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THE EVOLUTION OF THE PRESIDENCY: BETWEEN THE PROMISE AND THE FEAR



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PRESIDENTS CONFRONT A YAWNING GULF BETWEEN THE duties of their office and the inadequate formal powers at their command. This fundamental asymmetry is at the heart of the presidency's historical development. It has yielded an improvisational and opportunistic presidency, one whose incumbents are constantly on the make for short-term advantage in America's system of shared powers. That presidents remain at a competitive disadvantage in this struggle for influence can be gleaned from contemporary scholarship. Leading students of the office conclude that presidential influence over Congress occurs "at the margins" of the policy process; moments of presidential domination are episodic and contingent at best. Indeed, these studies indicate that the successful exercise of presidential leadership is shaped more by the configuration of situational variables outside the president's immediate control and less by the personal attributes of a particular incumbent or the institutional organization of his office.¹

These impediments to effective leadership simply make presidents work harder, prompting them to explore the available mechanisms of political control and to challenge the political and cultural conventions that define appropriate presidential behavior. The results of these leadership efforts have been consequential. Historically, the presidential struggle for political influence has wrought several fundamental changes and, in the process, helped lay the foundations for the modern presidency: a profound conceptual reworking of the office, one that