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Book Review by Joseph M. Bessette

SOUNDING PRESIDENTIAL

The Lost Soul of the American Presidency: The Decline into Demagoguery and the Prospects for Renewal, by Stephen F. Knott.
University Press of Kansas, 312 pages, \$39.95



A dangerous ambition more often lurks behind the specious mask of zeal for the rights of the people than under the forbidding appearance of zeal for the firmness and efficiency of government.... Of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants.

—*The Federalist*, No. 1

STEPHEN KNOTT TAKES THIS WARNING from the first *Federalist* essay as the epigraph for his new book, *The Lost Soul of the American Presidency: The Decline into Demagoguery and the Prospects for Renewal*. He repeats it a few pages later—adding, for good measure, Alexander Hamilton’s admonition at the end of *The Federalist* to guard

against “the military despotism of a victorious demagogue.” By the time Knott’s history reaches the office’s present occupant, we learn that “[President Donald] Trump is precisely the type of demagogue Hamilton and the other founders feared.” Knott writes in bold strokes, with little nuance or subtlety.

A professor of national security affairs at the United States Naval War College, Knott chronicles the presidency’s decline from the high-toned administration of George Washington (and Alexander Hamilton) to Donald Trump’s “hasten[ing] [of] the office’s descent into a media-saturated, cultish, hyperpartisan, public-opinion pandering enterprise.” He ends with a chapter on “The Prospects for Renewal” for the Washington-Hamilton model. This first presidency was energetic and committed to the rule of law. It embodied moderation and prudence. It embraced rhetorical restraint, rejecting pandering

and demagogic appeals. It promoted sober expectations about what government could accomplish. It was dignified and respectable. It was guided by republican ideals. It sought neither to mold nor inflame but to check public opinion. And it eschewed partisanship in favor of the president’s symbolic role as head of state.

ALMOST IMMEDIATELY AFTER WASHINGTON left office, Knott argues, the presidency began its descent into partisanship, rhetorical excess, pandering and demagoguery, inflated expectations, attacks on the rule of law, and the enshrinement of majority rule. Only a few presidents have sought to stand against the tide, including John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln (in a qualified sense), William Howard Taft, Dwight Eisenhower, Gerald Ford, and George H.W. Bush—none with lasting success.



The Lost Soul of the American Presidency takes its place in a larger project of understanding and recovering the strong constitutional presidency of *The Federalist*, Washington's administration, and Hamilton's Pacificus essays (1793)—a project inspired by Charles Thach's *The Creation of the Presidency, 1775–1789: A Study in Constitutional History* (1922). (Revival of scholarly interest in the strong constitutional presidency can be dated to the 1969 reissue of Thach's work, which included an introduction by the University of Chicago's Herbert J. Storing.) For several decades, political scientists, historians, and law professors have explored and elaborated the constitutional presidency and its relationship to American political and institutional development. Until this revival, scholars saw the presidency as constitutionally weak but (potentially) politically strong, ignoring Hamilton's Publius and Pacificus essays.

Knott is less interested in questions of constitutional power than in the president's relation to public opinion. "As this book attempted to convey," he writes in closing, "the problem is not one of the 'imperial presidency' but the populist presidency." This focus on the problems of populism causes Knott to overlook the very ways the founders created

the office to be broadly responsive to popular sentiment. He praises Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky for focusing "on the undemocratic nature of the founders' Constitution"; he claims "the American framers...did not believe in government by the majority"; he asserts that "most of the nation's founders" would have disagreed with Woodrow Wilson's belief that the United States stands for "the sovereignty of self-governing peoples."

The founders did reject *direct* democracy. Elected officials, they believed, ought to refine and enlarge public views, and natural rights ought to trump public opinion. But they also thought they were creating institutions through which the people would rule themselves. In the same paragraph of *The Federalist* in which James Madison says that representatives will "refine and enlarge the public views," he calls the results of legislative deliberations "the public voice." And later when he praises the Senate for its ability to resist unwise popular desires, he affirms that "the cool and deliberate sense of the community ought... ultimately [to] prevail over the views of its rulers." Would Madison (or, for that matter, Hamilton or Washington) have denied that the United States stands for "the sovereignty of self-governing peoples"? Though Knott is no progressive, he embraces the Progressive

view that the Constitution is more concerned with resisting public desires than facilitating responsible self-rule.

"THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENCY," HE writes, "was designed to rebuff public sentiment, if need be, or at the very least moderate these sentiments." There is *some* truth in this. Nonetheless, the framers viewed the president's selection by electors (initially chosen either by democratic state legislatures or the people themselves) as a type of popular election through which, in Hamilton's words, "the sense of the people [would] operate." Moreover, indefinite re-eligibility after four-year terms would give the community regular opportunities to judge the president's performance. It is unlikely that the people would support for president someone they suspected would frequently "rebuff" their views, or reelect a president who frequently did so. In short, the Constitution framed the presidency to be a more popular office than Knott concedes.

As David Nichols reminds us in *The Myth of the Modern Presidency* (1994), the Hamiltonian presidency was not the only one that motivated friends of a strong chief executive at the Constitutional Convention. Regrettably, *The Lost Soul of the American Presidency*

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says nothing about Gouverneur Morris's and James Wilson's signal contributions in fashioning the office. In the Convention's first days, Wilson proposed a single executive elected directly by the people for a three-year term and eligible to succeed himself. Such provisions would make the president "the man of the people." Morris enthusiastically endorsed Wilson's recommendations. "[T]he Executive Magistrate," he explained, "should be the guardian of the people, even of the lower classes, against Legislative tyranny, against the Great and the wealthy who in the course of things will necessarily compose—the Legislative body.... The Executive therefore ought to be so constituted as to be the great protector of the Mass of the people."

It did not take long for the two principal authors of *The Federalist* to learn that effective governing required a serious engagement with public opinion. Less than three years after taking his seat in the First Congress Madison helped launch the *National Gazette*, for which he wrote 18 essays to mobilize public opinion against the "antirepublican" policies of then-Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton. "Public opinion," Madison wrote, "is the real sovereign in every free [government]."

A year later the Washington Administration was embroiled in a public controversy over whether the United States should provide military assistance to France, as appeared required by the 1778 French-American treaty. As Gary Schmitt shows in his 2009 essay "President Washington's Proclamation of Neutrality," much of the American public initially supported French ambassador Edmond-Charles Genêt's efforts in 1793 to end-run the administration by going directly to Congress for aid. Hamilton and other Federalists rallied public opinion around neutrality by publicly denouncing Genêt's "increasingly impolitic behavior" and holding dozens of mass

meetings at which citizens passed resolutions supporting the president. "Although the attempt to use public opinion in this fashion was bound to happen sooner or later given the underlying republican character of the regime," Schmitt concludes, "the surprise is that this precedent was set so quickly and, interestingly, set first by the Federalists and not [Jefferson and Madison's] Republicans." Knott himself quotes an 1802 letter by Hamilton acknowledging that the "Federalists...have neglected the cultivation of popular favour by fair & justifiable expedients."

WHAT, THEN, OF KNOTT'S HARSH assessment of President Trump's populism (in a brief 13-page chapter)? Knott concedes that there are risks in evaluating an incumbent president. Despite this, he isn't reluctant to reach definitive conclusions about Trump's presidency—as is evident from the story his subheadings tell: Trump is "Hamilton's Nightmare" who is "True to the Base" by using demagogic rhetoric to undermine "The Rule of Law" in "A Reality-Show Presidency" that engages in "Extremism in the Defense of Vice."

A fair assessment of Trump would describe and evaluate his actual policies. Although Knott is right that "the impact of [Trump's] policies cannot be fully assessed until the passage of time"—surely he could detail the main policy lines, evaluate whether the administration's efforts are improving or harming Americans, and assess the prospects for long-term success. He does none of that. After mentioning that "many of Trump's policies are not that different from the policies his 2016 Republican primary challengers likely would have pursued," Knott simply drops the subject. Nothing on tax cuts. Nothing on deregulation. Nothing on immigration (beyond a mention of

Trump's rhetoric on the wall). Nothing on protecting religious groups from government regulation. Nothing on reductions in the food stamp and welfare rolls. Nothing on trade agreements. Nothing on the provision of military aid to Ukraine. Nothing on the war against ISIS.

Near the end of his chapter on Trump, Knott criticizes the president's "academic supporters" for "endors[ing] the notion that the ends, e.g., judicial appointments, justified Trump's destructive means." Although he mentions Michael Anton's widely read "The Flight 93 Election," Knott fails to engage conservatives who have a different diagnosis of what ails the American polity and a different assessment of the administration's accomplishments. This is an opportunity lost.

Donald Trump is *not* "precisely the type of demagogue Hamilton and the other founders feared." He is neither a military despot nor a demagogic tyrant. Despots and tyrants suppress freedom. Yet prior to the recent pandemic-related restrictions, Americans enjoyed *more* freedom, not less, than three years ago, and almost certainly more under the Trump Administration than they would have enjoyed under a Hillary Clinton Administration—the freedom that comes from employment and higher wages, the freedom deregulation brings to businesses and property owners, the freedom of religious organizations to act on their beliefs, the freedom to send one's child to a better school, and the freedom that hundreds of conservative federal judges will advance in thousands of decisions over their judicial careers. Is this Hamilton's nightmare—or "the Blessings of Liberty" promised in the Preamble to the document that created the nation's highest office?

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