

# DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## Posc 105

### LIMITS ON PRESIDENTIAL POWER

#### I. THIS MORNING:

- A. Limitations on presidential power.

#### II. ROLES AND PERSONALITY:

- A. A president's character is obviously important in explaining his or her successes and weaknesses.
  1. But, as argued repeatedly, institutional constraints and circumstances including historical events probably play an even bigger role.
  2. So, certainly the film "What Happened to Bill Clinton," has merit. But we also need to look at some of the strengths and weaknesses of the office.

#### III. INSTITUTIONAL AND CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS:

- A. Proposition: the things that are a source of a president's power are also potential sources of weakness.
- B. Public expectations and campaign rhetoric versus the nature of the problems presidents face:
  1. Economic transformations and dislocation, behavior of foreign governments, transnational entities, and non-governmental groups
- C. "Control" of the bureaucracy does not give presidents the power one might think.
  1. The cabinet
    - a. Nominal under presidential control departments and agencies often have a life of their own.
    - b. Cabinet secretaries have to fight being coopted by the bureaucracies they are supposed to supervise.
  2. Other "bureaucratic" limitations include:
    - a. Bureaucratic permanence and inertia
    - b. Bureaucratic politics
      - (1) Arms control
      - (2) The "gays in the military" issue
    - c. "Sub-governments" or "iron triangles"
    - d. "Group think" and advisors
      - (1) Example: LBJ and Vietnam?
  - D. Separation and fragmentation of power
    1. Presidents have to be exceptional to dominate the legislative process.
      - a. Not many have been over long periods of time.
      - b. This observation suggests an inherent weakness in the office.
    2. Congress, the Federal Reserve (FED), the Supreme Court, state

governments, and so forth fragment power.

- E. The absence of mechanisms to create and sustain a governing **message**
  - 1. The national party is not gear to generating and sustaining specific political agendas.
  - 2. Political commentators frequently bemoans the lack of "vision" on the part of presidents and presidential candidates.
  - 3. In point of fact, their message can sometimes be read as "elect me and I'll deal with programs and policy later."
- F. "Fishbowl" phenomenon: intense media scrutiny
  - 1. Presidents can "command" a nation's attention.
  - 2. But at the same time they are under ceaseless eye of the media.
- G. The contradictions of general-welfare liberalism
  - 1. Liberalism versus the "positive state"
- H. The bottom line is that the political system and popular culture places enormous burdens on presidents but does not give them the "tools" (e.g., strong party leadership) to carry them.
- I. A final proposition: real reform involves strengthen party discipline and giving the president more influence over legislation.
  - 1. This is the way to maximizing accountability and hence democracy and increasing political capacity.

IV. NEXT TIME:

- A. Second test