

The Triumphs and Tragedies of a President's First Year

Much has been written about the ahistorical nature of Donald Trump, the first person elected president of the United States without ever serving in government or the military. Indeed, to anchor some of Trump's protectionist and populist positions in a historical context, political scientists and historians have reached back all the way to the mercantilism of eighteenth-century Europe, and the populism of President Andrew Jackson in early nineteenth-century America.

Despite his determination to challenge the orthodoxies of the current political system and international order, however, Trump has been unable to fully escape his

tory. The same powerful forces that both empowered and constrained his modern predecessors have shaped his administration's first year in office, for good and ill. Trump's triumphs have revealed familiar alignments of political actors and motivations, just as his tragedies have followed a recognizable script. As Mark Twain reputedly mused, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes."

The Center for the Study of the Presidency & Congress recently published the anthology *Triumphs & Tragedies of the Modern Presidency: Case Studies in Presidential Leadership*. In it we asked some of the top historians, journalists and political scientists in the country to search for and identify those rhymes and cadences of history. Our writers examined the first one hundred days of every post-World War II president, and looked at their domestic and foreign policy milestones that laid the foundation for the "American Century." These case studies offer important lessons in successful



presidential leadership, as well as pitfalls that any administration would do well to avoid.

A Quick Start

Virtually every president of the modern era has chafed at the “First One Hundred Days” as an artificial measuring stick, one set impossibly high by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933 at the height of the Great Depression, when he shepherded fifteen major new laws through a compliant Congress. And yet none of FDR’s predecessors have fully escaped the “hundred days” expectations game, in part because the liftoff phase is when new presidents and administrations are at their most aspirational, and thus revealing. The personalities and priorities illuminated in this early period of governing make an indelible first impression, giving the new administration a chance to develop a presidential narrative before the political winds inevitably shift.

The first hundred days are also when election headwinds are at their strongest, and mandates can be claimed and leveraged. A president’s party almost always loses congressional seats in midterm elections, for instance, making it imperative that a new administration starts strong. Lyndon B. Johnson, the master legislator and presidential arm twister who early on achieved one of the most transformative legislative agendas in modern history, described this phenomenon best.

“I keep hitting hard because I know this honeymoon won’t last. Every day I lose a little more political capital. That’s why we have to keep at it, never letting up,” Johnson said. “One day soon, I don’t know when, the critics and the snipers will move in and we will be at stalemate. [After a few months lawmakers will] all be thinking about their reelections. I’ll have made mistakes, my polls will be down, and they’ll be trying to put some distance between themselves and me.”

While every modern president confronts a different set of challenges, and their administrations must navigate specific economic, domestic, and geopolitical landscapes, one constant has been the increasing size and complexity of the U.S. government itself. As the country grew into its mantle as the leader of the Western democracies after World War II, becoming an undisputed superpower in the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, the apparatus of the federal government that presidents must manage necessarily grew in breadth and scope.

Modern presidents have to stock massive executive-

branch bureaucracies responsible for overseeing the largest economy in the world, and underwriting an international order that is largely dependent on the United States to enforce its rules and norms with a globe-spanning diplomatic corps and military. They have to appoint no fewer than fifteen Cabinet secretaries, and shepherd more than one thousand political appointees through an increasingly cumbersome vetting and confirmation process. Meanwhile, the average time required for Senate confirmation of a top-level political appointee has grown from less than three months

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during the Kennedy administration to roughly nine months in the twenty-first century.

New administrations also often overreact in distancing themselves from the previous administration, falling into avoidable mistakes. As George Mason political scientist and presidential scholar James Pfiffner writes in *Triumph & Tragedies*, John Kennedy overreacted against President Dwight Eisenhower’s seemingly cumbersome national security policy process by abolishing it, and the resulting lack of organization arguably led to the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961. President Jimmy Carter, reacting against the Watergate scandal and Nixon’s White House-centered administration, tried to initially run his presidency without a chief of staff; he soon realized this was impossible given the size of the modern White House.

The unexpected nature of Trump’s victory—and a controversial campaign that saw more than 120 Republican national security and foreign affairs experts sign “Never Trump” letters that led the Trump team to blacklist them—greatly complicated efforts to quickly stock the Trump administration with appointees. The Trump transition team simply had less time to prepare than more traditional campaigns, and less support from the establishment Republican bench.

The Trump team arguably got off to a good start by quickly naming former Republican National Committee chairman Reince Priebus as his chief of staff shortly after the election. By naming anti-establishment populist Steve

Bannon of *Breitbart News* notoriety as an apparently coequal White House counselor, however, Trump created competing power centers in the West Wing that often clashed in the early months of the administration, slowing the process of appointing personnel and muddling the policy agenda. The resulting chaos in the White House persisted into the summer until both Priebus and Bannon were ultimately exiled, and retired Marine Corps Gen. John Kelly, then head of the Department of Homeland Security, was brought in as chief of staff in late July to instill much needed discipline into the White House decision-making process. By most accounts he has succeeded in that mission.

Electoral Mandates

Presidents who win in landslides like Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson obviously have distinct advantages in their early going. As only the fourth president in U.S. history to win in the Electoral College only to lose the popular vote, Trump had a more limited mandate. Like FDR, LBJ and Barack Obama, however, his party has initially enjoyed majority control in Congress, though not a filibuster-proof majority in the Senate.

Trump took a page from the first hundred days of George W. Bush, who at the time of his election was the first president in a century to lose the popular vote. After the Supreme Court intervened to eventually swing the election his way, Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney rejected the idea of scaling back their ambitions given a razor-thin margin of victory. “To do so would show weakness from the start, the two reasoned,” Peter Baker, *New York Times* chief White House correspondent, writes in *Triumphs & Tragedies*.

Yet Trump has also stumbled into two of the most common mistakes made by new presidents: underestimating the power lawmakers have to delay or derail a presidential agenda, and failing to recognize the need to nurture good relations with key members of Congress. That has been especially true of chief executives who ran as Washington outsiders, such as Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, who chose not to even send a first-year domestic program to Congress; and Jimmy Carter, who after the Nixon impeachment rode an anti-Washington wave to the White House, and surrounded himself with aides from Georgia who often kept Congress at arm’s length.

The modern gold standard in congressional relations was once again Lyndon Johnson, the “Master of the Senate.” “It is almost impossible to overestimate how much LBJ benefited from having served in Congress for twenty-seven years, six years of which he spent as Majority Leader in the Senate,” the

noted historian Michael Beschloss writes in *Triumphs & Tragedies*. “Having witnessed numerous presidential failures with Congress, Johnson designed his programs from the ground up in concert with influential Members of Congress.”

As the classic outsider, Trump has wisely leaned heavily on vice president and former congressman Mike Pence to keep the channels of communication to Capitol Hill open and the Republican caucus united behind his agenda. After his frequent criticisms of fellow Republicans failed to unite a fractious Republican caucus behind his “repeal and replacement” of Obamacare, Trump wisely adjusted and relied on Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., and House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., to pass the year-ending GOP tax reform bill, the most far-reaching overhaul of the tax code in three decades.

Overloading Congressional Circuits

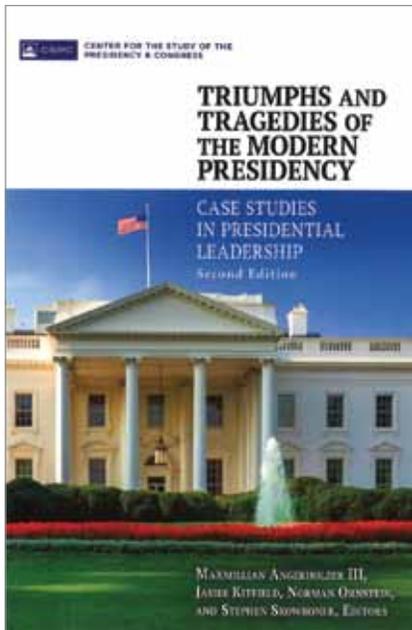
Another common mistake of new presidents is trying to ram through an overly ambitious agenda that trips circuit breakers on Capitol Hill. Jimmy Carter made that mistake by rapidly pushing a long list of proposals for specific new legislation, including bills on energy conservation, tax reform, hospital cost control and welfare reform, among many other initiatives.

Ronald Reagan learned from Carter’s mistakes. His transition team decided to focus on just a few major policy priorities. Reagan was also aided by a clearly articulated governing philosophy that was well understood by his team. “Reagan repeatedly pledged to cut taxes, boost military spending, and balance the federal budget by reducing domestic spending,” Lou Cannon, Reagan’s biographer, writes in *Triumphs & Tragedies*.

By contrast, Trump presented Congress with an agenda that would have been ambitious under any circumstances, leading with a controversial policy that united Democrats in opposition and for nine months consumed much of the energy on Capitol Hill: “repealing and replacing” Obamacare. Stacked up behind are Trump’s call for a massive \$1 trillion infrastructure bill, the “largest ever” buildup of the U.S. military, and funding for a controversial border wall. By following the lead of Congressional Republicans and focusing on a once-in-a-generation tax reform bill, however, Trump was able to notch an important legislative victory to seal his first year in office.

The Bully Pulpit & Crisis Management

In his continued ability to connect with the raucous crowds that represent his base, Trump follows in the tradition of



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modern presidents who have mastered the bully pulpit of the White House, whether it was Barack Obama’s soaring oratory, or the self-deprecating wit of former actor Ronald Reagan, “the great communicator.” In his unprecedented use of Twitter, Trump has also inhabited a new communications medium like no president since Franklin Roosevelt used radio and his “fireside chats” to connect directly with an anxious public, and the telegenic John F. Kennedy created the aura of “Camelot” at the dawn of the age of television.

As a direct conduit to Trump the provocateur, however, Twitter has proven a double-edged medium. Trump’s unfiltered Tweets help explain why he entered the Oval Office with the lowest approval rating of any modern American president, and has struggled to broaden his base of support or raise his poll numbers ever since.

Another narrative thread that runs consistently through the case studies in *Triumphs & Tragedies* is the testing of new presidents by crisis. Of course, many administrations are born of crisis. Franklin Roosevelt assumed power at the height of the Great Depression. Lyndon Johnson took the oath of office on Air Force One after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Gerald Ford’s ascension ended what he called the “long national nightmare” of Watergate and the Nixon impeachment. Barack Obama’s first weeks and months in the Oval Office were consumed by a global financial meltdown and the Great Recession. And then there were the presidents who inherited hot wars that demanded immediate attention and decisions with life-or-death conse-

quences, including Harry Truman (World War II), Dwight Eisenhower (the Korean War), Richard Nixon (Vietnam) and Barack Obama (Iraq and Afghanistan). For those who would lead “the indispensable nation,” crisis is always lurking just beyond the visible horizon.

Now it’s President Trump’s turn. In his first year in office Trump has already confronted an escalating crisis with a nuclear armed North Korea, and hot wars against Islamist extremists in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Confronted with those challenges, the retired and active-duty generals Trump has surrounded himself with have walked back some of the most controversial of Trump’s foreign policy pronouncements.

Trump initially called the United States’ bedrock security alliance NATO “obsolete,” and then decided it was not obsolete after all. He called for renegotiating the One China policy with Beijing, and promised to label it a currency manipulator, and then backed off on both fronts as China’s importance in the North Korean crisis became clearer. A threat to scuttle the NAFTA trade agreement with Mexico and Canada has been put on hold as of this writing.

These policy reversals can be viewed as welcome evidence of an outspoken candidate and inexperienced commander-in-chief maturing in the Oval Office, the world’s most unforgiving crucible. The history of the modern presidency suggests that there are plenty of triumphs, tragedies and hard lessons still to come. □