Imperial Presidency: Overview Essay, Research Paper

Imperial Presidency: Overview

In his book, The Imperial Presidency, Arthur Schlesinger recounts the

rise of the presidency as it grew into the imperial, powerful position that it

is today. His writing reflects a belief that the presidency is becoming too

powerful and that very few people are making a real effort to stop it. He

analyzes the back and forth struggle for power between Congress and the

Presidency. Schlesinger breaks up the first half of the book chronologically. He

begins by discussing the areas concerning the presidency where the founding

fathers agreed and also the areas where they disagreed. He then goes on to

analyze the rise of the imperial presidency through war and recovery, with

emphasis on the events of the twentieth century. After the war in Vietnam,

Schlesinger divides the book based on the specific nature of the events that had

an impact on presidential power. He divides it based on domestic policy, foreign

policy, and the affairs that go on in secrecy.

Schlesinger provides an incredible amount of evidence to recount the ups

and downs of the imperial presidency. He provides a base for his argument with

an in-depth view of what the framers intended and how they set the stage for

development over the next two centuries. An issue that Schlesinger focuses on is

the presidents ability to make war. The decisions of the founders in this area

would have a huge impact on the power contained in the office of the president.

The consensus amongst the framers was that the president, as Commander in Chief,

had the ability to defend the United States and its interests, but the ability

to declare war was vested in the Congress. This decision set the stage for the

struggles between the president and congress. He also discussed the debate over

the power institutionalized in the presidency. At the time, there were two

schools of thought on the subject. Hamilton supported an active president, while

Jefferson argued in favor of a passive president. The final draft included a

compromise of the two theories. There was also some debate over the power of the

president versus the power of congress. Additionally, there was a compromise

made over this issue when writing the final draft. The spirit of compromise

amongst the founders was what provided a viable and secure base for the future

of the presidency.

After his discussion of the founders, Schlesinger shifts to the

president’s powers of war. He analyzes every war, excluding the Revolution, that

the United States has participated in up to and including the war in Vietnam. He

discusses the specifics of each scenario and the way in which the president

handles it. Schlesinger develops the slowly growing power of the presidency by

recounting the actions that the president carried out on his own as well as

those that required the consent of Congress to be accomplished. As time

progressed, Schlesinger made note of all the major events that increased and

decreased the power of the presidency. For example, he discusses the almost

dictatorial power of Lincoln during the Civil War and then the impeachment of

Andrew Johnson shortly thereafter. These are two events that are indicative of

the seesaw struggle between the presidency and Congress. Schlesinger goes on to

discuss additional examples of conflict between the presidency and Congress such

as the dominance of Congress during the late 1800’s, the annexation of Texas,

the Great Depression, W.W.II, the Korean War, and the war in Vietnam.

Schlesinger focuses a great deal of attention on the events of the

twentieth century, because, in part, this was when the power of the presidency

vaulted to the level that it currently maintains. The reason for this, in

addition to what the early presidents had done, was that the government was

growing fast and the role of the government was increasing. There were many gray

areas in which the president could extend his power. The power of the president

to make war as Commander in Chief is an example of a gray area where the

presidency was able to gain much power. Schlesinger discusses how the president

was able to gain power through the clause in the Constitution that gives the

president the power to mobilize the military, without the consent of Congress,

in the name of national defense. This clause allowed the president to deploy

forces around the world. The grayness of this area comes from the fact that what

one man may consider an act of defense, another man may consider to be an act of

aggression, and vice versa. Because of this, the presidency was able to gain a

leg up on Congress.

Schlesinger also discusses the actions taken within the inner sanctum of

the White House. His focus is on the presidents from FDR through Nixon. Many of

these men made many controversial decisions while in the oval office.

Schlesinger goes over these actions with a microscope. For instance, he

discusses the extreme secrecy and deception that Nixon practiced while in office.

He analyzes the specific actions of the administration, the reasons for the

actions, and the result of the actions. According to Schlesinger, the result of

Nixon’s extreme secrecy led him to be withdrawn from the rest of the country. He

eventually created his own reality within the White House. It was a self-

perceived reality where he could do whatever he wanted, right or wrong. This led

to a somber, macabre mood throughout the White House, and eventually led to

Nixon’s downfall. He goes over the administrations of the modern presidents with

a fine-toothed comb. He reviews their actions in reference to their specific

nature (i.e., internal policy and foreign policy). Schlesinger also spends a

chapter discussing the classified actions that only the officials in Washington

knew about. He reviews the covert actions throughout the history of the

presidency, not merely the twentieth century. Although, as is the case with most

other topic areas, he focuses on the modern presidents. The majority of these

secret actions involved either the CIA or the military. Even though we are

unaware that these actions are occurring, they have a big impact on both our

lives and the imperial power of the office of the presidency.

Methodology & Evidence: Imperial Presidency

Schlesinger proves his thesis by following American politics from the

founding fathers up through the Nixon administration. He recounts the major

political actions taken by the presidents over the first two-hundred years of

the United States. He shows how the presidency grew in power and stature by

reviewing the specifics of the actions of the individual presidents. Through

these actions, Schlesinger shows how the presidency gradually accumulated power.

He shows how the presidents wrestled power away from Congress bit by bit over

time. The reactions of Congress are analyzed as well as the rest of Washington,

and the general public. Schlesinger describes how the president gradually, over

time, began to make more and more decisions on his own, leaving Congress in the

dark. His incredible historical knowledge allows him to justify all his

arguments. He provides more than sufficient specific information on what was

really going on in Washington and the White House. It seems as though

Schlesinger knew the specifics and background of every major presidential

decision and treaty every made.

As he moves into the twentieth century, Schlesinger expresses the

opinion that the presidency is gaining too much power and that Congress has not

taken the necessary measures to prevent this. Schlesinger expresses disapproval

of the secrecy that presidents have been exercising and their practice of

circumventing Congress. He directs the most disapproval towards the Nixon

administration. He speaks of Nixon as the most secretive and the most

independent from Congress. The Nixon administration was characterized by the

sneakiness that Schlesinger most strongly disapproved of. Schlesinger does not

express his opinions outright, but infers them through the tone of his writing.

Presidential Power

In his book, Richard Neustadt discusses the quest for power and

influence that has become necessary for a modern president to be effective. He

believes that the constitution provides only for the president to be a clerk.

This is why it is necessary for a president to be thirsty for power to be

effective. There is very little power provided for the constitution. He has to

have the initiative to make things happen. The key to power, he believes, is

the ability to persuade people. Neustadt contends that the power of the

President is constantly in jeopardy, and that the ability to persuade is

necessary for the president not only to gain power, but to also maintain his

power. Also, Neustadt believes the president’s ability to influence people is

necessary to move the three branches of government into action. He says that

there are several necessary qualities that a president must have in order to

exert this influence. The president must be tenacious while also understanding

of others. If he wants to get anything done, he must be persistent, but it is

necessary that he listen to the opinions of others and use their suggestions. As

an aspect of his persistence, a president must be able to rebound from adversity.

Then, he will have the respect and confidence of the people.

Neustadt writes the book from the perspective of the general public

looking in from the outside. He shows much understanding of the presidency and

an awareness of the position the president is placed in. His great knowledge of

the presidency and his first hand experience with the institution provide him

with the basis for his argument. He contends that the presidency is not as

powerful as we think it is. In fact, he believes that an increase in

presidential power would be good for the country and is not to be feared. In

essence, he contends that presidents should strive for power and strive for it

on their own.

Conclusion

Schlesinger and Neustadt both have an incredible knowledge of the

history of American politics, and both have had first hand experience as counsel

to the president. Although, in their respective books, Schlesinger and Neustadt

express distinctly different opinions. Schlesinger is more wary of presidential

power than Neustadt. Neustadt believes that presidents should try to accumulate

as much power as possible for the good of the country. Schlesinger, on the other

hand, believes that the presidency has accumulated more than enough power, and

the other branches of government should take action to check the trend. Neustadt

believes that presidents gain power through good, hard work and persuasion.

Schlesinger writes that power is the result of sneakiness and boldness. In short,

Neustadt thought that an increase power would be positive, and Schlesinger

thought it would be a detriment.

Each author supported his argument by personifying it in a specific

president. Neustadt used FDR, while Schlesinger used Nixon. Neustadt felt that

FDR exemplified all the qualities necessary for an effective presidency. He was

vigorous, experienced, confident, and a sincere person. He was willing to do

what it took to get things done in the best interest of the country, and he did

it ethically. According to Schlesinger, Nixon was also willing to do whatever it

took to make things happen, but ethics were of little importance to him.

Schlesinger discussed how he gained his power by keeping Congress, the media,

and the public ignorant of his actions, legal and illegal. His sneaky,

underhanded ways were what led to his downfall. He had become too powerful. He

felt he could get away with anything.

Neither man is wrong. They just maintain different views. Neustadt

focused on the good things that have come from presidential power (FDR), while

Schlesinger pointed out the negative (Nixon). Although, each man’s argument is

not completely right. Neustadt displays a bit too much optimism. He does not

take in to account the abuses of power that are likely to happen if a president

becomes too powerful. He doesn’t consider the fact that not all presidents are

completely ethical. Schlesinger expresses a bit too much pessimism. This is a

result of the Johnson and Nixon administration. Schlesinger may have been

reacting to all the negative things that were coming out as a result of Vietnam

and Watergate. The Imperial Presidency was written at a time when political

efficacy was very low. Had Schlesinger written the book at any other time, he

probably wouldn’t have been that wary of an overly powerful president. If I had

to make a recommendation, I would endorse both. The seem to compliment each

other. Neustadt discusses how presidential power can improve the presidency and

the government, and enumerates the traits necessary to achieve it. Schlesinger

helps to warn us of the problems that can arise from too much power. Together,

they provide us with both sides of the argument.

Bibliography

Imperial Presidency

Arthur Schlesinger

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