



Prometheus for President (Or The Myth of an All-powerful President Lives On)

I am not inclined to rush to the library or bookstore to find and read the latest bestseller or new release, like *Deciding Points* by former President George W. Bush. I like the old bestsellers and even an occasional old worstseller. Yesterday was the date on which, 50 years ago, Sen. John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts was elected President of the United States. So I picked up off the living room floor a copy of Theodore H. White's bestseller of 1961, *The Making of the President, 1960*.



It was considered groundbreaking journalism at the time, since it went behind the scenes to look at the candidates and campaigns with a greater depth and continuity than the readers of 1960 got from their daily newspapers and their 15-minute TV newscasts each evening.

White began at the beginning of the end, the midnight voting at Hart's Location, New Hampshire on November 8, 1960. Then he went back to the "first stirrings" on the primary trail in an election campaign far more compressed than the endless marathons that today's voters know, with presidential hopefuls visiting Iowa and New Hampshire more than two years before the quadrennial November balloting.

Blessed is the reader who finds a book that lets him know on the first page that he has found a gem or has stumbled into a world of misrepresentation. In White's book, one could find evidence of both. But something White said on page one leaped out at me, all the more for the fact that he said it matter-of-factly, as something we all know but seldom recall. Because a presidential election, even an extremely close one like the contest between Kennedy and Vice President Richard Nixon, can seem rather humdrum as the grinding campaign blurs the distinctions between the candidates until, as George Will wrote in 2004, you could scarcely fit a Kleenex between President Bush's policy on Iraq and what Sen. John Kerry was advocating. Or, as William F. Buckley, Jr. said of the overhyped Kennedy-Nixon debates, they were like a debate between the Smith Brothers over cough drops.

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The White statement that I found jarring was this one, describing how the bits and pieces of the big decision, cast in secret ballots all over a country a continent wide, produces a momentous decision:

What results from the fitting together of these secrets is, of course, the most awesome transfer of power in the world — the power to marshal and mobilize, the power to send men to kill or be killed, the power to tax and destroy, the power to create and the responsibility to do so, the power to guide and the responsibility to heal — all committed into the hands of one man.

One can easily imagine millions of adults, including countless college professors and high-school civics teachers, nodding in agreement while reading that description of the awesome power and responsibility we place every fourth year in the hands of the one we choose to be President of the United States. And



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on November 9, 2010

one also might imagine the terribly important question that is so seldom asked: *Since when?*

When did We the People decide to place all that power into the hands of a single ruler? Such a description would no doubt have left the Founders of this blessed Republic, the Framers of our Constitution, slackjawed in amazement and tearful in despair. Did they fight a war for independence and build a great Republic to perpetuate a monarchy after all? How did we allow the presidency to expand to fill and fit White's remarkable description?

It would be hard to imagine a phrase more alarming to the Founders and more antithetical to the meaning and architecture of the Constitution than "into the hands of one man." That's not exactly what was meant by *e pluribus unum*. Yet the One People that have inherited our legacy of freedom seldom question this grandiose vision of the President. Oh, occasionally we get ticked off over something like Nixon's Praetorian Guard, and we get all syrupy sentimental over a President who carries his own suitcase into the White House and addresses the nation wearing a cardigan sweater. Occasionally someone will write a book about *The Imperial Presidency*, but our interest in that sort of thing seldom lasts. We expect the President to be a potentate and an inspirational leader and a teacher and healer and a father or grandfather figure to us all.

Fifty years ago we might never have imagined the President of the United States standing before a joint session of Congress and advising Americans, as George W. Bush did after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, to "hug your children." Can you imagine President Eisenhower saying that? President Kennedy might have believed the American people knew whom to hug and when and where to refrain from embraces, even if he did not. Could you imagine either Mamie Eisenhower or Jacqueline Kennedy telling the nation, as Hillary Clinton did in 1996, that along with the "whole village," it takes her husband in the White House to ensure the proper raising of your child?

Our President-worship is not unrelated to our celebrity-worship, and the two shall be as one if we ever take complete leave of our senses and put Oprah in the Oval Office. What better forum from which to instruct the nation on what we should be reading. We could even call it the pulp-fiction pulpit.

"Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country," John F. Kennedy said a few short weeks before presenting to the Congress of the United States a laundry list of things my country could and should do for me. Kennedy was our first and thus far only Catholic to become President, but he probably had not read *Rerum Novarum* and subsequent papal encyclicals that enunciated the principle of subsidiarity, by which the organizations closest to the people should provide, to the extent possible, whatever services and assistance are needed. Worse, he gave no evidence of even a casual acquaintance with the principle of federalism that permeates the Constitution he had sworn to "preserve, protect and defend, so help me, God." Was Kennedy taking the name of the Lord in vain? Have other Presidents done the same when they repeated the same solemn oath?

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