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The American President: From Cincinnatus to Caesar

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> The great body of the nation has no real interest in party.
>
> —James Fenimore Cooper
> *The American Democrat*, 1838

The American presidency offers many fascinating questions for historical exploration. Here, historical exploration does not mean the all-too-common form of pseudohistory that puts the presidential office at the center of our experience as a people. In that scenario, presidential Lone Rangers—Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, Ronald Reagan—gallop in to save us from dark forces that threaten divinely ordained progress toward the universal triumph of "American democracy." (The dark forces are often discovered to be ourselves: The American people must be saved by presidential heroes from their ignorant prejudices against such things as foreign wars, affirmative action, and unlimited immigration.)

That scenario is not history at all but a part of the mythology of empire. Its origins can be traced to nineteenth-century Massachusetts when Calvinists lost their theology but none of their aggressive belief in their own chosenness, when the godly City upon a Hill was replaced by "American democracy" (that is, Bostonian arrogance) as the end goal of the universe.

No, we mean real historical questions to be explored. How did the chief magistrate of a confederacy of republican states evolve into the leader of the world? Historians of the remote future, should there be any such after the disintegration of Western civilization, will see this as a central factor in the rise and fall of the American empire.

But here let us take a more limited and manageable question. How did we come to the present system of choosing our elective monarch? Of determining what citizen has the qualifications necessary for an office which surely requires patriotism, intelligence,

and character of a high order? Or to put it another way, what could possibly cause an apparently normal person to stand on a chair and cheer at the prospect of an Al Gore or a George W. Bush assuming such grave responsibilities, as many did in the most recent election?

Part of the answer lies in the invention of the two-party political system—something utterly unknown to the framers of the Constitution, and particularly to the invention in the early nineteenth century of the diabolically-devised political nominating convention. The intent of this nominating convention was to take the choice of candidates away from the people and ensure control by professional politicians; that is, persons who seek profit and place by the pursuit of power rather than by honest, productive work.

There was a time when candidates for high office were expected to show their achievements and services for the commonwealth—successful leadership in arms, wise executive administration that met public necessities while relieving the burden of taxes, forethought, and eloquence in the legislative hall in dealing with hard issues. Compare recent occupants and aspirants of the presidential office with this standard. What does the absence of this or any other standard from our electoral discourse tell us about our state as a people? In fact, presidential candidacy is and for some time has been a factor, not of achievement or service but of celebrity, or what patriots who decried the emergence of this phenomenon in the nineteenth century called "availability."

One of those patriots, James Fenimore Cooper, wrote in his *American Democrat*:

> Party is an instrument of error, by pledging men to support its policy, instead of supporting the [true] policy of the state. . . . Party leads to vicious, corrupt and unprofitable legislation, for the sole purpose of defeating party.
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> The discipline and organization of party, are expedients to defeat the intention of the institutions, by putting managers in the place of the people; it being of little avail that a majority elect, when the nomination rests in the hands of a few.
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> Party is the cause of many corrupt and incompetent men being preferred to power, as the elector, who, in his own person, is disposed to resist a bad nomination, yields to the influence and a dread of factions.

> Party pledges the representative to the support of the executive, right or wrong, when the institutions intend that he shall be pledged only to justice, expediency and the right, under the restrictions of the Constitution.
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> When party rules, the people do not rule, but merely such a portion of the people as can manage to get control of party. . . .
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> The effect of party is always to supplant established power. In a monarchy it checks the king; in a democracy it controls the people.
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> Party, by feeding the passions and exciting personal interests, overshadows truth, justice, patriotism, and every other public virtue, completely reversing the order of a democracy, by putting unworthy motives in the place of reason.
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> It is a very different thing to be a democrat, and to be a member of what is called a democratic party.[1]

Cooper's hope was for a Washingtonian president who would be above party—an Andrew Jackson. It was not an unreasonable hope in the beginning. But there were two problems with this appeal to a noble executive such as the Constitution had designed the office to be. By the time anyone achieved the distinction necessary, he had more than likely reached the stage of declining mental powers. This was true of Jackson, as it was of George Washington. Though not in the same category as Washington and Jackson, it is likely that some of the worst mistakes of Wilson, FDR, and Reagan can be traced to this fact of life. Those who hope to manipulate a powerful officeholder for their own ends are many, wily, and adept at raising plausible public clamor for their goals.

An even greater problem was the hope for a president above party, which both Washington and Jackson erroneously believed themselves to be. No sooner had the government been founded than Alexander Hamilton and his northeastern friends began to force through an agenda that boldly disregarded all the understandings that had been reached at Philadelphia, in the ratifying conventions, and in the first ten amendments—under the cover of Washington's prestige. The Jeffersonians managed to halt this initiative in mid-course

[1]James Fenimore Cooper, *The American Democrat* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 226–27.

and hold it in abeyance for a quarter century. But Thomas Jefferson should not be regarded as a player in the leftist scenario of presidential Lone Rangers. He did not regard the presidential office in that way, but as a consensual and restraining force. He walked to his inauguration rather than riding, like "plain" John Adams did in a carriage with white horses; he sent his messages to Congress in writing rather than delivering them from the throne; and he established Virginia country pell-mell as etiquette in the executive mansion. But he could not help being the leader of a party, however he wished otherwise.

For a time, Jeffersonians did establish the dominance, at least rhetorically, of a limited collegial presidency, and more important, the dominance, at least rhetorically, of a confederal central authority restricted in its jurisdiction. This was the bedrock public feeling when Jackson was elected president. The majority was disgusted with John Quincy Adams's efforts at neo-Hamiltonian expansion of the government and regarded Jackson as honorable and safe. But, as Washington had his Hamilton, so Jackson had his Martin Van Buren, the American solon of party.

One may interpret Van Buren's motives in constructing the American party system in two different ways: He was a devotee of Jeffersonian principles who realized that under the conditions of mass democracy only a strong party organization could defend them; or, as most observers at the time and later have believed, he was a shrewd pursuer of political preferment for its own sake, troubled no more by principles than was necessary to keep the hayseeds in line. Motive really does not matter. The effects were the same either way.[2]

These effects were the substitution of party machinery and patronage for public opinion and the transformation of electoral contests into trials of celebrity rather than of issues. As an 1829 newspaper commented:

> Mr. Van Buren seems disposed to take a conciliatory course. He looks forward to a higher station in the General Government,

[2]My interpretation of this period of presidential history differs greatly from that in this volume by Jeffrey Rogers Hummel, a very fine historian. Good historians, as honest men, may disagree, and that is all to the good. The reader may have his consciousness expanded in more than one direction and consider the options for himself.

> and his whole air and manners evince it. He desires, therefore, to make as many friends, and as few enemies, as possible.[3]

It would be hard to find a better description of the way our aspirants to the highest office have been addressing the issues most of the time since. Perhaps the most important issue of the late 1820s and early 1830s was that of free trade versus tariff protection. President Jackson took a bold and decided stand for "a judicious tariff." The Jeffersonian principle of free trade had become a party trick. One could be for or against free trade as long as one supported the party. Though it was assumed that Jackson's party leaned toward free trade, his supporters among Mr. Van Buren's friends in the northeast were free to vote for all the tariffs they wanted.

The key, of course, was organization. New York, because it had more patronage than other states, because political contests were close, and because Hamilton and Burr had left a legacy of competing organizations, provided the model for the nation. And federal patronage grew with the phenomenal expansion of the country in every measurable dimension. One need not be troubled with public opinion or issues. All you needed was to control the meetings. So appeared the party convention, which was actually thought of as an advance in popular control over the legislative caucuses that previously had nominated candidates and that now were decried as aristocratic evils.

So, if enough postmasters and pensioners and contractors and their friends and relatives, and those who expect to be postmasters, contractors, etc., when their ticket wins, and their friends and relatives show up, that settles the matter. Whatever resolutions and platforms and nominations emerge from the meetings, already carefully designed by the managers, are, by definition, public opinion. The people have spoken. If you don't believe it, just ask the newspapers (who are getting most of their profits from public printing).

Meanwhile, you have been busy putting into place all those nice, new devices to better express the will of the people (that is, to make the managers' job easier). Let us suppose that 20 percent of the electorate of Massachusetts and 80 percent of that of Mississippi are Democrats. But in the convention, states are represented by population. Your Massachusetts Democratic voter is going to have several times the power per capita of my Mississippi

[3]Charleston, South Carolina *Courier*, April 14, 1829.

voter writing the platform and choosing the candidate. The real effect, of course, is to allow a well-organized minority of a minority to choose the president. As Cooper pointed out: It is "of little avail that a majority elect, when the nomination rests in the hands of a few." And the minority that controls is a stealth minority, with a vested interest in disguising its agenda and avoiding any real public debate and decision of issues, since controversy might scare off voters. And have you noticed those new laws, unknown and unanticipated by the Constitution, which mandate that the party that wins New York by 51 percent or, by even less in a three-way race, gets 100 percent of New York's votes in the electoral college? Thus do our leaders labor ceaselessly to bring us ever and ever greater democracy.

Despite historians' endless blather about "Jacksonian democracy," pro or con, there was now a president and party ruling by patronage and popularity with no principle in sight. True, there was much talk in the air about the common man, which meant that the party managers had learned to get his vote, after the options had been carefully culled down to the safest ones. (Rather, there were two Jacksonian principles in sight: an insistence on maximum presidential prerogative, and one the historians never mention in this context—firm opposition to abolitionism.) Even the vaunted war against the national bank—put forward as a campaign for hard money—actually resulted and probably was intended by the president's managers to result in a host of government-protected banks, inflating the currency happily for private profit.

It is true that Van Buren opposed this, as he did anything so decisive as to make enemies. As he reported unblushingly in his autobiography, he once missed a key vote because he had promised to accompany a friend on a cemetery visit. This method failed him at last when he lost the 1844 nomination by attempting not to take a stand either way on Texas annexation. Still, it made him president for a term. When elected in 1836, he was a veteran officeholder, but he had no real achievements to rank with Adams, Jackson, Clay, Calhoun, Webster, and many others. Cincinnatus had been called from the plow and turned out to look a lot like Uriah Heap rather than the natural aristocrat for whom the presidential office had been designed.

But the game was not over. Two could play. The Whigs, on the outs while Jackson was popular, had learned a few tricks from Van Buren. In 1840 their managers, who had been busy

building up their own patronage network, devised a new strategy. They found another quondam military hero, General William Henry Harrison, who was completely unburdened by any political opinions or record. They adopted no platform, thus reducing the chance of offending any potential voter. Instead of a platform, there was a campaign: torchlight parades carrying log cabins, coonskin caps, and jugs of cider, to symbolize their candidate's identity with the common people, and whooping it up for "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too."[4]

A traveling circus had been sent to find Cincinnatus and had come back with his distinguished-looking but rather dimwitted cousin who did not have a clue as to what he had been called for. This was just what the managers had in mind. The real leader of the party, Clay, announced that the electoral victory had been a mandate for the party's policies (which had hardly been mentioned in the campaign)—a national bank, a high protective tariff, and distribution of tax money for internal improvements. For the moment, the agenda stalled because Cincinnatus's cousin ungraciously died and was succeeded by a junior member of the electoral coalition, a "states' righter" who had opposed Van Buren without going for the Whig program.[5]

But the party men had managed to co-opt the process by which the people were to find their Cincinnatus and corrupt it beyond repair. The Whigs, soon to be Republicans, had designed a formula that they have clung to since. Never address a real issue if you can help it, and if you have to, redefine it till it's harmless. Serve big business—that is, safe, as opposed to entrepreneurial, capital but never mention it. Always be the party of the respectable middle class, a sure vote-getter everywhere outside the South. In pursuit of this goal the party has for more than a century and a half, with very rare interruptions of talent, produced a succession of presidential and vice-presidential candidates who have astonished the world with their mediocrity.

Calhoun, who shared Cooper's distaste for party and his preference for an independent presidency, and who was in a much better position to assess the real state of affairs, described it thus:

[4]Harrison actually had been born in one of the best plantation houses in Tidewater, Virginia, a fact lost on Northern voters.

[5] For years I hoped vainly I would be important enough to be asked to participate in one of those surveys where historians are asked to rate presidents, so I could nominate John Tyler as one of the greats.

> the existing party organization[s] look only to plunder. The sole object of strife is to elect a president, in order to obtain the control through him of the powers of the government. The only material difference between the two parties is, that the Democraticks [sic] look more exclusively to plundering through the finances and the treasury, while the Whigs look more to plundering by wholesale, through partial legislation, Banks, Protection and other means of monopoly. The one rely for support on capital and the other on the masses; and the one tends more to aristocracy and the other to the power of a single man, or monarchy. Both have entirely forgot the principles, which originally gave rise to their existence; and are equally proscriptive and devoted to party machinery. To preserve party machinery and to keep up party union are paramount to all other considerations; to truth, justice and the constitution. Every thing is studiously suppressed by both sides calculated to destroy party harmony. . . .
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> It is impossible for anyone, who has not been an eyewitness, to realize the rapid corruption and degeneracy of the Government in the last few years. So callous has the sensibility of the community become, that things are now not only tolerated, but are scarcely noticed, which, at any other period, would have prostrated the Administration of Washington himself. . . . It is time for the people to reflect.[6]

Calhoun's description of the end effect could serve as an epitaph for the late-twentieth-century presidency:

> When it comes to be once understood that politics is a game; that those who are engaged in it but act a part; that they make this or that profession, not from honest conviction or intent to fulfill it, but as the means of deluding the people, and through that delusion to acquire power; when such professions are to be entirely forgotten, the people will lose all confidence in public men. All will be regarded as mere jugglers—the honest and patriotic as well as the cunning and the profligate—and the people will become indifferent and passive to the grossest abuses of power, on the ground that those whom they may elevate, under whatever pledges, instead of reforming, will but imitate the example of those whom they have expelled.[7]

[6]Clyde Wilson, ed., *The Essential Calhoun* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1992), pp. 341, 353.

[7]Ibid., p. 101.

Remember George H.W. Bush and "Read my lips." In some quarters there has been much emphasis on the disgrace brought on the presidential office by Bill Clinton and his obvious sleaziness. So what else is new? In fact, the Bush deception of the people is by far the worse of the two. Clinton's lies were mostly to cover up his misdeeds. Bush's lie was a deliberate deception of the people made publicly in presenting himself as an aspirant to their highest office, a corruption of the democratic process at its very root. But, of course, our sensibilities have become so callous that neither the deceiver nor the deceived thought much of it.

It is in fact possible to praise what Calhoun decried, to glory in the fact that American political parties present the people with no real alternatives. Freedom from ideological strife can be seen as a great boon when compared to the havoc wrought in Europe by struggles over irreconcilable visions of the political good. This has been a basic theme of left and right democratic capitalist penmen, such as Arthur Schlesinger in *The Vital Center* and Daniel Boorstin in *The Genius of American Politics*.[8] Instead of wasting themselves on class struggle, Americans have been busy manufacturing more refrigerators and automobiles for everyone. There is indeed much to be said for a nonideological regime that promotes peace and prosperity. One may wonder, however, if that accurately describes a country that killed six hundred thousand of its men in a civil war. Or if any number of fridges, or even of guided missiles, can save a people with a leadership unable or unwilling to address honestly its real necessities.

Can a lack of principle—a refusal to contest real issues—be covered by an appeal to the evils of ideology? Would not a more accurate description suggest that since the Progressive Era of the late nineteenth century the driving force of American history has been a quasi-socialist ideology, whether it is called progressivism, liberalism, or neoconservatism? There has not been an absence of ideology but rather a two-party agreement on one. For those who believe in Clinton's worldview, mistaken though they are, a vote for Clinton or Gore is a rational choice. In the

[8]Boorstin was the original neoconservative, beginning as a communist and ending as a spokesman for respectable conservatism (appointed director of the Smithsonian by President Ford). However, unlike Schlesinger and the giant minds that took up the cause of democratic capitalism after him, Boorstin was too good a historian not to see some of the ironies in such a position, as in his *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1975).

same circumstances, a vote for a George Bush (junior or senior) is a vote for "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" if it is thought of as a vote for an alternative.

The Whig frustration after 1840 was compounded by Calhoun's eloquent and intransigent stand for free trade, free banking, and strict construction, which had rallied the latent Jeffersonianism of the people. The Democratic Party, after the breaking of Van Buren's power in 1844, returned to principle and held to it until principle was rendered irrelevant by blood and iron.

The economic centralists, whose drive since the time of Hamilton had been presented as a moral imperative, needed other cards to play. The American presidency required two more steps to Caesarism. First, the party men must learn how to combine predatory patronage and predatory policy—which separated the Democrats and Whigs—into one power, something best accomplished in crisis. Lincoln was able to lay the groundwork for this in the midst of war, though the final consummation would not come until a century later when the Great Society discovered how to buy both sides by shifting the costs to posterity.

Ronald Reagan came to power, like Jackson, on a wave of protest over what the party men had done to the people's property and principles. He spoke like, and perhaps even believed himself to be, the Jeffersonian who would turn back to states' rights and limited government. But as Jackson had his Van Buren, Reagan had a phalanx of handlers ready to reinterpret the revolution into a Hamiltonian form. The patronage thrown up by the Great Society was too great a temptation to be spurned. The bakery would not be closed; the cake would just be sliced a little differently. In order for the Reagan revolt to have worked, there would have to have been a real opposition party determined to take wealth and power from the federal government and give it back to the people.

The war allowed Lincoln to combine patronage and policy by eliminating effective political opposition. But a second step was needed before the presidential office metamorphosed from CEO to Caesar. This was the establishment of American history as a salvation drama. The groundwork for this had to be religious and cultural. It required a country in which superficial education emanating from New England schoolmarms had replaced, in a substantial part of the population, tradition and common sense.

Since the War of 1812, New England had declined severely in prestige and power. Its intellectuals had lost their religion but had retained their sense of themselves as The Elect. The Calvinist mentality, even without its theology, reasoned diabolically. That which stood in its way was by definition evil. By the time this impulse got to the hustings in the greater New England of the Burnt Over District of New York and the upper Midwest, it took on strange forms.

The New England clergy had preached rabidly that Jefferson was a tool of the Bavarian *Illuminati* who would set up the guillotine, kill Christians and declare women common property. A generation later came the belief that the harmless fraternal order of Masons was conspiring to subvert the country—a fantasy that was soon transferred to the Catholics. In the meantime, the religious dissolution of New England spun off many strange subcults, including vegetarianism, feminism, communalism, Mormonism, and Adventism. The underside edge of this great age of reform was the psychopathic gang of John Brown, in the same way that Charles Manson was the underside of the great sexual liberation of the sixties. (Late bloomers of the latter include the Unabomber and Timothy McVeigh, whose crimes have been blamed by the intelligentsia on the "right-wing Southern gun culture.")

The more respectable side of this phenomenon was a conflation of Christianity and Americanism, America as the fulfillment of God's plan for mankind, a seductive bit of blasphemy that has remained a strong motif in our national consciousness ever since. Out of this matrix came a thirst for vanquishing the devils that stood in the way, a thirst satisfied perfectly by the idea of the "slave power." The South, which stood in the way of Northern progress, economic and moral, was not simply a region defending its own interests within a federal system; it was a diabolic conspiracy by degenerate and imperious slaveholders to spread their evil ways to the North, threatening all things good and decent. Since domestic slavery had been a feature of American society from its first days, and since all American law and tradition forbade interference by one section with the internal affairs of another, this strategy could only work politically by the fantasy that the "slave power" was the aggressor, a convenient forgetting of the fact that most of the most stalwart founders and defenders of American liberty and the American Union had been Southern slaveholders.

It was the combination of economic agenda and cultural hysteria that brought Lincoln to power, thanks to the tricks that the party managers had played with the electoral college. Lincoln was far too shrewd to really believe the conspiracy theory, but he was willing to allow it to benefit himself and his party. As long as the South remained a large, prestigious, and skillfully-led minority, there was an irreducible body of opposition to both economic nationalism and the cult of Americanism.

The trauma of war followed by Lincoln's assassination provided the final missing ingredient in the drama of presidential salvation. The president had begun as the CEO of a federal republic, expected to have extraordinary republican virtue in the exercise of his powers. He was now the martyred savior in the world historical drama of American uniqueness. The Northern clergy and their business lobbyist allies were not slow to use the opportunity for all it was worth. A huge literature developed in which Lincoln was literally a Christ figure who died for our sins. (They had tried this out on a limited scale with John Brown before the war, but it had not flown.) To read the Lincoln hagiography is to understand easily how the Romans came to grant divinity to their emperors, the difference being that those Romans did not claim to be Christians.

The conflation of America with God's plan for the perfection of human history was complete. And the president as savior was essential to the drama. It could not, of course, be used every day. But it would ever after be there as a potential to clothe dubious objectives with sacredness. And there would always be a portion of the people ready to follow. So Wilson could lead the country into the insane mayhem of the European war, kill and be killed in order to end killing, and make the world safe for democracy. Many would believe that Franklin Roosevelt had personally saved us from depression and fascism.

Perhaps the strangest eruption of all of the salvation drama occurred after the dramatic assassination of the youthful President Kennedy. This dubiously elected, questionably competent, and somewhat churlish power seeker became in death a sacrificed god. You have to be old enough to have been there to really remember what an orgy of adulatory hysteria was whipped up for that occasion.

It was that emotional eruption that provided the fuel for the Great Society, a salvation drama against the sins of poverty and discrimination, the chief result of which was to engross for the

presidency ever more of the power and wealth of the country. That could not have happened, however, if there had been a real opposition party. The Great Society did not create the moral breakdown of the sixties. Rather it was a product of moral breakdown in which the intelligentsia, through the grace bestowed upon them by the martyred president and their paternal egalitarianism, liberated themselves from morality and into irresponsible power and privilege to remake the world.

What was new about this was that the president no longer had to be even a dim copy of Cincinnatus. By the time we get to Clinton, the imperial office itself had become the object of worship. It does not matter how tainted the credentials of its occupant. In the drama of salvation, a sleazy prevaricator can be the savior of the oppressed. It does not matter if this requires the murder of innocent women and children at home or abroad. The emperor can do no wrong.

This was in part because the presidency had become enmeshed in the public relations, advertising, and mass entertainment culture. It was no longer a debate on the business of the public, but a popularity contest. So the Republicans of this writer's state were treated, during the 1996 presidential campaign, not to a declaration of Mr. Dole's principles and policies, but to a visit from his daughter who regaled us with the assurances of what a wonderful fellow he was.

As an undergraduate student, this writer repeatedly heard that the American press was owned by big business, and therefore, could always be expected to support the reactionary side in American politics. It was up to the working stiffs of the media to correct this terrible imbalance as best they could. A prime example of the corruption of American politics by public relations instructors was the fact that Eisenhower had taken elocution lessons from a Hollywood actor. In a remarkably short time, the brave crusaders of the media became slavish lickspittles of the imperial Kennedys, who had pretended to regard them as wise and important.

The Federalists who designed the presidency at Philadelphia wanted a vigorous and independent power that could preserve the honor of the Union against all foes. In constructing the office, they violated all the wisdom of American experience. The American Revolution had been in essence a struggle of the representative bodies of the thirteen colonies against the executive power, the monarchical prerogatives represented by the royal

governor and his placemen. Because of these struggles, the colonies emerged from the revolution with weak executive power, a governor elected annually by the legislature, a magistrate with very limited initiative in the vital matters of purse and sword.

The prevailing element at Philadelphia designed an office unlike any other in the world—a monarch, with more than monarchical powers—in all respects except the requirement for election by the people of the states. (The electoral college was designed not so much to take the decision out of the hands of the people as to guarantee weight to the states. If there was no majority, as might happen often, the House would choose, with each state having an equal vote. Party management once more triumphs over the intent of the Constitution in selecting the president.) Theory prevailed over experience.[9]

All three branches of the federal government, and thus the people too, are guilty in the transformation of America from a constitutional federal union to an empire. But it was the president who was meant to check evil tendencies in the body politic. This is why he was given the power to negate acts of Congress and to appoint the judges and generals. He was to be the hero of republican virtue who would represent all the people as a historic community of freedom rather than a coalition of interest groups and ideological agendas.

At the beginning of the new millennium, we see only too well how misplaced was the hope. From Cincinnatus to Caesar was a long road. From Caesar to Caligula is but a few short and easy steps.

[9]This is why the theoretician James Madison is revered by every fake and superficial political philosopher in the land, because he provides a vehicle to translate the American regime from historical experience to the rationalization of power.