

THE EVOLVING AMERICAN PRESIDENCY SERIES

Series Foreword:

The American presidency touches virtually every aspect of American and world politics. And the presidency has become, for better or worse, the vital center of the American and global political systems. The framers of the American government would be dismayed at such a result. As invented at the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention in 1787, the presidency was to have been a part of the government with shared and overlapping powers, embedded within a separation-of-powers system. If there was a vital center, it was the Congress; the presidency was to be a part, but by no means, the centerpiece of that system.

Over time, the presidency has evolved and grown in power, expectations, responsibilities, and authority. Wars, crises, depressions, industrialization, all served to add to the power of the presidency. And as the United States grew into a world power, presidential power also grew. As the United States became the world's leading superpower, the presidency rose in prominence and power, not only in the United States, but on the world stage as well.

It is the clash between the presidency as created and the presidency as it has developed that inspired this series. And it is the importance and power of the modern American presidency that makes understanding the office so vital. Like it or not, the American presidency stands at the vortex of power both within the United States and across the globe.

This Palgrave series recognizes that the presidency is and has been an evolving institution, going from the original constitutional design as a chief clerk, to today where the president is the center of the American political constellation. This has caused several key dilemmas in our political system, not the least of which is that presidents face high expectations with limited constitutional resources. This causes presidents to find extraconstitutional means of governing. Thus, presidents must find ways to bridge the expectations/power gap while operating within the confines of a separation-of-powers system designed to limit presidential authority. How presidents resolve these challenges and paradoxes is the central issue in modern governance. It is also the central theme of this book series.

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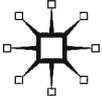
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The Unsustainable Presidency

Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Beyond

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THE UNSUSTAINABLE PRESIDENCY

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2014 978-1-137-37181-2

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Grover, William F.; Peschek, Joseph G., *Voices of Dissent: Critical Readings in American Politics*, 7th Edition, Copyright 2008, Pp. 244–245, 246–252. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ.

First published in 2014 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-1-349-47581-0

ISBN 978-1-137-48598-4 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9781137485984

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Grover, William F., 1956–

The unsustainable presidency : Clinton, Bush, Obama, and beyond / by William F. Grover, Joseph G. Peschek.

pages cm.—(The evolving American presidency series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Presidents—United States.
2. Executive power—United States.
3. Political leadership—United States.
4. United States—Economic policy.
5. National security—United States.
6. Clinton, Bill, 1946–
7. Bush, George W. (George Walker), 1946–
8. Obama, Barack.
9. United States—Politics and government—1993–2001.
10. United States—Politics and government—2001–2009.
11. United States—Politics and government—2009–
I. Peschek, Joseph G. II. Title.

JK516.G77 2014

973.93092'2—dc23

2014026631

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: December 2014

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Preface

I think we are fortunate at the moment that we do not face a crisis of the scale and scope that Lincoln or FDR faced.

—Barack Obama, 2014

American presidents seek to offer reassurance to citizens, and it is not surprising that Barack Obama, in a conversation with *New Yorker* editor David Remnick, would deny that we are living in a time of deep crisis. We contend, in contrast, that the United States and the larger world really are facing a set of interrelated crises, including a seemingly endless commitment to a “war against terrorism” and a prolonged economic slump accompanied by substantial material hardship and deepening inequality. Global climate change, brought about by accelerating emission levels of carbon dioxide and methane, threatens life on Earth as we know it. We argue that the political, economic, and ideological underpinnings of the modern American presidency render the institution incapable of addressing these crises in creative, hopeful, and progressive ways. We write with some sense of urgency because we seek to avoid having to add “catastrophe-in-chief” to the list of presidential duties laid out in Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution.

In his interview with the *New Yorker* President Obama stated, “I just wanted to add one thing to that business about the great-man theory of history. The President of the United States cannot remake our society, and that’s probably a good thing.... Not ‘probably.’ It’s definitely a good thing.” If democracy rests on popular sovereignty, then who could disagree? But in *The Unsustainable Presidency* we examine the relationship between “society” and “the president” in different ways. We situate the modern presidency in the context of the structure of American society as a whole, emphasizing its defining features as a capitalist democracy with an accompanying class and power structure and as a global political and military hegemonic superpower. To understand the presidency and presidents, it is essential to analyze how the two state imperatives of securing private economic growth and maintaining US global dominance—which stem from the nature of modern American society and the political economy—shape the office and its occupants. In our view, these

factors are at least as important as the impact of public opinion, election outcomes, and relations with Congress, crucial though these are, and probably more so.

The Unsustainable Presidency both builds on and criticizes as overly narrow the field of presidency studies in Political Science. In chapter one, we characterize and critique dominant theories of the presidency for operating with a restrictively narrow understanding of structural context. In chapter two, we offer an alternative structural theory that draws on several types of critical social theories, particularly theories of the state, to develop an expanded structural framework—grounded in political economy—to better contextualize the presidency. In effect we seek to explore the contours of what might be called the “deep presidency.” Chapters three, four, and five are interpretations of the presidencies of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. Our case studies focus on core political, economic, and national security issues and are by no means comprehensive in nature. We hope readers will approach these chapters looking to see to what extent our analytical framework helps them better understand the three most recent presidencies than do more conventional approaches. In chapter six, we discuss the normative and political implications of our argument in terms of future possibilities for the presidency and American democracy. And we suggest nothing less than a fundamental rethinking of how we define “economic growth” and “national security” if the modern presidency is to be sustainable. Toward that end, in our view, citizens should be less concerned with the important but relatively comfortable question of what kind of president our society needs, and more attuned to the unsettling yet urgent question of what kind of society we want to be.

In completing this book we received insightful comments and suggestions from Josh Hoxie, Dillon Klepetar, Elizabeth Sanders, Michael Schwartz, and Patricia Siplon. We take responsibility for any remaining errors of fact or interpretation. Finally, we would like to thank Brian O’Connor, our editor at Palgrave Macmillan, for his encouragement and support. As in all we do professionally, this book is dedicated to our students at Hamline University and Saint Michael’s College.