

Principalities & Powers

by Samuel Francis

The presidential games of 1992 are well more than a year away, but would-be Republican gladiators are already measuring George Bush for a quick thrust in the belly. Their plans may be premature. Though the President came close to wrecking his party by breaking his promise against new taxes and may yet make a fool of himself and his country abroad, he is no more seriously wounded than Ronald Reagan was in 1982 at a corresponding low point in his own presidency. Nevertheless, whatever happens between now and the moment when the political swordplay begins, the games these days seem to produce little more than yawns from the bored and largely passive citizen-spectators. Barely 50 percent of qualified voters bothered to cast ballots in 1988, and the illusion that it really matters who sits in the White House is gradually dissipating.

One reason for the indifference to which slicko is crowned as the nation's chief executive is that the *de jure* office of the American presidency has become about as effective an instrument of power as Roseanne Barr would be on a basketball court. Swollen far beyond its natural proportions by a century's steady diet of the political equivalent of double cheeseburgers and hot fudge sundaes, the presidency today no longer consists of the individual who sits in the Oval Office and who spends most of his day in harmless ceremonial. Today the presidency in fact is composed of pretty much the same sort of invisible munchkins who manage the corporate economy and the labyrinthine caverns of the dominant culture.

It is they, and not the occupants of formal office or the legal owners of corporate stock, who determine how, when, and in what direction the obese apparatus of power and wealth will waddle. The man in the grey flannel White House today confines most of his labors to munching cookies with visiting dignitaries, supervising Cabinet klatches, making periodic forays into the wilderness beyond the White House gates to receive honorary doctorates, and threatening foreign tyrants with visitations of globalist brimstone if

they don't forthwith release whatever Yanks have been foolish enough to wander into their precincts. There is no doubt that the chief executive still performs such meaningless rituals of state, but the irrelevance of the President to real power emerges clearly whenever word of an Important Decision leaks out.

A Cabinet secretary is fired, a Supreme Court justice nominated, a treaty concluded, a law proposed, or a war begun, and no one, from the humblest chimney sweep to the most plugged-in pundit in Georgetown, ever imagines that the President had anything to do with it. Maybe it was the White House chief of staff, the secretary of state, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the First Lady, the President's pollsters, the President's astrologer, or one or another of the castrated intellectuals who decorate the White House court who actually had the idea and guided it through the paper-clip jungle to the President's desk. But nobody thinks that the President himself conceived the idea, planned the strategy, or performed the work that made the decision real.

Of course, that doesn't mean he escapes the blame if the act of statecraft blows up in his and the nation's face. One real function the President still retains is to serve as national scapegoat for the crimes, failures, weaknesses, and follies of the executive bureaucracy. The contemporary President of the United States does not resemble an emperor of Rome in its last days so much as he does one of the "divine kings" that the anthropologist James George Frazer wrote about. Chosen by the local priesthood to reign for a year of splendor and indulgence in every known human appetite, the holy monarch would eventually be pitched into a volcano or have his entrails ripped out to divert the wrath of whatever vengeful gods the Third World of antiquity adored. But of course, during his year of opulence, there was never any question of letting his divine majesty actually run things. His only function was to vegetate in sacerdotal luxury until the dread day of atonement fell.

The engorgement of the American presidency by the managerial priest-

hood of the executive branch means that it has ceased to make much practical difference which individual or party holds the office. A new President may bring new lapdogs to court and his wife may order new wallpaper for the White House bathrooms, but the real rulers, invisible and immovable, never even flutter their eyelids when the body politic twitches in the quadrennial presidential election.

It follows that conservatives, who have dreamed and drooled at the prospect of placing one of their own in the Oval Office ever since Herbert Hoover was defenestrated, ought to find better things to do with themselves. In 1980 they actually thought their millennium had arrived, and indeed Mr. Reagan was about as reasonable a facsimile of the conservative ideal as the political chemistry of the late 20th century could brew. But, while Mr. Reagan occasionally voiced inspiring sentiments, made a few good appointments, and even presided over an at least temporary economic recovery, not even the Gipper succeeded in staying the course of governmental enlargement. When he left office, the Department of Education was even bigger than when he entered, despite his promise to abolish both it and the Energy Department, and he even added an entirely new appendage in the form of the Department of Veterans Affairs to the already bloated federal trunk.

Yet the presidency throughout American history has always served as the spearhead by which a new elite has broken through the intermediary institutions in which an old elite is lodged. In the First Republic of the early 19th century, the main social conflict was between, on the one hand, northern commercial and industrial interests that sought to use the federal government to help fill their own pockets and "develop" the rest of the country and, on the other, Southern agrarian interests, which, to be sure, made use of Washington to protect slavery as much as possible through the Constitution and the Fugitive Slave Law but in general had every reason to keep centralized power as limited as possible. Once the representatives of the South-

ern interests had seceded in 1861, their rivals in the north saw their opportunity and grabbed it.

Lincoln's presidency (and perhaps Secretary of War Edwin Stanton as much as the President himself) served as the icepick that broke through the crystallized institutions of the First Republic and allowed the waters of an emerging bourgeois elite to flow toward political, economic, and cultural control. Once the bourgeoisie had won, it had little use for an expanded presidency, and it ruled largely through its own intermediary institutions in Congress, the local jurisdictions that controlled Congress, and the informal, decentralized, and private apparatus that the elite constructed in small towns, private corporations, and state and local governments across the country.

The corruption and incompetence that ensued from bourgeois dominance is known to every schoolboy, though somehow the connection between the excesses of the Gilded Age and the crushing of the South is never noticed. In any case, by the early 20th century, a new elite of rising technocratic and managerial forces was challenging the bourgeois order and making use of Progressivist ideology to discredit bourgeois institutions.

Of course, they saw in the presidency a convenient instrument by which they could centralize power and undermine the hegemony of their bourgeois rivals. Progressivist ideologues like the *New Republic's* Herbert Croly looked on the Lincoln presidency as a

model for their own revolution, and with the two Roosevelts and Woodrow Wilson they succeeded in entrenching themselves in the vast regulatory woodwork of the executive branch that they built. A half century later the dominant managerial class is still there and is still dependent on the imperial presidency, and, like the bourgeois elite that it displaced, has also become corrupt, self-serving, incompetent, and oligarchic.

For a brief moment in the 1970's it looked as though its power was being effectively challenged by yet another rising social force of Middle Americans, and both Richard Nixon's "New American Majority" and the "New Right" of the later part of the decade seemed about to oust the incumbent managerial elite. In the first half of the Reagan presidency, however, it became clear that it wouldn't happen. It couldn't happen then, for two reasons.

First, Mr. Reagan and his supporters never developed an alternative base of cultural power by which they could legitimize their efforts. They did not do so mainly because they never understood clearly what they represented — not a clean-up squad sent in to mop up the mess left by Jimmy Carter but a new set of engineers and architects who were supposed to tear down the old structure and build anew. Hence, Mr. Reagan and most of his advisers, wordsmiths, and satellites continued to justify their policies in terms acceptable to the dominant culture and the interests it serves. Mr. Reagan continually invoked Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, and the supply-side proselytizers and resident anticommunists were always summoning from the vast deep the spirits of John F. Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey, and Henry Jackson, while everyone rushed to prostrate himself before the chief deity of the liberal pantheon, the Divine Doctor himself, Martin Luther King, Jr. The Reagan administration presented itself simply as a corrective to liberal errors in navigation, not as a new ship charting a new course. In the end, the Middle American radicalism to which Mr. Reagan had appealed in his early political career and in his 1980 campaign proved to be too immature, too poorly understood by the Gipperites, and too lacking in an independent cultural and political consciousness to serve as the

chart by which the new course could be planned.

Secondly, any effort to raise Middle American consciousness for a new cultural identity and a power base resting on it was thwarted by the manipulative genius of the incumbent elite. By inserting cultural managers like William Bennett into the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Education Department, by placing corporate mandarins like Donald Regan and George Shultz in charge of economic and foreign policy, by letting George Bush and his friends wield more influence than they had a right to, and by relying on such silver-throated men of the people as Howard Baker and Robert Dole to run the Senate for him, Mr. Reagan ensured that nothing he did would ever seriously threaten the foundations of the ruling groups he had campaigned against. His chosen lieutenants and the bureaucratic morlocks who labored beneath the surface of visible politics simply aborted any inclinations to radical action that might have stirred in the administration's womb.

The emasculation of the Reagan presidency before it ever reached political puberty was, in retrospect, predictable. The underlying radical impulses of Reaganism were simply too embryonic to be able to take and exercise power. Nor, for all the disenchantment with George Bush and his court, have they grown up very much since Mr. Reagan departed.

In effect, what this means is that genuinely radical conservative forces cannot expect to accomplish much simply by winning the White House. Political power in the absence of an alternative social and cultural power base will inevitably be swallowed by the forces that remain dominant in society and culture and that are particularly dense in the presidency, the institutional heart of the regime. If the right really wants to win power, it will have to create that kind of counterculture before it can expect to gain much from electoral glad-handing and horse-trading. Once it does so and is willing to mobilize its countercultural base against the incumbent elite and its institutional loci of power, it will find the presidency the natural instrument for a new Middle American revolution. ◊

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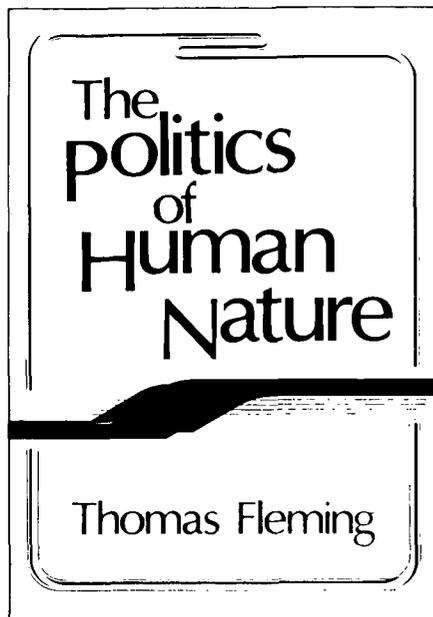
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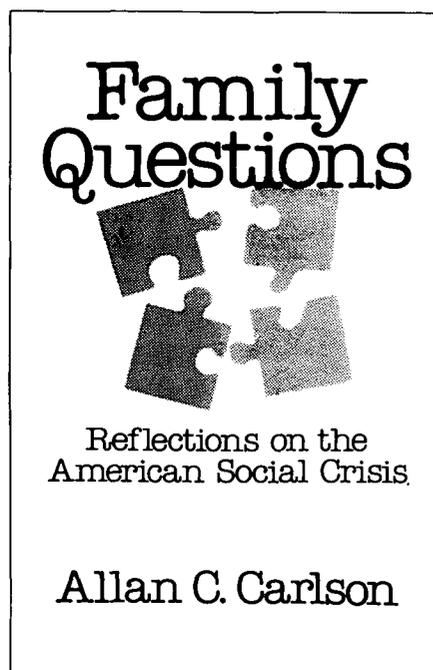


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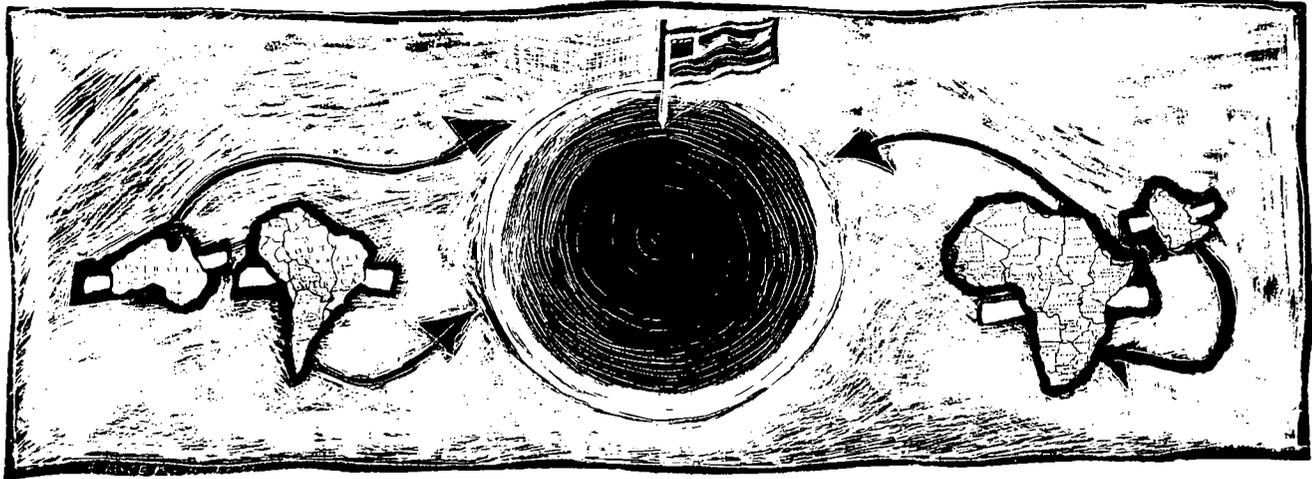
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Anna Myreck-Wodecki

Surviving in the New World Order

by Thomas Fleming

George Bush chose a risky moment for launching his New World Order. World stock markets have reacted to the vicissitudes of war with all the stability of a manic-depressive who won't take his medicine when he's feeling up and doesn't see the point of taking it when he's down. The mere rumors of war were enough to send oil prices up and stock prices down, but the brilliant success of the first day's air attack caused an ebullient rebound in world stock markets and lowered oil prices by \$10 a barrel. However, continued Iraqi resistance wreathed in the black smoke of a pipeline fire was enough to send the bears back into hibernation.

War is probably not the best medicine for an ailing economy that has just been hit by bank failures and tax increases. The money industry in the United States has been on the verge of crisis for some time. FDIC's decision to take over the Bank of New England in January came hard on the heels of the temporary closing of Rhode Island Credit Unions, bankrupted by the failure of their insurer. If one can believe Ralph Nader and other "consumer advocates," many large insurance companies are on the brink of ruin. Worst of all, the savings and loan industry, as a reward for its follies and chicaneries, is being bailed out by American taxpayers whose children and grandchildren will have to pay for the mistakes of incompetent regulators and corrupt liberal senators, yea unto the fourth generation. (One had always heard that Senator Cranston, impeccable anti-American leftist that he is, despised wealth, especially the wealth of American plutocrats, but it always turns out that socialists so firmly believe what they say about capitalist greed that they are determined to get in on the action.)

The causes of these emergencies are varied and complex. Some institutions have followed the Donald Trump model of investing heavily into real estate markets on the way up,

only to discover that elevators can move in more than one direction. Others, in their rapacity for Arab petrodollars, showered billions of dollars on Third World countries, who used the money to pay the interest on their already massive debt. The general opinion is that the international American banks, Chase Manhattan, Hanover Trust, Citibank, Bank of America, *et al.*, will never see a penny of the principal owed by Brazil and Mexico, but with the usurious rates of interest, premiums, and penalties they're charging, it is a situation they can live with—so long as there is not a run on the bank.

But if there were, the nearly bankrupt FDIC will be sure to bail them out on the principle of "too big to fail," which means apparently that the bankers who go into government service are committed to saving their own industry's bacon. In the case of the Bank of New England, FDIC Director Seidman decided to guarantee all accounts, including those over the \$100,000 limit.

On the other hand, when a small bank in Harlem failed, it was only under pressure that the FDIC agreed to settle on 50 cents on the dollar for accounts over \$100,000—precisely the offer made by Mr. Potter to the depositors of the Bailey Building and Loan.

Of course, Mr. Seidman's defense is that the Bank of New England is important to the New England economy, but the real difference is that major banks are players in the national and international money game; a black community bank is not, and it is the stability and security of international markets that must be preserved.

When the oilman-turned-international-avenger speaks of a New World Order, he clearly has in mind something a little less ambitious than world conquest but more grandiose than the mixed assortment of multinational corporations, international banks, and U.N. agencies (the IMF and the