

## **Ancient Paradigms and Modern Expectations: Is the United States acting like a normal state?**

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### **Abstract**

Not since the Roman Empire has any nation had as much economic, cultural and military power as the United States does today. In light of the session's concern to appreciate the relevance of history to understanding current international affairs, this paper will discuss the regularly noticed but under conceptualized behavioral pattern of the American presidency that strongly influences the shaping of U.S. foreign policy. The goal is to provide a corrective emphasis on the controversies surrounding the response of George W. Bush to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the resulting "Bush Doctrine." A response often described as a "neoimperial vision in which the United States arrogates to itself the global role of setting standards, determining threats, using force and meting out justice" in the world community.

Specifically under consideration is the issue of presidential language and the shaping of national sentiment. Indeed, as scholars have repeatedly noted, speeches are also action and the interchange between culture and language is where the issue of constructed meaning – the attribution of motives – must reflectively be considered. I argue that such rhetorical symbolism not only goes to the core of presidential leadership during times of crisis, but also is an area that can lead presidents to make avoidable, sometimes serious mistakes. By employing a "Biblical leadership" paradigm (e.g., American exceptionalism) in which American political culture is steeped, the paper will elucidate the historical consistencies that guide U.S. grand strategy and the restructuring of the today's unipolar world.

I dread our *own* power and our *own* ambition; I dread our being too much dreaded. It is ridiculous to say that we are not men, and that, as men we shall never wish to aggrandize ourselves. (Edmund Burke)

How has the United States conducted its' foreign policy during the War on Terrorism and what are the implications for the future? The importance of these questions cannot be underestimated. To quote Steven Hook:

There has never been a more crucial time than today to study the formulation and conduct of U.S. foreign policy. The United States stands at the start of the twenty-first century as the world's most powerful and embattled country, with mounting challenges on several fronts. How American foreign-policy makers respond to these issues and problems will dictate the course of the rest of the century for the United States and world politics as a whole. The outcome is anything but certain.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Steven W. Hook, *U.S. Foreign Policy: The Paradox of World Power* (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 2005), xvi.

More personally for Americans, the importance of these questions can be rephrased. In the words of Shibley Telhami:

Heart-wrenching tragedies and crises test both individuals and groups. The horror that befell the United States on September 11, 2001, presented a serious challenge . . . It wasn't simply fear and sense of vulnerability, or astonishment at the degree of ruthlessness that the terrorists exhibited; even more, it was about profound questions that everyone asked – about who we are, what kind of world we live in, and who we want to be. We all understood that choices we made in responding to this horror not only would affect the degree of future threat but also would define who we will become.<sup>2</sup>

The topic of my presentation is: Ancient Paradigms and Modern Expectations: Is the United States acting like a normal state? The short answer is: Yes – both in terms of itself (i.e., its own political traditions) and as an actor on the world stage (e.g., “The adoption of a preventive war doctrine,” as Robert Jervis concludes, “may be a mistake, especially if taken too far, but it is not foreign to normal state behavior. It appeals to states that have a valued position to maintain.”<sup>3</sup>). One should note that while the Bush doctrine has and continues to provoke much controversy, it is not the purpose of this paper to decide or debate its pros and cons. Although many observers were taken by surprise at the turn in President Bush’s pre-September 11<sup>th</sup> views that saw American leadership – especially its use of force – restricted to defending narrow and traditional vital interests and move towards a grand strategy that appears to form a

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<sup>2</sup> Shibley Telhami, *The Stakes: America and the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2002), ix.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Jervis, “Understanding the Bush Doctrine,” in G. John Ikenberry, ed., *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005), 586.

“neo-imperial vision in which the United States arrogates to itself a global role of setting standards, determining threats, using force and meting out justice,”<sup>4</sup> they probably should not of been. The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First it is to provide a corrective emphasis on current explanations of the Bush doctrine; and secondly, it is hoped that it will stimulate further critical dialogue.

Methodologically, the questions that surround the Bush doctrine stem from the issue of how to conceptually identify the dynamics of foreign policy change without *missing or distorting* their actual implications. In as much as scholars must grapple with the fact that the Bush strategy represents a “profound strategic innovation” to quote Daalder and Lindsay,<sup>5</sup> the point should be rephrased. In the current political environment, has American policy changed or has the environment merely brought to light different aspects/possibilities of its integrative purposes? This is the reference to ancient paradigms and modern expectations in the title.

The specific focus for explanation will be on a regularly noticed but under-conceptualized role of the presidency during times of crisis. Analytically this is driven by the proposition that foreign policy is a product of the actions officials take on behalf of the nation-state they lead. Because of this, it can be argued that the way a government is structured for purposes of policy-making will affect the conduct and content of foreign affairs as well. In other words, a relationship can be hypothesized to exist between the substance of policy and institutional setting from which it derives. The importance of leadership in this regard, as Murry Edelman reminds us, is that its very idea makes a complex and largely unknowable social world understandable even while it assuages personal guilt and anxiety by transferring responsibility to

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<sup>4</sup> G. John Ikenberry, “America’s Imperial Ambition,” in G. John Ikenberry, ed., *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005), 564.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Andrew Bennett and George Shambaugh, *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American Foreign Policy* (Dubuque, IA: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 25.

another. As an individual, leaders can be praised and blamed and given “responsibility” in a way that processes cannot.<sup>6</sup> That the American presidency is the central and preeminent leadership focus of the American political system is a truism beyond dispute. Several studies most notably by Fred Greenstein, have shown that

[t]he president is first a symbol for the nation; second an outlet for affect – a way of feeling good about one’s country; third a cognitive aid, allowing a single individual to symbolize and substitute for the complexity and confusion of government; and fourth a means of vicarious participation through which people identify with the president and feel more a part of events occurring around them.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, the president is the initial point of contact, the general symbol of the government, and orientation point from which the rest of the government is perceived. And that this leadership function often narrows to essentially a speaking role is at least by implication in many accounts, hardly more disputable. Certainly among contemporary scholars there is nearly unanimous agreement that among other presidential responsibilities, the designation of America’s number one office holder as “Tribune of the people” and/or “spokesman of the nation” must be included. Nowhere is this more evident than in the area of foreign affairs. “The President is”, as Clinton Rossiter designated him fifty years ago, the nations’ “Chief Diplomat.”<sup>8</sup> Although authority in the field of foreign relations is shared constitutionally between two organs

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<sup>6</sup> Murry Edleman, *The Symbolic Uses of Power* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 78.

<sup>7</sup> Fred Greenstein, “What the President means to Americans,” in *Choosing the President* ed. James David Barber (New York: American Assembly, 1974), 130-131.

<sup>8</sup> Clinton Rossiter, *The American Presidency* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1987). See Thomas Cronin and Michael Genovese, *The Paradoxes of the American Presidency*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford University Press, 2004), 139.

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– President and Congress – “his position is paramount, if not indeed dominant.”<sup>9</sup> In times of war, few citizens would question the obligation of presidents to preserve and protect the nation. Few would deny them the constitutional and statutory authority to do so.

Yet it is also a fact that the terms of crisis leadership remain little defined.<sup>10</sup> By focusing more on how individual presidents structure and manage the decision-making process, scholars have explained little, specifically about how this role colors – or does not color – how officeholders fulfill their duties as commander-in-chief or faithfully execute the office of the President. We have been told even less that would consistently elucidate the basis or platform on which a president should rise to defend the interests of the assembled people, or of the kinds of words he should utter in the nation’s name and why. Why is it, for example, that no other country’s leaders so frequently invoke the Lord’s name to bless its international enterprises? It seems mostly left to common understanding to accept, without detailed specification or explanation, that what presidents do in this role, sometimes well, often poorly, is a politically significant attribute of the office. But if there are no explicit specifications for this role, how and by what criteria is it determined that some have performed it well, others ill? More importantly, is this a role that is well assigned to the president, one which – if we knew with precision what it was – we would want given to the president in its present form in times of crisis?

This paper will attempt to answer these unattended questions by applying to this central speaking role in the presidency a paradigm of leadership drawn from biblical sources. Scholars have long recognized that although American civilization is complex and counts many points of origin, the Bible remains a source of unsurpassed significance. It should not be surprising that

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<sup>9</sup> Clinton Rossiter, *The American Presidency* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1987). For an excellent discussion surrounding this issue see Barbara Hinckley, *Less than Meets the Eye: Foreign Policy Making and the Myth of the Assertive Congress* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> H. Mark Roelofs, “The Prophetic Presidency: Charisma in the American Political Tradition,” Paper presented at the annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association 1991.

the historical development of the core institution of the American political system might be supposed to have been influenced by biblical thought patterns. Many evaluations of current policy do in fact highlight some aspect of this feature. At best however, analysts only go so far as identifying such biblical influences as the source of the moral certainty that American leaders have traditionally carried abroad.<sup>11</sup>

With roots going back to John Winthrop's sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity," this moral certainty is commonly referred to as American exceptionalism. Jerel Rosati identifies three attributes of this self-image: innocence (the desire merely to be the "City upon a hill," a model for other nations to emulate); benevolence (the desire to do good for the world and not merely for oneself); and exceptionalism (a confidence and optimism about the superiority – not merely the distinctiveness – of the American experiment to create "a new nation, conceived in liberty").<sup>12</sup> These three attributes are what Woodrow Wilson referred to

when he wanted to accentuate the providentially assigned role of the United States to lead the world to new and better things. To him, what defined "America" was precisely this special calling or mission. The nation had been allowed to see the light and was bound to show the way for the historically retrograde. There was a duty to develop and spread to full potential under the blessings of the most perfect principles imaginable.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Mel Gurtov, *Super Power on Crusade: The Bush Doctrine in US Foreign Policy* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006); and Anders, Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (Hill and Wang, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Jerel Rosati, *The Politics of United States Foreign Policy*, 2d ed. (Ft. Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 408.

<sup>13</sup> Anders, Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (Hill and Wang, 1995), xii. It should be noted in this quote that Stephanson refers to "manifest destiny" as an alternative to what others have described as American exceptionalism.

To be sure, this is a language and style seemingly far removed from the language and provisions of presidential duties under the Constitution.

With regard to the presidential role as it is to function during times of national stress, it should be noted that some commentators have been prompted to talk of Americans as having recovered the oldest form of human government, the “elected king.” In stressing the immersion of political systems in their historical contexts, I would point out, however, that Americans have no experience with elected kings. On the other hand – and this is a subtle but crucial distinction – because culturally they are a predominantly and profoundly a Protestant people they have had right from the beginning, a ready available and detailed leadership image from the Bible. As such, what matters to the present paper is that there is a remarkable “fit” between the Bible’s leadership paradigm and what is from time to appropriate time expected of modern presidents.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, it will be argued that it is this fit between the ancient paradigm and modern expectations that both confirms and illuminates their relationship, that the first is both the source of the second and a reliable guide to its definition and analysis. And it will finally be argued that this confirmation and illumination will bring to prominence aspects of the presidency which now require urgent attention.

### **1) The Mosaic Leadership Paradigm<sup>15</sup>**

In this paper, the biblical leadership paradigm will be identified with Moses. It could have been identified just as easily with Abraham, Joshua or David. Moses is chosen because all

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that this is an argument first made by H. Mark Roelofs in his “The Prophetic Presidency: Charisma in the American Political Tradition,” Paper presented at the annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association 1991. Although this paper differs from Roelofs in several ways (most notably his notions of myth and reality) it seeks to be an extension of his work. See also H. Mark Roelofs, *The Poverty of American Politics: A Theoretical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Throughout this section we will be following very closely the work of H. Mark Roelofs on this point. H. Mark Roelofs, “The Prophetic Presidency: Charisma in the American Political Tradition,” Paper presented at the annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association 1991.

biblical examples are seen being called to account against an original paradigm that is applied with great consistency to all of them.<sup>16</sup> In a word, they all expected to be “prophetic.” The biblical prophetic role is essentially concerned with words, with language, with dialogue. The prophetic leader must utter words and the people must hear them and respond to them. The prophetic emphasis on words arises from the fact that, as H. Mark Roelofs explains,

[T]he Hebrews were nominalists, that is, existential experientialists, of an extreme sort. Without even a remote capacity for philosophical reflection and detachment, they spoke and wrote exclusively about experience, their own, personal and subjective. They wrote of experience directly as they remembered it, had it, anticipated it. Words, designating subjects and objects actions and attributes, brought experiences to mind, evoked them in all their vivid particularity, and thereby compelled hearers to relive those events, to suffer and endure them again, or alternatively, to feel them in the offing, impending, and disturbing.<sup>17</sup>

The essential Hebrew literary structure is, therefore the narrative. The essential problem the story teller leaves with his hearers or attempts to solve for them is always the same: what does the story do to the hearer, where does it put the hearer in the story, how does it demand that he or she respond to its telling? There are typically three parts to the narrative. The first is an account of the past to recall or associate the hearer with it. In other words, the story teller

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<sup>16</sup> See for example Exodus chapter 23; Joshua chapters 23 and 24. For secondary sources see Bernard Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1957); Johann Pederson, *Israel its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926); Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962); Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960).

<sup>17</sup> H. Mark Roelofs, “The Prophetic Presidency: Charisma in the American Political Tradition” Paper presented at the annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association 1991, pg. 10.

reminds the listener of how they became a people – the trials and victories which brought them to their present place and time. The second part of the narrative is an experiential now, a moment of crisis occasioned if only by the hearing of the story being told. The final narrative part is concerned with an unfulfilled future – what the hearer will do now that the story is has been told.

The Hebrew prophetic leader is essentially the teller of a story, the hearers are his people, and the story he tells is the story of their life together. Technically the prophetic leaders' words are an act of congregation. He is not there to debate or to negotiate. Rather, by his call, he summons the people before him into one body, one life or enterprise of souls, so that, in the Bible's repeated phrasing, they may go out as one man and speak with one voice. In generating their unity the prophetic leader also becomes, to quote Roelofs, "as a father to them[;] a patriarchal hero gathering them into the ambit of his instruction of their story."<sup>18</sup>

The interpretation of the moment in which the people stand is not, however, exhausted by its announcement. The prophetic leader now presses upon his people their moment of choice. They have come this far in their history, they have achieved what they have because they have been true to their tribal commitments and loyal to their god of destiny. But now troubles heap up on every hand. There has been a falling away of commitment, a weakening of identity, a dispersion of social and psychic energy, a loosening of community. The patriarch demands the people's attention to meet the need to choose again the objects of their highest loyalties, to reach again for a life with their god and his chosen hero, the national leader. Alternatively the people can choose to go their separate ways, to abandon their founding commitments, loyalties, and social meaning.

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<sup>18</sup> H. Mark Roelofs, "The Prophetic Presidency: Charisma in the American Political Tradition" Paper presented at the annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association 1991, pg. 14.

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The choice is historic, existential, moral and redemptive. “I” said Moses to the people of Israel, “call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19). “Now therefore” said Joshua to all the people assembled at Shechem, “choose this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:14-15). When the choice is made positively the soul of the heroic leader will meld again with that of the people, magnifying them, unifying them, and they and he will together be renewed, historically ennobled to go forward with their god. The covenant between god, man, and people has been renewed: god will protect, man will lead and the assembled people in love will obey.

### **2) The Prophetic Presidency**

It is clear from this discussion that the prophetic leadership paradigm delineates a role that, in its communal significance is both powerful and important. To an extraordinary degree, it can cultivate community identity, solidarity and a belief in community legitimacy. To move, however, from an analysis of this sort to a specific examination of the prophetic character of the American presidency is awkward. The quick statement of evidence for its presence – now that the pattern is recognizable – comes so easily from presidential speeches as to seem not to need justification. Here is John F. Kennedy informing and reassuring Americans of who they legitimately are:

We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans – born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage – and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing

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of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed, and too which we are committed today at home and around the world.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, one need look no further than Woodrow Wilson's written commentary on the presidential office. A more literal summons for a charismatic patriarchal Moses would be hard to find:

For he [the president] is also the political leader of the nation, or has it in his choice to be. The nation as a whole has chosen him, and is conscious that it has no other spokesman. His is the only national voice in affairs. Let him once win the admiration and confidence of the country, and no other single force can withstand him, no combination of forces will easily over power him. His position takes the imagination of the country. He is the representative of no constituency, but of the whole people. When he speaks in his true character, he speaks for no special interest. If he rightly interpret the national thought and boldly insists upon it, he is irresistible; and the country never feels the zest of action so much as when its' President is of such insight and caliber. Its instinct is for unified action, and it craves a single leader.<sup>20</sup>

The purposes of this paper will not be served, however, unless it can be shown why – for what reasons – the ancient Hebraic paradigm worked its way into the Oval Office. We begin with a discussion of the *Federalist Papers* – the best guide to how the framers understood the

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<sup>19</sup> John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.

<sup>20</sup> Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908), 68.

Constitution when they wrote it.<sup>21</sup> To what degree does the Constitution welcome presidential activity that reasserts national identity and regime legitimization? In *Federalist* no. 70, Alexander Hamilton outlines its importance:

Energy in the executive is a leading character in the definition of good government. It is essential to the protection of the community against foreign attacks; it is not less essential to the steady administration of the laws; to the protection of property against those irregular and high-handed combinations which sometimes interrupt the ordinary course of justice; to the security of liberty against the enterprises and assaults of ambition, of faction, and of anarchy.

In what seems a strange defense of an office designed for a people fearing tyranny, Hamilton unflinchingly goes further:

Every man the least conversant in Roman history knows how often that republic was obliged to take refuge in the absolute power of a single man, under the formidable title of **dictator**, as well against the intrigues of ambitious individuals who aspired to the tyranny, and the seditions of whole classes of the community whose conduct threatened the existence of all government, as against the invasions of external enemies who menaced the conquest and destruction of Rome.

There can be no need, however, to multiply arguments or examples on their head. A feeble executive implies a feeble execution of the government. A feeble execution is but another phrase for a bad execution;

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<sup>21</sup> All references to the *Federalist Papers* are to be found in the following edition: Hamilton, Madison and Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, (New York: Signet Classic, 1999).

and a government ill executed, whatever it may be in theory, must be in practice, a bad government.

Clearly the framers wanted the president's function to go beyond the Constitution's simple phrasing of "see[ing] that the laws are faithfully executed."<sup>22</sup> What the framers were seeking to address through the institution of the presidency was the principle of "crisis government" or to use Rossiter's term: "constitutional dictatorship."<sup>23</sup> The importance of this principle was first raised by Hamilton in *Federalist* nos. 23, 25, 26 and 31. It was argued that the new government "ought to be clothed with all the powers requisite to complete execution of its trust" and that "it is both unwise and dangerous to deny [it] an unconfined authority in respect to all those objects which are intrusted to its management." In a struggle between "parchment provisions" and "public necessity" necessity will invariably win out. When certain actions are demanded by the force of events, political leaders will take them whether or not constitutionally authorized to do so. History proves that:

Nations pay little regard to rules and maxims calculated in their very nature to run counter to the necessities of society. Wise politicians will be cautious about fettering the government with restrictions that cannot be observed, because they know that every breach of fundamental laws, thought dictated by necessity, impairs that sacred reverence which ought to be maintained in the breast of rulers towards the constitution of a

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<sup>22</sup> When Wilson and Morris (members of the Convention's Committee of Detail) used the term "The Executive Power" as Richard Pious notes, "they were seeking deliberately to build into the Constitution an open-ended clause useful to expand the powers of the presidency. Indeed, the common rules of constitutional construction that then prevailed assumed that general terms might imply more than the enumerated powers that followed." Richard Pious, *The American Presidency* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 30. See also Charles Thach, *The Creation of the Presidency 1775-1787* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), 138-39.

<sup>23</sup> Clinton Rossiter, *Constitutional Dictatorship: Crisis Government in Modern Democracies*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948). John Locke would refer to this as the discretionary or prerogative power of government. See John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), chapter XII.

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country, and forms a precedent for other breaches where the same plea of necessity does not exist at all, or is less urgent and palpable.

A constitution which is not comprehensive enough to meet the dangers posed by extraordinary events will soon lose, through the precedent of disobedience, much of its restraining force even in ordinary times. According to Rossiter, the principle of constitutional dictatorship finds its rationale in these three fundamental facts:

*first, the complex system of government of the democratic, constitutional state is essentially designed to function under normal, peaceful conditions, and is often unequal to the exigencies of a great national crisis. . . . Therefore, in time of crisis a democratic, constitutional government must be temporarily altered to whatever degree is necessary to overcome the peril and restore normal conditions. This alteration invariably involves government of a stronger character; that is, the government will have more power and the people fewer rights.*<sup>24</sup>

A properly framed constitution must, then, embrace two distinct and conflicting characteristics. It must genuinely channel and moderate governmental power while at the same time assuring that, according to *Federalist* no. 31, "a power equal to every possible contingency . . . exist[s] somewhere" – "free from every other control but a regard to the public good and to the sense of the people."<sup>25</sup> The need to limit authority does not imply a need to weaken it. This is not to say that the Constitution, as Lincoln noted, "is different in time of insurrection or invasion from what it is in time of peace and public security," but rather that "the constitution is different, *in its application* in cases of Rebellion or Invasion, involving Public Safety, from what it is in

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<sup>24</sup> Clinton Rossiter, *Constitutional Dictatorship: Crisis Government in Modern Democracies*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), pg. 5. (Italics in the original).

<sup>25</sup> Both quotations are from *Federalist* no. 31.

times of profound peace and public security."

The founders solution was to make the executive the key to achieving both limited (for normal or routine issues) and forceful (for issues of crisis or regime legitimation) government. By establishing the legislature as the *de jure* "supreme power," but then restricting it to the formulation of general rules, the executive was made responsible for much of the real work of government i.e., its day-to-day operations. In consequence, Article II that sets out the bulk of presidential powers under the Constitution should be read as containing a set of principles which both restrain and empower.

First, the office is to carry out the law where it is clear and easily stated. Derived from the need to remedy the administrative problems occurring under the nation's first constitution (the Articles of Confederation), executive power is to serve Congress as an effective but subordinate instrument. The second principle addresses the fact that not all the circumstances of political life can be foreseen or encompassed by laws. Although the rule of law was designed expressly to replace personal discretion, the executive must be left sufficient latitude for confronting the unexpected.

Possessing a legitimate right to mold the commands of legislators,<sup>26</sup> this greater independence signifies an equality – if not, indeed, a superiority – of the executive to the Congress. To paraphrase *Federalist* no. 71, executives are expected, ‘to dare to act [their] own opinion with vigor and decision.’ Wilson put it this way: “Crisis gives birth and a new growth to statesmanship because they are peculiarly periods of action . . . [and] also of unusual opportunity

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<sup>26</sup> See Richard Pious, *The American Presidency* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 41; See also Ruth and Stephen Grant, "The Madisonian Presidency," in Bessette and Tulis, eds. *The Presidency in the Constitutional Order* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 43-9.

for gaining leadership and a controlling and guiding influence. . .”<sup>27</sup> A then former President Thomas Jefferson would write in 1810:

The question you propose, whether circumstances do not sometimes occur, which make it a duty in officers of high trust, to assume authorities beyond the law, is easy of solution in principle, but sometimes embarrassing in practice. A strict observance of the written laws is doubtless one of the high duties of a good citizen, but it is *not* the highest. The laws of necessity, of self-preservation, of saving our country when in danger, are of higher obligation. To lose our country by a scrupulous adherence to written law would be to lose the law itself, with life, liberty property and all those who are enjoying them with us; thus absurdly sacrificing the end to the means.<sup>28</sup>

This sort of prophetic power, which places strong emphasis on the organic quality of political life, is enhanced by the absence of any formal internal check. In consciously rejecting a plural executive or one checked by an executive council, the framers ensured that the presidency would display the elements, they believed, best characterized any well-constructed executive office: "decision, activity, secrecy, and dispatch."<sup>29</sup>

### **3) Institutionalized Charisma**

To this point we have dealt with the dimensions of defining the prophetic paradigm in presidential terms. We now turn to an examination of the limits and hazards the role

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<sup>27</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "Cabinet Government in the United States," in Ray S. Baker and William E. Dodd, ed., *College and State*, vol 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1925), 34-5.

<sup>28</sup> Letter of Thomas Jefferson to John B. Colvin, quoted in Clinton Rossiter, *Constitutional Dictatorship: Crisis Government in Modern Democracies*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), ix.

<sup>29</sup> *Federalist* no. 70.

encompasses as an institutional practice. The prophetic tongue with which the American president speaks in his legitimizing role is powerful, emotional, and deeply evocative. Its' mutually reinforcing and balancing concepts of national identity and heroic leadership – of shared experience in memory, present trial, and hope – answer to the needs in the psychology of all Americans.

But compelling as it may be the fact remains that the concept of the heroic, charismatic, prophetic leader, is inherently unstable. Naturally given to taking those who would operate in its conceptual terms to furthest extremes, the record in the Bible of Hebrew leaders is on balance an unhappy one.<sup>30</sup> “Even presidents who are themselves of mild and pacific nature can get caught up in its demands for clarion call to exalted hopes.”<sup>31</sup> When crisis looms, presidents must step forward with a mind set to undertake the work of the lord in the name of a people aroused in history. Speaking to the uncertainties of the 1920s, here is the conservative Calvin Coolidge (or “silent Cal”):

America seeks no earthly empire built on blood or force. No ambition, no temptation, lures her to thought of foreign dominations. The legions which she sends forth are armed not with sword, but with cross. The higher state to which she seeks the allegiance of all mankind is not of human but of divine origin. She cherishes no purposes save to merit the favor of Almighty God.<sup>32</sup>

The language of biblical prophecy is, however, narrow. To use it in its own terms and for

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<sup>30</sup> See Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 17-25. In short, as Heschel notes: “To be a prophet is both a distinction and an affliction. The mission he performs is distasteful to him and repugnant to others; no reward is promised him and no reward could temper its bitterness.”

<sup>31</sup> H. Mark Roelofs, “The Prophetic Presidency: Charisma in the American Political Tradition” Paper presented at the annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association 1991, pg.38

<sup>32</sup> Calvin Coolidge, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1925.

its own ends is no great difficulty. To translate it, to move from it to other grammars and vocabularies without loss of meaning, without profound moral compromise is virtually impossible. Yet this, given the general character of both the American political system and the international community, is what presidents are compelled to attempt in order to translate their legitimizing efforts into practical courses of political action. Many of the difficulties are lodged in the office's first responsibility and primary power: to inspire, focus and legitimize American enthusiasms. In the forceful words of one office holder, a president "has to take *hold* of America before he can move it forward. . . . He must articulate the nation's values, define its goals and marshal its will."<sup>33</sup>

In understanding the greatest strength of American people to be its communal vision of itself, incumbents come to hold that political consensus is possible in all realms, goals and methods. If there is a national purpose, if all Americans stand for the same values, all political discord and divisions can be resolved. Consensus for the prophetic hero comes to mean what he can convince the people to do. Lyndon Johnson pointedly defined consensus as "first deciding what needed to be done regardless of the political implications and, second, convincing a majority of the Congress and the American people of the necessity for doing those things."<sup>34</sup>

The process of confusing a consensus about ends with a consensus over means is the result of a truncated presidential perspective that centers on the prophetic hero's moral mindset. To be "the one man distillation of the American people" is an inherently difficult and dangerous claim. George Reedy eloquently describes the gravity of this prophetic disposition:

The presidential burden does not lie in the workload. It stems from the

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Nixon quoted in Stephan Ambrose, *Nixon: Triumph of a Politician, 1962-1972*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 354.

<sup>34</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 28.

crushing responsibility of political decisions, with life and death literally hanging in the balance for millions of people. A president is haunted every waking hour of his life by the fear that he has taken the wrong turn, selected the wrong course, issued the wrong orders. In the realm of political decision he can turn to no one for authoritative counsel. Only *he* is authoritative.<sup>35</sup>

Even the modest and unprepossessing Jimmy Carter was quoted in 1976 to the effect that, “the president is the only person who can speak with a clear voice to the American people and set a standard of ethics and morality, excellence and greatness.”<sup>36</sup> Two consequences flow from this centralization of political responsibility. The first is that presidents must not only be the genuine architects of U.S. policy, but they must approach the policy-making process with vigor. Here is Franklin Delano Roosevelt:

We do not distrust the future of essential democracy. The people of the United States have not failed. In their need they have registered a mandate that they want direct, vigorous action. They have asked for discipline and direction under leadership. They have made me the present instrument of their wishes. In the spirit of the gift I take it.<sup>37</sup>

George W. Bush put it this way: “If America is under attack, my job as the President is to protect the homeland, to find out the facts, and to deal with it in a firm way.”<sup>38</sup> Strong leaders do not tarry with indecision; they weigh the alternative, choose a line of action, and once committed to it, see it through to the end. Any change in course of action has to be resisted because it

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<sup>35</sup> George Reedy, *Twilight of the Presidency from Johnson to Reagan*, (New York: Mentor, 1987), 45.

<sup>36</sup> *National Journal*, August 7, 1976, pg. 993.

<sup>37</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933.

<sup>38</sup> George W. Bush, “Interview with Claus Kleber of *Ard*,” May 21, 2002.

implies error; and error implies incompetence and/or a lack of courage. From his April 30, 1970 address Nixon states, “Here I stand, I can do no other. . . . I would rather be a one-term President and do what I believe is right than to be a two-term President at the cost of seeing America become a second rate power.”<sup>39</sup> Here is George W. Bush two weeks before hostilities got under way in Iraq in 2003:

The risk of doing nothing, the risk of hoping that Saddam Hussein changes his mind and becomes a gentle soul, the risk that somehow – that will make the world safer is a risk I’m not willing to take for the American people . . . I think the threat is real. And so do a lot of other people in my government. And since I believe the threat is real, and since my most important job is to protect the security of the American people, that’s precisely what we’ll do.<sup>40</sup>

When asked, in his news conference of April 13, 2004, by a reporter to indicate his biggest mistake after September 11, Bush replied:

I wished you had given me this question ahead of time, so I could plan for it. John, I’m sure historians will look back and say, gosh, he could have done it better this way, or that way. You know, I just – I’m sure something will pop into my head here in the midst of this press conference, with all the pressures of trying to come up with an answer, but it hasn’t yet.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Richard Nixon, April 30, 1970 Address.

<sup>40</sup> George W. Bush, “Presidential Press Conference,” March 6, 2003.

<sup>41</sup> George W. Bush, “Presidential Press Conference,” April 13, 2004.

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The second consequence that flows from centralized responsibility is that incumbents, as Doris Kearns observed of one president, “are unable to foresee the possibility of resentment based, not on objections to [their] social goals or to the practicality of specific measures, but on hostility to the implicit assertion of increased central authority to define the general welfare and confer benevolences which, however desirable in themselves, should not be imposed by presidential will.”<sup>42</sup> The independent role of Congress is delegitimized. As Samuel Kernell has noted, this type of leadership “usurps [congressmembers’] prerogatives of office, denies their role as representatives and questions their claim to reflect the interests of their constituents.” At best Congress is reduced to being viewed as the handmaid of the president and at worst – should it be bent on doing its duty – an outright obstacle in the way of progress. When confronted with criticism for disregarding congressional advice and consent in ordering troops into Cambodia, Nixon’s administrative spokesman concluded: “It is not the proper posture for anyone to correct the President of the United States.”<sup>43</sup>

This situation is compounded by the fact that there is little in the root Hebrew tradition to give prophetic or charismatic leadership a rational, principled, and above all, restrained content. All too often content is to be filled by pure faith, love, anger, fear, daring, and exalted intuition. To be sure, combinations such as these make for high drama. They also make, as Roelofs reminds us, “for extremes of megalomania and paranoia, however disguised.”<sup>44</sup>

When Moses came down from the mountain and found the people worshipping the golden calf, his anger was kindled. He ground up the calf into powder, put it in water, and made the people drink it. More than that, he stood in the gate of the camp and said, “Who is on the

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<sup>42</sup> Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 180.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Stephen Ambrose, *Nixon: Triumph of a Politician, 1962-1972*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 369.

<sup>44</sup> H. Mark Roelofs, “The Prophetic Presidency: Charisma in the American Political Tradition” Paper presented at the annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association 1991, pg. 38

Lord's side? Come to me." He then made the sons of Levi go to and fro through the camp and slay every man his brother and every man his companion and every man his neighbor. Thousands fell (Exodus 32: 19-29). Is this what a modern critic would call a proportionate response – or vengeance of the lord?

In presidential terms, the lack of prophetic restraint creates an almost insidious mentality in situations threatening war. It tilts those possessed by it to prefer decisive, military solutions. Enemies are dehumanized, condemned not only for what they have done but also for being themselves evil. In a press conference the day after September 11, 2001, Bush said, "The deliberate and deadly attacks which were carried out yesterday against our country were more than acts of terror. They were acts of war . . . This will be a monumental struggle between good and evil. But good will prevail."<sup>45</sup> At the national prayer service at the Washington Cathedral, the President reiterated, "Our responsibility to history is already clear . . . to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil."<sup>46</sup> To the nation on September 20, 2001 Bush announced: "This is not . . . just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom."<sup>47</sup> Fortunately, there is no need to debate issues of right and wrong: "Moral truth" Bush told graduating West Point cadets in 2002, "is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place. . . . We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name."<sup>48</sup> So self-evident is the distinction between right and wrong that Bush expressed utter amazement that others did not see it that way:

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<sup>45</sup> George W. Bush, "Presidential Press Conference," September 12, 2001.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Stephen J. Wayne, "Presidential Decision Making," in *Readings in Presidential Politics*, ed. George Edwards, (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2006), 150.

<sup>47</sup> George W. Bush, "War on Terrorism Address," September 20, 2001.

<sup>48</sup> George W. Bush, "Address at West Point," June 1, 2002.

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I'm amazed that there is such misunderstanding of what our country is about, that people would hate us . . . like most Americans, I just can't believe it. Because I know how good we are. . . . We are fighting evil. And these murderers have hijacked a great religion in order to justify their evil deeds. And we cannot let it stand.<sup>49</sup>

So too did Dwight Eisenhower express amazement when faced with angry anti-American demonstrations in the Middle East. He wondered why it was so hard for “people in these down-trodden countries to like us instead of hating us.”<sup>50</sup> Of course, to imagine one's national self image in an exemplary manner, that its' values are universal is not unique to the United States. “Every nation-state” as Anders Stephanson notes, “lays some claim to uniqueness, and some nations or empires, historically, have even considered themselves Higher Authority the anointed focal point of world or universal history.”<sup>51</sup> [T]o lead the world” in the words of Woodrow Wilson, “in the assertion of the rights of peoples and the rights of free nations,”<sup>52</sup> leads, however, to a blatant disregard for the sovereignty or rights of others. Listen to the moral certainty couched in the Roosevelt Corollary of 1904:

All this country desires is to see the neighboring countries stable, orderly, and prosperous. Any country whose people conduct themselves well can count upon our heady friendship. If a nation shows that it knows how to act with reasonable efficiency and decency in social and political matters, if it keeps order and pays its obligations, it need fear no interference from

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<sup>49</sup> George W. Bush, “Presidential Press Conference,” September 16, 2001.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Mel Gurtov, *The Bush Doctrine in US Foreign Policy*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), 15.

<sup>51</sup> Anders, Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (Hill and Wang, 1995), xii.

<sup>52</sup> Woodrow Wilson, quoted in Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (Hill and Wang, 1995), 117.

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the United States. Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the U.S., however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power.<sup>53</sup>

By 1950 the pushing aside of state sovereignty would expand globally. Here is part of the National Security Council paper 68 – the document that would become the blueprint for the Cold War:

In a shrinking world, which now faces the threat of atomic warfare, it is not an adequate objective merely to seek to check the Kremlin design, for the absence of order among nations is becoming less and less tolerable. This fact imposes on us, in our own interests, the responsibility of world leadership. It demands that we make the attempt, accept the risks inherent in it, to bring about order and justice by means consistent with the principles of freedom and democracy. . . .

Even if there were no Soviet Union we would face the great problem of the free society, accentuated many fold in this industrial age, of reconciling order, security, the need for participation, with the requirements of freedom. We would face the fact that in a shrinking world

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<sup>53</sup> Theodore Roosevelt quoted in Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (Hill and Wang, 1995), 107.

the absence of order among nations is becoming less and less tolerable.<sup>54</sup>

Thus endowed with prophetic vision, Eisenhower would authorize a CIA operation to overthrow the Iranian leadership. Lyndon Johnson would worry that unless the Vietnamese communists were put in their place, revolutionaries everywhere would “sweep over the US and take what we have.”<sup>55</sup> Faced with the election of a socialist president of Chile in 1970, President Nixon would determine that the United States could not accept the result. It was irresponsible, so he reasoned, since Allende had been elected with only 36 percent of the vote in a three-way race. “Nor was Chile an isolated case: Under Operation Condor, Latin American dictators banded together to carry out political assassinations and torture of leftist and other opponents with knowledge and approval of US leaders.”<sup>56</sup> It is but a short step to the remarks of Richard Haass, a senior state department official, in 2002:

Sovereignty entails obligations. One is not to massacre your own people. Another is not to support terrorism in any way. If a government fails to meet these obligations, then it forfeits some of the normal advantages of sovereignty, including the right to be left alone in your own territory. Other governments, including the United States, gain the right to intervene. In the case of terrorism, this can even lead to a right of preventive, or preemptory, self-defense. You essentially can act in

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<sup>54</sup> S. Gleason, ed. *Foreign Relations of the United States 1950*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), 241, 263.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Mel Gurtov, *Super Power on Crusade: The Bush Doctrine in US Foreign Policy*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), 15.

<sup>56</sup> Mel Gurtov, *Super Power on Crusade: The Bush Doctrine in US Foreign Policy*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), 16.

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anticipation if you have grounds to think it's a question of when, and not if, you're going to be attacked.<sup>57</sup>

In his address to the nation on September 20, 2001, Bush would first make this ultimatum to Islamic fundamentalist Taliban government of Afghanistan: "Give the United States full access to terrorist training camps, so we can make sure they are no longer operating. These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion. The Taliban must act, and act immediately. They will hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate." The president would then go on in charismatic presentation to say:

We will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.<sup>58</sup>

From the perspective of Mosaic paradigm, American presidents must be unflinching and unyielding as they prove themselves and the nation worthy of the mantle of history. There can be no negotiations, surrender must be unconditional. In thinking about current U.S. actions it is important to not simply view them through the prism of political realism (e.g., that the U.S. is merely acting like a normal state that has achieved a position of dominance), or that it is an accident of history (e.g., that the new American stance was precipitated, if not caused by the

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<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Mel Gurtov, *Superpower on Crusade: The Bush Doctrine in US Foreign Policy*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), 41.

<sup>58</sup> George W. Bush, "War on Terrorism Address," September 20, 2001.

interaction between the terrorist attacks, the election of George W. Bush, and the influence of neoconservatives in the White House), or that there has always been both a strong pull and precedent in the direction of unilateralism.<sup>59</sup> What this paper has aimed to show is that the general principles and the institutional functioning of crisis government are, in Rossiter's phrase, "political and social dynamite." Whether the Bush doctrine will prove to be the most effective way to conduct the war on terror is not for us to say. It is, however, to bring the construction of presidential leadership, as it has been defined within the American political tradition, into question.

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<sup>59</sup> As Robert Jervis notes: "[I]t is almost a truism of the history of American Foreign relations that the United States rarely if ever engages in deeply cooperative ventures with equals." Robert Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine," in G. John Ikenberry, ed., *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005), 585.

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