

# 2018

## H-Diplo

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**An H-Diplo Book Review Essay**

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**Jeremi Suri. *The Impossible Presidency: The Rise and Fall of America's Highest Office.*** New York: Basic Books, 2017. ISBN: 9780465051731 (hardcover, \$32.00/CDN\$42.00).

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Towards the end of Ronald Reagan's presidency, so the story goes, a member of the White House staff entered the Oval Office to find the fortieth president gazing thoughtfully out of the window. 'Look at that fellow,' Reagan said to him, pointing to one of the gardeners working in the grounds. 'What I'd do to be him on a beautiful day like this.' Afterwards the staff member reflected that no doubt there were many gardeners who had dreamt of being President of the United States, but surely few presidents who had dreamt that one day they might be the White House gardener.

Reagan bore the cares of the presidency more lightly than most, but even he was shocked to his core by the awesome power that went with the office. Much of his nuclear strategy—"Star Wars" and the disarmament negotiations with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev—was rooted in his moral revulsion at the global destruction he personally could inflict. It was all part of being leader of the world's greatest power; the realization that, in the words of Jeremi Suri, "The president can bomb more places, spend more money, and influence more people than any other figure in history. His reach is almost boundless" (ix).

But reach is not the same as grasp. At the heart of Suri's intriguing and gracefully written book is the idea that modern presidents have rarely been able to deliver successfully on their agendas—and that much, perhaps most, of the reason for those disappointments is the very nature of the office itself. Presidents, he says, have consistently "overcommitted, overpromised, and overreached." They have "run in too many directions at once, ... tried to achieve success too fast," and "become too preoccupied with managing crises ... than leading the country." In short, "even the most ambitious presidents [have] become largely reactive" (ix). But for Suri these are more symptoms than cause. For "even the most capable modern presidents are doomed to fail." Limiting the failure and achieving some good along the way "is the best we can expect" (xxiii).

That may seem a gloomy prognosis, but it is one that to some degree has its roots in the founding documents of the United States. The founders themselves, famously steeped in ancient history, drew lessons from the fall of the Roman republic and its replacement with an imperial system of government. Within their new republic they wanted a president who was modest, cautious, and restrained; in George Washington they got precisely

that. But the success of democracy demanded that future leaders remained just as prudent and self-aware as the first president even as the country grew more prosperous and dynamic. “I hope our wisdom will grow with our power,” the third president Thomas Jefferson wrote, “and teach us that the less we use our power the greater it will be” (xi).

Ironically, the person of George Washington was part of the problem for the office of the presidency. While the constitution and the first ten amendments went into great detail about the way in which the new state would operate, the key line on the presidency was one very simple sentence. “The executive Power shall be vested in the President of the United States of America.” It is a good example of prioritizing what the nineteenth-century British Prime Minister George Canning described as ‘men not measures.’ Certainly that sentence in the constitution made clear that the president would not be royal, legislative, or judicial. In this way, the character of the president was central to the office from the outset.

Many of the best presidents have indeed been those who were able to impose their personalities, character, and vision at times of fast change or crisis. Abraham Lincoln was a “national storyteller” and “more of a prophet than a ruler” (20). Theodore Roosevelt added direct action and aggressive problem-solving to Lincoln’s eloquence (99). Franklin Roosevelt brilliantly conveyed the idea of “a president who seemed to care more than any before” (152). Yet all three presidents, who are consistently seen as among the best by multiple generations of historians, each took the presidency further away from its modest origins. Washington “would have recognized their unifying vision,” Suri writes, but the “transformative ambitions would have astounded the first president” (99). By the time of FDR’s presidency, the office was a “Leviathan,” civilized, in Saul Bellow’s phrase, only by the character of the man in charge. For Suri, Roosevelt was the last president who managed to pull it off.

Wide ranging books such as *The Impossible Presidency* are often patchy in their reading and analysis. That most certainly is not the case in this comprehensively researched book. The overall argument is developed in a bracing yet nuanced fashion. And on the Kennedy administration in particular Suri makes a genuinely imaginative and original contribution.

Here he takes pages from Franklin Roosevelt’s daily calendar and compares them to Kennedy’s daily schedule. It sounds innocuous enough, but Suri uses the information to build a picture of the thirty-fifth president as completely overwhelmed by events and information. Roosevelt was “never frantic, and rarely rushed. He was in control, even in the immediate aftermath of horrible, unexpected events” (192). Kennedy in contrast always seemed stretched too thin. “As recounted in his calendars,” Suri writes, too much of Kennedy’s time was spent managing messes, not leading where he wanted to go” (195). The most notable moments of his presidency--the Berlin Wall crisis (1961), the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), the civil rights TV address (1963)--were essentially reactive. Suri’s conclusion is brutal: “He stalled, he hedged, and ultimately did very little” (204).

Given that Suri’s analysis of Kennedy and the presidency is so sure footed, it is a pity that he did not engage with the work of a historian who served that president. Arthur Schlesinger Jr’s *The Imperial Presidency*<sup>1</sup> is one of the most influential books written on the changing nature of the presidency, so it seems odd not to have referenced it, not least because Suri could have done so seamlessly in the context of the Kennedy

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

## H-Diplo Review Essay

administration. Another surprise is the way Suri glosses over Richard Nixon and completely ignores Jimmy Carter, when surely both in their different ways are central to our sense of what the modern presidency is.

Still, the analysis of later presidents is brilliantly done. Suri skillfully develops his theme of incumbents constantly battling minutiae and detail to push through strategic priorities. He praises Ronald Reagan for his attempts to put “mission over management” (240). In contrast, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama are shown to have been totally unable to control their calendars or priorities; the result was “limited accomplishments, frequent haste, and emerging fatigue, rather than big and enduring New Deal-style transformations ... Tactical brilliance crowded out strategic focus” (272).

As his surprisingly damning “first draft” on the Obama presidency shows, Suri is not afraid to land his punches, but his analysis throughout is always detached and nonpartisan. Only at the end does he dip his toe into political waters with a look at how the presidency is doing under its most recent office-holder. His argument is that it was the broken nature of the presidency itself that helped bring Donald Trump to power. “It was impossible to lead as president in 2016, and voters recognized that,” he writes, “They elected an anti-leader, Donald Trump, whose main qualification was that he had never served in public office and had no desire to act like a traditional public servant.” Instead, “Trump promised to be a disruptor” (289-290).

The question this excellent book leaves us with is an intriguing if controversial one; whether a disruptor is exactly what the office needs, or if some other “improved national leadership” is on offer. In other words, does the impossible presidency require an impossible president?

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