

6-25-2004

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### ScholarWorks Citation

Jordan, Marc, "At Harvard, Studying the Presidents" (2004). *Features*. 97.  
<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/features/97>

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## At Harvard, Studying the Presidents

By Marc Jordan

Following my acceptance into the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, I had to overcome feelings of intimidation. It was Harvard, the institution that conferred degrees to thirteen American presidents. From General George Washington to John F. Kennedy, Harvard has trained and/or honored the best and the brightest leaders. The attitude toward political leadership promoted by the university is simple, and in 1929 Franklin Delano Roosevelt touched on it at a Harvard commencement: "I do not mean for a moment that taking an interest in public service is a life task or a profession. It is rather an avocation which should be entered into by every man as a part, great or small, of his daily life." It was this philosophy of wide-spread participation -- which should be ingrained in every American citizen, and not simply intellectual curiosity -- that led me to the study of government, and more specifically presidential leadership, at Harvard University. The American presidency has always fascinated me. In my youth I witnessed Ronald Reagan consoling a nation after the tragic explosion of the space shuttle Challenger. I realized then the need for strong and compassionate leadership. I also realized my passion to emulate such leaders. Many questions began to form in my mind. How did those individuals get to the pinnacle of governmental leadership, the American presidency? Were their formative years different from those of most American youth? Were they better read or educated differently? These questions and others piqued my interest and ignited a passion to learn just what made them successful enough to attain political prominence. I began to read and study the lives of these men. I traveled to presidential homes, libraries, and significant places where pieces of presidential history had been uncovered. At Michigan State University I studied political science with an emphasis on the American presidency, and upon completion of my undergraduate work, I turned my attention to the law. I thought that the mastery of law and our legal system would help me better understand the role of the American president in our system of government; after all, twenty-five of our forty-two presidents were lawyers. I thought a legal background was essential to understanding the creation of legislation and effective policy. My legal studies pushed my curiosity further. I left law school confident in its practice but not one step closer to understanding how men became presidents.



Marc Jordan

So I applied to Harvard. I wanted the opportunity to study government and the American presidency. There are few places better equipped to study the subject than the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. The resources available to students are top notch. It is not, however, only academic resources that make the experience so memorable and educational; it is the complete package, the environment in which students are immersed. Upon reflection, there are three specific areas that made studying the American presidency so worthwhile: the academics, the many lecture series that the university presented, and the students themselves.

The academic rigors of Harvard live up to their reputation. The caliber of the professors at the podium is amazing. Each has served at the highest levels of government. They are former high-level aides to the president, secretaries of one agency or another, and elected officials such as congressmen. Having held these types of positions has given each of the professors unique insights into the different presidents with whom they have worked, as well as an in-depth understanding of what the presidency is about. It is difficult not to be impressed with a professor who has served, worked with, and advised six or seven presidents in some capacity or another, and who has been a regular commentator on numerous national news programs.

Two professors in particular, Roger Porter and David Gergen, not only increased my academic understanding of the American presidency, but changed my life. Professor Porter served for more than a decade in senior economic policy positions in the White House, most recently as assistant to President George H. W. Bush for economic and domestic policy from 1989-93. He served as director of the White House Office of Policy Development in the Reagan administration and as executive secretary of the president's economic policy board during the Ford administration. His course on the American presidency delved into theories and practical reasons for how our leaders acted, learned, adapted, and made executive decisions that impacted our country.

The course began with an historical overview of the office, and then moved into presidential campaigning and what it takes to become the president of the United States. The course focused for the remainder of the term on presidential leadership. We discussed the president's interaction with Congress, the courts, and -- most importantly to Professor Porter -- the interaction between the president and his staff. Special emphasis was placed on the impact of the president's decision making on the shape of his administration's policies. We learned that "a good decision-making process cannot guarantee good or wise decisions," but also that the president's decisions on a particular issue can dramatically affect the outcome of other issues he faces. And so it is important to focus on the president's ability to organize and structure his decision making process. The three organizational models of presidential leadership and decision making introduced by Professor Porter were "ad hococracy," centralized management, and multiple advocacy.

The ad hococracy approach relies heavily on the president to distribute assignments and determine the agenda. This approach, according to Professor Porter, "minimizes reliance on regularized and systematic patterns of providing advice...." Professor Porter noted that Franklin D. Roosevelt's ad hococracy resulted in a chaotic administration: "He dispensed conflicting assignments almost at random with no individual and little institutional machinery to pick up the pieces." Although Professor Porter believes ad hococracy is used less often today, it remains an attractive method to many presidents, because it conveys the image of a president personally in command. This partially explains why presidential task forces and committees proliferate under this style of leadership.

Under the centralized management model, the president centralizes his management style and relies heavily on the White House and the Executive Office to filter ideas, proposals, and recommendations of departments, agencies, and bureaus before they go to the president.

The third model, multiple advocacy, is designed to expose the president to competing viewpoints rather than filtering them through the staff. This model allows the president to meet with advocates, hear their issues and arguments, and make appropriate decisions based on the information.

In most of the courses I have taken on the presidency, these theories were presented with a few examples and then reiterated for an examination. In Professor Porter's class, however, we learned that there was more to presidential leadership than any one theory can capture. In many cases the president must balance all three facets simultaneously to be successful. We wrote on events in which our president had to use all three leadership models, and we created our own models for presidential leadership. In my thesis I dealt with the conflict between unrealistic promises made by presidential candidates and the realities of the presidency. There has never been, after all, a candidate who has run on the slogan, "I am going to raise taxes and go to war." Once in office the realities of leading a nation set in and promises to constituency groups come into question. Does the president try to do all the things he said he would do? Does he champion a few issues and depend on their successes or failures? My work and the classroom experience brought to light a different and sometimes difficult aspect of the presidency: having to govern once elected.

Professor David Gergen's course on political leadership "through the eyes of the American president," was another fascinating course. Over the past three decades, Professor Gergen served as a White House advisor to four presidents: Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and Clinton. In the fall of 2000 he published a best-seller, *Eyewitness to Power: The Essence of Leadership, Nixon to Clinton*. He argues that oftentimes when we study successful leadership in America, we turn to entrepreneurs or business leaders who have changed American life. But the true symbol of leadership can be found in the American president. Professor Gergen's book focused on seven lessons of leadership through the eyes of the president, all of which were addressed in his course.

First, we learned that leadership starts from within. Gergen described how character heavily influences decision making: "Ford's pardon of Nixon grew out of his own decency. Reagan showed us the degree to which personality shapes rhetoric as well as the ability of a president to work with Congress and the press." Gergen who described two brilliant presidents, Nixon and Clinton, who were the authors of their own demise: "Nixon let his demons gain ascendancy, and Clinton could not put the fault lines in his character. They were living proof that before mastering the world, a leader must achieve self mastery. Or as Heraclitus put it more succinctly, character is destiny."

Gergen's second aspect of leadership is that one must have the "fire in the belly," or a compelling purpose. A president must know where he is headed and tell the country that it is the direction we must go: "Lincoln's purpose was to save the Union, FDR's to end the Depression and then to win a war." He taught us that when you look back over the past presidents, you should be able to say in a single sentence what they stood for and what they were all about.

The third lesson in leadership is that a leader must have the capacity to persuade. Through much of American history, the president really only had to influence Congress. Now, however, with the onslaught of modern media, it is important for a leader to bring the public along to his policies as well. To show this change even within the modern presidency, Professor Gergen states that "George Bush actually gave more public talks per year than Reagan, and Clinton has delivered more than both of them combined."

The fourth aspect of leadership is the ability to work well within the system. Today, many believe that it is only necessary to persuade public opinion -- to get them in your corner -- to be successful. Gergen said that it is "surprising how often this lesson has been lost." Presidents Nixon, Carter, and Clinton seemed to thumb their noses at institutions like Congress, while others found more success working with these institutions. This is exemplified, according to Gergen, by "FDR's success in the New Deal, Harry Truman's passage of the Marshall Plan, LBJ's victories in the civil rights bills of 1964 and 1965, and Reagan's passage of his economic program."

The fifth aspect of good leadership is a quick start. Gergen noted that "in most institutions, the power of a leader grows over time.... The president is just the opposite; power tends to evaporate quickly." While a CEO or a university president gains stature over many successful years of administration, the president of the United States must have this stature from the start. Professor Gergen stated that "FDR, LBJ and Reagan knew how to pull the levers of power before they got to the White House; Carter and Clinton had to learn on the job.... By giving the voters a clear sense of what they wanted to do in office, LBJ in 1964, and Reagan in 1980 both won mandates that greatly strengthened their hands in the months that followed."

Strong and prudent advisors were the sixth quality we looked at in the course. It is imperative that the president be surrounded with people he knows and trusts. Professor Gergen pointed to George Washington preparing for his third annual message to Congress. He took suggestions from James Madison and Thomas Jefferson and then asked Alexander Hamilton to draw up the first draft, which went back to Madison for a rewrite. As Professor Gergen said, "The Washington experience underscores repeated lessons from presidential history. The best presidents are the ones who surround themselves with the best advisors."

Finally, we ended the course studying how a strong leader inspires others to carry on the mission. We discussed presidential legacy and what presidents have left from the past that we still pursue today. Gergen suggests that Reagan accomplished this best: "While he never built a coalition to match FDR's, he put a stamp upon his party and upon the nation's political culture that shapes it still." President Reagan also came into office fixed on decentralizing government and instilling in America the idea of entrepreneurialism which, in theory, currently remains strong. In the context of the seven aspects of leadership, we were able to study almost all of our presidents. I was able to take Gergen's lessons and apply them to our presidents in insightful ways.

Another tremendous benefit at Harvard are the many lectures that the university hosts. These forums create an environment of dialogue and learning that are so rich that they are a regular and much anticipated facet of the academic experience. On an almost daily basis there is someone at the school to lecture on government in some form or another. Many of these lectures focus on the challenges of the various presidents and are given by high ranking officials from across the political spectrum. I personally heard individuals lecture from each administration since Eisenhower's. There were, however, a few forum events in particular that were quite memorable.

The first event that left a lasting impression on me was a visit by former first lady Barbara Bush. At the beginning of her remarks, she described her experience of being married to the president of the United States. She was then asked a couple of questions to which her answers were quite revealing. A young lady asked whether or not she considered herself a feminist. Barbara Bush responded by laughing and saying that she was 77 years old and, quite frankly, she did not even know what a feminist was. Another question posed to her was how she dealt with issues on which she disagreed with her husband while he was president. She responded by saying that when she was raised, it was important to honor and respect the husband. And since the American people elected her husband president, and not her, the opinions she held on particular issues were not important, publicly. She concluded her talk by describing how she and President George H. W. Bush raised the current president. She spoke of family values and instilling an ethic of hard work. Barbara Bush's lecture gave an inside perspective on the making of a president and how through the love of family and hard work the Bush family has been successful.

David McCullough also visited the forum to discuss his research and share with us his Pulitzer Prize-winning book on our second president, John Adams. I was fascinated by the amount of time and research Mr. McCullough put into this wonderful work. The comment he made during this series that I found to be most interesting was how he started out wanting to write on President Thomas Jefferson. After delving into much research and reflection on Jefferson, he explained that he could not write a book on someone he did not have high regard for. Instead, through his research, the greatness of President John Adams continually appeared. McCullough went on to say that after the founders set about establishing a nation, Adams was thrust into the presidency. He was the first president that actually had to run the newly established nation and he did a magnificent job.

Perhaps the forum event that left the biggest impression on me came on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis. We had the honor to sit in a room with Robert McNamara, defense secretary for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, and Ted Sorensen, longtime friend of President Kennedy as well as his special counsel and advisor. The event started off as a brief lecture on the Cuban Missile Crisis, then culminated in a question-and-answer session. One question posed to Ted Sorensen was about the origin of the famous one-liners in Kennedy's speeches, for example, the phrase, "ask not what your country can do for you -- ask what you can do for your country." Since he was Kennedy's speech writer, and therefore had special knowledge of the composition of each speech, had such one-liners been generated by Sorensen or by Kennedy himself? Ted Sorensen replied that everywhere he travels he is asked this question and his response is always the same: "Ask not!" After the lecture, the forum played the movie "13 Days," a modern-day Hollywood version of the events that took place during the Cuban Missile Crisis. As the movie played, Sorensen stopped the tape and interjected his recollection of what really happened during each scene. It was amazing that someone who sat in the room of the White House during these scary moments was now sitting with us describing how Hollywood got it wrong and how events really unfolded.

Finally, I would just add that in many cases the students themselves made studying the presidency at Harvard such a unique experience. I was fortunate enough to study and debate with students from all over the country and the world. Their diverse education and career backgrounds added incredible insights to classroom discussion and pushed us to really think about the many perspectives on each subject. We had former White House fellows, top military officials, and students from high levels of government in countries such as France, Germany, Turkey, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

While I was at Harvard, the United States was on the brink of war with Iraq. The debates about presidential leadership and President Bush's decisions in foreign affairs made for an enlightening learning environment. There were heated debates generated by many of the students who lived outside the United States, many of whom did not agree with our president. Looking back over the experience, I realize how fortunate I was to have sat in a room with an aide to French Premier Jacques Chirac and a governmental official from Germany, discussing the American presidency and the role of the United States in the world. What other place could I engage in such rich discussion? It was an amazing experience, an outstanding challenge, and a wonderful way to broaden my views on the American presidency.

No matter how many presidential homes or libraries I visited growing up, and regardless of the number of biographies and scholarly works I read on the American presidency, I never thought I would realize the dream of studying the presidency at Harvard. The experience did not satisfy my curiosity, but it gave me the tools I needed to evaluate for myself the essence of presidential leadership. Later, after leaving Cambridge and having time to reflect on my experiences, both educationally and culturally, I found the study of the American presidency at Harvard to be nothing short of transforming.

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