarities of a given event, or at least that power as such has set characteristics, capable of being identified in numerous and diverse circumstances. This assertion easily can be taken too far, and it is not my purpose to suggest that something as complex as the exercise of power can or should be divorced from the specifics of the setting in which it occurs. Rather, it is to suggest that certain actions are more likely to be exhibited when presidents are said to be powerful, that such is not coincidental, and that as actions and not circumstances, they are typical of the quality scholars are inclined to call power. Although presidential behavior

may be understood in the context of specific, isolated events, I will attempt to reach beyond this and make a statement about the nature of power itself, in the belief that it is far more interesting and potentially more useful to explore reasons why *presidents* succeed and fail, than why a particular president may succeed at a given time.

The focus will be on instances in several administrations in which we can assume that presidential power was exercised, sometimes effectively and sometimes not, in an effort to attain policy goals. As there is variability to what all presidents can achieve, it is reasonable to examine a variety of events within as well as between administrations, some presidential accomplishments and others presidential frustrations, for clues to what worked and what did not. Viewing power as a quality that will vary over the course of an administration, rather than thinking of presidents as being singularly powerful or not powerful during their tenure, will enable us to understand power as the fluid entity it is.

To do this, we need to agree on a definition of power. We can rely on the guidance of convention to establish a working understanding of an admittedly broad concept. Traditionally, presidential power was seen as a function of the office, and the various constitutionally derived roles its occupant could play.[4] Thus, the president could be understood to exercise power differently as commander-in-chief than as chief of state, although the dissimilarities displayed here are better understood to stem from the prerogatives or power*s* of the office than from any particular actions taken by its occupant. Over a generation ago, Richard Neustadt departed from this approach and addressed presidential power as a largely personal phenomenon, originating with the actions the president brought to bear on others in the Washington policy community in the effort to get them to follow his lead.[5]

This view of power brings into play the president's ability to convince others that his interests are their interests, especially if this is not actually the case.[6] Not surprisingly, persuasion plays a central role in what amounts to a large-scale presidential sales job, aimed at convincing others that the president's way is the right way. Neustadt addresses the particulars of Washington that contribute to the effort, although this understanding of power is largely a modified version of Robert Dahl's approach, refined and tailored

to apply to conditions in force in the Oval Office. Essentially, Dahl tells us that we can recognize power in cases where an individual utilizes some resource or resources available to him to move some other individual or individuals toward his position.[7] Following Neustadt, I employ a definition of power that accepts this principle, although, in contrast to the personal model of power, I hold open the possibility that effective organization of the executive branch may combine with personal "resources" to contribute to the effort.

A resource is any quantity available to the president in his attempt to move others. This broad understanding allows an eclectic variety of behaviors and prerogatives to be studied together. In the pages that follow, I will explore the possibility that presidential power derives from a host of items ranging from tangible favors, to nebulous individual characteristics such as charm and flexibility, to the personal realm of access to the president, to the institutional advantages provided by organizational efficiency in the White House.[8] The composition of specific resources should become clear shortly, when I address the hypothetical use of each by the president, but suffice it to say that the list is extensive and wide-ranging. This is a patchwork, but one that allows for the exploration of a full range of items that may contribute to the exercise of presidential power.

Simply having resources is of marginal value, except to provide the president with a variety of options to employ as power. In their dormant state, the group of resources available for use by the president is what Dahl calls the power base, the starting point for the exercise of power. As "exercise" implies action, it is by using the resources constituting the base that the president or any power wielder tries to generate a response from others. Such actions, or what Dahl calls the *power means*,[9] stem from decisions about which resources to use and how to use them. So, it is possible for the president to offer or not to offer favors, let's say, in exchange for political support. Whether he does so, and how his actions are received, should influence the nature of the support he generates. The exercise of power, then, is predicated on both the existence of resources and the means to use them effectively. The president first must have things to give if he seeks to employ favors in return for political support, but he also must be inclined to use them if

they are available and find a way to employ them effectively. At the juncture between knowing which buttons to press and doing so effectively, power is both science and art. Our efforts will focus on discovering the buttons, on uncovering patterns in the way resources are used during instances of presidential effectiveness. As we will see, although presidential resources are not unlimited, neither are they scarce. But, knowing which ones to employ takes skill, and doing so effectively remains the job of the political artist.

By including organization as a resource, I implicitly suggest that the exercise of presidential power includes more than the interpersonal factors to which Neustadt gives great currency. While acknowledging the size and scope of the institutional presidency, Neustadt chose to base his analysis of power on individual performance. Thus, he stated " 'Presidential' on the title page means nothing but the President. 'Power' means *his* influence."[10] Whereas we tend to think of powerful presidents as powerful individuals, it is limiting to proceed as though effectiveness derives from the actions of a single person. When journalists wrote of the policy accomplishments that came out of the early days of the Reagan administration, they often pinned credit on Reagan *and his team*. The relationship they shared was described in terms of its efficiency, as the White House staff was said to work well because goals were clearly defined, accepted, and enacted more or less harmoniously by the principle players. The effect was to generate vital support by enhancing the administration's working relationship with Congress or, if you will, to bolster the president's power.

Interpersonal resources that define persuasiveness will also be thoroughly considered; the purpose here is not to contradict Neustadt, but to build upon his work while developing an empirical framework for the study of power.[11] So, instances in which presidential pressure is applied, threats are made, favors are offered, and the like, will be given careful consideration. My intention is to consider the relationship between a wide array of resources and legislative outcomes, and in so doing to expand the prevalent personal model of presidential power to embrace both its personal and organizational components. Indeed, we will see that both persuasion and organizational efficiency are related to presidential effectiveness over time and across administrations.

At the same time, some personal characteristics of the presi-

dent are not factors in the power game. For instance, despite what the personal model of power might lead us to believe and contrary to what we may assume to be the case from a casual reading of the first Reagan term, presidential charm and charisma are of limited utility to the exercise of power. We will see that, although Ronald Reagan's charismatic way was not lost on others in the Washington community, it alone was not enough to help steer him from defeat. Likewise, other less enchanting chief executives accomplished much without a warm smile and endearing quips. It is all too easy to overstate the importance of charm when employing a model of power that emphasizes the individual to the exclusion of the tools used.

Identifying specific purposes for which power is exercised is critical to the development of the model. To what end is presidential power employed? Neustadt spoke of power in its own terms, as something of value to the president that he should strive always to maximize.[12] Implicitly, he saw the powerful president as a good president, and the acquisition of power more an end in itself than a means to an end. As a result, power is not treated in the context of what its exercise could bring about, but as something the president should amass. Not surprisingly, power becomes inseparably braided with the person who exercises it. In this study, the means to power are rooted in some of the ends it may achieve, in moving Congress and the executive branch toward specific objectives. This will enable us to view the subject with a wider lens, to look at power from multiple perspectives, both interpersonal and institutional, in the effort to enhance our understanding of what it is and how it works. When I claim, for instance, that the place of Reagan's charm has been overstated, I mean to suggest that it has been overstated in the context of domestic policy endeavors he attempted to get through Congress. These, as much as anything, were among Reagan's most salient objectives as he, like most presidents, endeavored to use his power to make his mark on American public policy.

As an empirical analysis of presidential power, this project focuses on actual events in order to understand what really happened when a given president exercised power effectively. Where Neustadt was primarily concerned with the potential exercise of power, with what the president could or should do if he wanted to be pow-

erful, my objective is to begin to understand what actually has worked and what has not.

I examine only domestic policy initiatives,[13] speaking of them in the simple shorthand of success and failure. A policy "success" is the realization, often by an act or set of actions by the legislature, of a policy goal previously sought by the president in both rhetoric and actions. In other words, it is something to which the president committed himself well beyond simple lip service. A "failure," for my purposes, occurs when comparable presidential attention yields results adverse to the president's stated position or no results at all. The terms, as they are used here, do not apply to the impact of a given policy once it is realized, nor are they intended to be pejorative in any respect. They are used as a simple way to distinguish presidential victory from defeat.

The task is to refine our understanding of presidential power by examining it in vivo, to connect the means of power to its ends and examine a sample of instances when the means were brought to bear on actual objectives. It is to define better those aspects of power that derive from the person and distinguish them from organizational factors. Ultimately, it is to make a rudimentary but important judgment about *how much* a given resource contributes to presidential power relative to all other resources available to a president, for multiple cases of success over a period of twenty years.

But, understanding presidential power is more complicated than this simple statement makes it seem. Even when we can identify instances when a president successfully accomplishes a policy goal, and distinguish them from occasions when he does not, we remain hard pressed to isolate the combination of factors and forces that forged the outcome. How, for instance, do we discriminate behavior from context? How much of a particular triumph may be attributed to a president's actions in office, as opposed to the opportunities afforded by circumstance? Power implies behavior; favorable outcomes produced without action are better understood as products of happenstance or even luck. Yet, circumstances will constrain some behaviors and facilitate others, potentially affecting the president's ability to wield power in pursuit of his goals. We will need to give this careful consideration.

Furthermore, the resources a president may draw upon are

many. Some will advance his objectives, but others will have no effect or even may be detrimental. To understand power in terms of resources requires a direct connection between presidential actions and favorable results, a link not likely to be apparent for all the things the president does. The president may cajole others, offer them favors, kill them with kindness, flatter them with charm, or dazzle them with expertise. In the end, he may get them to see things his way. He may not stop to discriminate between effective and ineffective actions; for that matter, he may believe that a little bit of everything he did contributed to the outcome. And, maybe it did. It is equally reasonable if not more cautious to assume that some actions ultimately mattered more. Of course, it is quite another thing to identify those actions and relate them to results. Where the connections are not obvious, we will hunt for them. Where information is lacking, we will rely on careful extrapolation. In so doing, we stand to better our understanding of what constitutes presidential power.

In Chapter 2, I discuss in greater detail how the study reported here was conducted and, using two case studies, identify the resources that will be considered for their contributions to presidential effectiveness. Chapters 3 and 4 will be devoted to systematic analysis of the resources a president may use to persuade others, and their relationship to the results he achieves.

In Chapter 5, I will address the institutional face of power, by considering organizational efficiency as a factor contributing to policy success. Congressional access to the president and the White House will be discussed in Chapter 6 as an item of some importance to policy outcomes, and one that the president has much leeway to control. Three resources were found to be of limited utility in shaping legislative outcomes: competence, charisma, and hard work. These, too, will be addressed in Chapter 6. Despite what conventional wisdom tells us about the importance of being able and working hard, and despite what the personal model of power might lead us to believe about the importance of charm, no relationship was found between these items and successful policy outcomes.

Chapter 7 presents a multivariate model for the exercise of power, in a preliminary effort to make relative statements about the importance of factors heretofore discussed and in an attempt to

weigh the overall importance of power with respect to circumstance or situation to the outcome of a policy event. General conclusions about the exercise of presidential power will be discussed in Chapter 8. Observations about the exercise of power during the first months of the Bush administration will be considered in a postscript.