

Jeremi Suri, *The Impossible Presidency. The Rise and Fall of America's Highest Office* (New York: Hatchett Books, 2017).

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In *The Impossible Presidency*, Jeremi Suri contrasts the successes of early presidents against the struggles of their modern successors (xv). When the delegates to the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia, they set out to create a system that would prevent abuse of power while empowering a strong national leader. Thomas Jefferson warned that failure to ensure a restrained use of power and a focus on the national interest would lead to excess, despotism, and decline (xi, 6). Presidents George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Franklin Roosevelt could invent and evolve in the office by expanding the power of the presidency. Their accomplishments have left modern presidents and citizens with outsized and unrealistic expectations for the office. America's disenchantment with the modern presidency is due to the discord between presidential promises and possibilities (6). Suri states that President Donald Trump's election is the product of a widening gap between power and values. Trump "is the final fall of founders' presidency – the antithesis of what they expected from the office" (xi).

Suri praises the early presidents' ability to redefine presidential power and apply it to the national interest. Washington was a humble commander guided by a complete concern for the national interest (27/28). Jackson redefined the presidency to become the voice and protector of forgotten citizens, those who did not traditionally wield power or possess wealth or large tracts of land (51). Suri states that Lincoln transformed the nation from a political arrangement into a scared whole (xii). Theodore Roosevelt followed progressive reforms at home, and military strength abroad (xiii). Franklin Roosevelt pursued international peace as complementary to his reform at home (127).

Modern presidents John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama became managers of the world's largest economy and military. They dealt with new security threats, from nuclear crises to terrorist attacks, while a vocal and global constituency

utilized the 24-hour news cycle to express outrage over presidential decisions. Today, modern presidents in response overcommit, overpromise, and overreach (ix, 260). However, the presidency is ill-equipped to police the domestic and global world these U.S. policies created (x). Presidents are thus overwhelmed by abundant capabilities, diffuse interests, and differing demands. Suri describes modern presidencies' crisis management as the effect of an "undisciplined power" (xiv).

The Impossible Presidency lays out the juggling act of modern presidencies as widening distractions from important issues of national interest. However, for each criticism of over-commitment, virtue-signaling, and overreach in the modern presidency, there is an identical policy in the early presidencies Suri praises. Suri criticizes Kennedy's anti-communist policy in Latin America, particularly in Cuba, as overstressing his administration mentally and physically (203). Missiles and the USSR's interest in Cuba were an immediate military threat to America's national security, whereas Washington and Jefferson's interest in helping crush an ill-equipped slave rebellion in Haiti was primarily concerned with alleviating the concerns of American business interests – namely its slave holders.

Suri questions the central purpose of Johnson's Great Society and its proliferation of laws such as the Voting Rights Act in securing the national interest (223). However, Johnson's legislation was fundamentally an enforcement of the virtue-signaling in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address when he promised to realize a nation with equality and freedom for all. Lincoln's presidency itself is mired in the kind of mission creep Suri decries as contributing to the decline of the modern presidency (ix). With Southern Democrats out of Congress, Radical Republicans passed laws previously held up by opposition including the Homestead Act and Pacific Railway Act. Lincoln's overreach was often reluctant and contested. He clashed with his own party and military commanders (notably George McClellan and Henry Halleck) who disagreed with his military strategies and domestic policies, including the designation of African Americans as "contraband of war." In a single decision in January 1863, Lincoln deprived American citizens in the Confederacy of their property with the Emancipation Proclamation. Together with Congress, he overturned a Supreme Court ruling with the 13th Amendment and expanded the definition of full citizenship to include African Americans. The presidencies of Kennedy and Johnson contended with

the abrupt end to Lincoln and Reconstruction Era Congressional over-reach, over-promise, and virtue signaling.

Suri does not fully grapple with the profound ways the “great early presidencies” failed Native Americans, African Americans, and women. He briefly mentions Jackson’s violent policies towards these constituents in the context of the great work Jackson does on behalf of common Americans, defined as white men. The Trail of Tears – a bloody campaign against the Cherokee nation - becomes about Jackson’s ability as a “remarkable strong advocate” for common Americans (53). The Indian Removal Act was in the national interest, as Jackson used the power of the federal government to expand opportunities for those left behind – “the bone and sinew of the country” (51, 67). Suri, however, describes Johnson and Kennedy’s attempt to utilize presidential power in the 1960s to expand opportunity for those left behind – non-white men – as contributing to the distractions of presidential power. In a similar vein, Suri defends FDR’s dismissal of civil rights as necessary for protecting the national interest from the threat of fascism (187). FDR, however, went to war to end the violent power of white supremacy in Europe while ignoring the same at home, to protect his New Deal agenda from opposition.

Modern presidents face modern constituents who demand that the office utilize the virtue-signaling, open wallets, and flexed muscles precedents set by early presidents. This includes presidential actions such as Washington’s interest in the Haitian Revolution on behalf of slaveholders, his response to the Whiskey Rebellion, Jackson’s Indian removal policy to secure land for poor whites, and FDR’s public spending on New Deal programs. Modern constituents are asking the presidency to live up to American ideals of liberty and equality for all, and expand these rights to them. That is essentially the vision of the Founding Fathers, even if they themselves did not always live up to it.