

## **Henry Jones Ford and the American Presidency**

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*The Rise and Growth of American Politics* provides a sweeping analysis of the American political system. In this short article, I will focus on Ford's understanding of the American presidency, showing how his thoughts presaged important orientations and foci of future presidential scholars and noting that, as influential as his work proved, he often got the story wrong.

### **View of the Presidency**

To the surprise of most readers of Ford's hundred-year-old masterwork, the presidency, since the time of Jackson, is portrayed as an *elected kingship* that had dominated public policy (293). Indeed, Ford argued, the president had become so strong that his party simply had to follow him. Impeachment was practically worthless and probably would never be used, and Congress could not use its appropriations power to stop the president's programs (288-289). The president could employ recess appointments to thwart the Senate (290), however, and he wielded a robust veto against Congress – much to the disappointment of the Founders (chap. 14).

A charitable commentator might characterize Ford's portrait of the American president as the result of a time-bound analysis that quite understandably lacked prescience about a rapidly changing society. More accurately, however, Ford's work reflects a fundamental misreading of American politics. Few present-day historians would conclude that the last two-thirds of the nineteenth century were characterized by

presidential dominance of the political system. Indeed, most observers view this period, Lincoln aside, as the period of weakest presidential leadership in the nation's history.

How could Ford have gotten the description so wrong? Perhaps because the standards of analysis were less rigorous in 1898 than in 1999. Ford's evidence of presidential dominance of public policy is presented in two paragraphs (279-282). Only one example is given to illustrate the argument that the president was so strong that party had to follow. Ford substituted assertions for systematic analysis. When addressing presidential relations with Congress, at the core of the president's dominance of government, Ford punted, proclaiming the operation of the presidential office in this respect had been "obscure" (279). At the same time he admits that the president often was ineffective in obtaining passage of his legislative initiatives. The reader has a right to be confused.

Whether or not his conclusions about the role of the presidency in American politics were correct, there is no question that Ford was content with the presidential dominance that he perceived. In this regard, he can be understood as a precursor of many commentators to come, most prominently Clinton Rossiter in *The American Presidency* (1956), who similarly emphasized the superiority of the presidency and the necessity of a strong president to successful governing. Indeed, making the strong president safe for the state was the "highest degree of constitutional morality" yet attained by any nation (293).

Like many political writers of his time, Ford had a strong reformist orientation. In his view, presidents needed to be powerful because only they could end party duplicity and define issues in such a way that public opinion could pass on them decisively (283). It is interesting to note that mid-twentieth century reformers in the APSA wanted to

strengthen government by strengthening parties, while Ford wanted to strengthen government by taming them.

A strong president was also essential because the separation of powers allowed Congress to avoid tackling difficult issues, which it did unless the president insisted on raising them. Only the president could deal with these issues; Congress required presidential leadership to act (283-284).

### **The Transformation of the Presidency**

According to Ford, the transformation of the presidency into a dominant institution was not sustained by the strength of prerogative powers but by the representative character of the presidency (chap. 15). The dominant president was the work of democracy. The development of executive authority was sustained by public sentiment because the executive had become an instrument of popular control. The convention system of nomination and the alteration in the role of the Electoral College had turned the presidency into a representative institution. The popular mandate recorded by the presidential election made the president the “organ of the will for the nation” (214).

This change in attitude of people toward the president decreased the importance of Congress. The House was reduced to a party agency, overthrown by the democratic revolution. Parties had to seek their fulfillment through the president.

In offering this analysis, Ford laid the foundation for two important intellectual traditions in the study of the presidency. For decades following Ford’s work, scholars, most notably Edward S. Corwin (1957), emphasized the president’s formal powers. At

the same time, Ford's emphasis on moving beyond presidential prerogatives in analyzing the presidency presaged Richard Neustadt's classic *Presidential Power* (1990).

Also to be found in Ford's work is an emphasis on the plebiscitary presidency, a forerunner of the much more modern emphasis on the public presidency (see, e.g., Edwards 1983; Kernell 1986; Lowi 1985). It is provocative that Ford saw a plebiscitary presidency sometime *before* the era of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, contrary to the findings of Tulis (1987). Moreover, Ford concluded that the public presidency developed as a result of the strength of party, which diminished the importance of Congress, whereas Kernell (1986) argued that the public presidency resulted from the failure of party to provide an alternative base of power.

Ford was an analyst and, as such, was interested in explaining why the presidency had been transformed into an instrument of popular control. In his explanation, however, there is an almost Marxist-like quality to his emphasis on the inevitability of this change. It was *inevitable* that the people would control the executive and use it as an agent of their will (chap. 17). The president was the most convenient instrument of democratic progress; the extension of executive government was the only practical method of advancing popular rule. The president simply had to be the leader of Congress. Today's reader might find this predestination a bit naïve.

In the end, Ford's work reflects insight and innocence, perception and misunderstanding. Perhaps scholarship has not changed that much after all.