

FOREWORD[†]

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Historians of the US presidency have lately taken a monarchical turn. In their quest to understand the origins of the office and the genesis of its powers, students of the presidency now increasingly look to the contemporary species of unitary executive with which the Framers were most familiar: the kings and princes of early modern and Enlightenment Europe. “We were educated in royalism,” Thomas Jefferson reminded James Madison in 1789: “no wonder if some of us retain that idolatry still.” And no wonder, then, that present-day historians have returned to royalism in search of one genealogy for the modern presidency.

For most of the twenty-first century, US presidents, both Republican and Democratic, have sought to assert their authority and to extend their prerogatives, often in contention with Congress and sometimes with the acquiescence of the judiciary. At the same time, and not coincidentally, scholars of the Founding Era such as Saikrishna Prakash, Eric Nelson, and Brendan McConville have reconstructed a history of the presidency that was “imperial from the beginning” because it was the product of a “Royalist revolution” that took place in “royal America”. The outstanding essays in *Political Thought and the Origins of the American Presidency* expand on their important work by excavating the tangled roots of America’s elective monarchy in the theory and practice of the Founding Era set in amply Atlantic context.

Among all the innovations of the US Constitution, the presidency was paradoxically the most novel and the most traditional. Novel, because there was no immediate precedent for a secularized, non-hereditary ruler endowed with such a wide panoply of powers, including command of the armed forces, the right to make war, peace, and treaties, and the ability to veto legislation. And yet traditional,

[†] Forthcoming in Ben Lowe, ed., *Political Thought and the Origins of the American Presidency* (University Press of Florida, 2021).

because those powers were vested in a single person and derived mostly from the suite of capacities Sir William Blackstone enumerated in his description of the British monarchy in the *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–69). In fact, after all the wrangling that accompanied the framing and ratification of the Constitution, the US presidency was innovative by virtue of being almost *hyper-traditional*. When George Washington became the first president of the United States in 1789, he possessed powers that George III could only envy or barely recall as appurtenances of his office, like the veto power or acting as commander-in-chief. Moreover, within two years of his inauguration, during the initial constitutional royalist phase of the French Revolution, the French Constitution of 1791 would deprive Louis XVI of competencies by that Washington still retained, such as the right to make treaties.

If the US presidency was originally a kind of monarchy, it was an Enlightened executive built on conventional, even for its time somewhat conservative, foundations. The revival of monarchy in some form was of course what opponents of a strong unitary executive feared and what some enemies of the infant United States even expected. Writing from New York in December 1782, the British commander-in-chief in North America, Guy Carleton, observed with palpable *Schadenfreude* that post-revolutionary schisms there seemed so acute “that a Monarchy must of necessity take place; under this persuasion [*sic*] three ideas are formed, a Prince of the blood of England, one of France, and General Washington, to whom, ‘tis added, the Monarchy has been offered, and by him refused.” (The echo of the refusal in 1657 of the crown by Oliver Cromwell, another revolutionary general turned executive “single person,” was surely not accidental.) In the debates on the Constitution, Edmund Randolph of Virginia warned against the presidency becoming “the foetus of monarchy,” while his fellow Virginians Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson were worried that “it squints toward monarchy” or would be merely “a bad edition of a Polish king”. Friends and critics alike of the new executive necessarily viewed their prospective ruler through monarchical spectacles.

Nonetheless, as the chapters in the first part of this volume persuasively argue, the actually existing monarchies best known to the Founders were as

dynamic as they were diverse. The institution was adaptable and adaptive across Europe, in the face of increasingly confident representative assemblies, the pressures of fiscal-military states, and a rising generation of educated princes with Enlightened aspirations in Madrid and Windsor, Potsdam and St Petersburg. Many Atlantic anglophones, their histories flecked with paeans to princes from Elizabeth I to Frederick the Great, viewed monarchs as models. They were also well acquainted with constraints that curtailed monarchical overreach, such as bills of rights and potent party systems, as components of a kinetic system of checks and balances that had been engineered since the mid-seventeenth century. At the moment of the US Founding, monarchy, like the institution of slavery, was modern because it was modernizing. The president was a temporary prince among mostly hereditary monarchs, time-limited when they ruled for life. Yet as an elected executive he still had something in common with the Polish king, of whatever edition, or even with the pope, the best-known (but not the only) elective monarch even in our own time.

Like contemporary monarchies, the US presidency was not set in aspic: it began evolving from the moment of its creation. The second part of this volume displays some of the branches of this evolutionary tree as they were revealed in the constitutional debates around the executive and the union. Each of these chapters asks why some early ideas flourished while others perished—for example, the competing forms of nationalist constitutionalism argued over by Hamilton, Gouverneur Morris, and James Wilson—and why other problems that had long-term implications, most notably the admission of new states to the union, were sidestepped with sometimes minimal reflection. As these chapters suggest, colliding visions and unfinished business from the Framing continue to inform present-day theories of the presidency, its functions and its limitations.

Practice necessarily shaped the institution's evolution from the beginning. The third and final group of essays shows how the personalities and intellectual commitments of the first three presidents inflected the office. Washington, Adams, and Jefferson animated constitutional abstractions with their own experiences and preferences, from the former general's military brusqueness to the aggressive informality of his Virginian successor. They also learned on the job, as every

president still must, but they came equipped for the task with mirrors for princes, gentlemanly conduct-books, and compendia of the law of nations. Their adaptations bequeathed a repertoire of presidential roles that would define but not confine the options for their successors in generations to come.

The infant United States was a novel republic in a world of monarchies and a new state—or congeries of new *states*—in an age of empires. Political emulation ensured that the state would acquire imperial traits. The presidency would likewise bear the imprint of monarchy but with one crucial difference: gender. According to Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* (1755), a president was “[o]ne placed with authority over others; one at the head of others,” while his third meaning for “MONARCH” was simply, “President”. By coincidence, Johnson illustrated each usage with a quotation from the same Shakespeare play, *Antony and Cleopatra*. “Come, thou *monarch* of the vine, / Plumpy Bacchus, with pink eyne ...” was his evidence for “monarch” meaning president; even more suggestive were Cleopatra’s words cited under the heading, “PRESIDENT”:

... A charge we bear i’ the war,
And, as the *president* of my kingdom, will I
Appear there for a man. (*Antony and Cleopatra*, III. 7)

By Johnson’s lights, as for Shakespeare, not only was a monarch a president but a president was a monarch—and, in Cleopatra’s case, a female one to boot. Yet here was one idea that did not occur to the Framers or their opponents, despite their knowledge of queens Elizabeth and Anne in British history or empresses Maria Theresa and Catherine the Great among the moderns. One Anti-Federalist could complain that, by the draft Constitution, once qualifications of birth and age were met, “a Pagan, a Mahometan, a Bankrupt may occupy the highest seat,” but no one imagined a woman as president. Even to those who originated the American presidency, some political thoughts remained unthinkable.

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