

The Bind That Ties

"There is no experience you can get," John F. Kennedy admitted after two years in office, "that can possibly prepare you adequately for the Presidency." Nor is there any advice, any handbook, since every president enters office determined to turn the page. Kennedy couldn't wait to toss out Ike's military management style for a more supple, activist alternative. "They behaved as though history had begun with them," said advisor Clark Clifford of Kennedy's men. Ford practiced radical normalcy—his wife even discussed her mastectomy—to send the clearest possible signal that the dark age of Nixon was over. Clinton wanted to prove he was not the second coming of Jimmy Carter; George W. Bush was all about not being Clinton; Barack Obama was about not being either one. Each had to learn how much they had to learn, before the club could be of much use—but eventually, they all find themselves reaching out for help. "That connection begins the first time you receive the daily intelligence briefing," argues the first President Bush. "We all understand the magnitude of the job when we decide to run for President. At least we think we do. But it's not possible to fully appreciate the responsibility that comes with being President until you get that first briefing."

One senior advisor to three presidents recalls watching the revelation unfold, as talented, confident men realize what they've gotten themselves into. "When you get in, you discover nothing is what you expect, or believed, or have been told, or have campaigned on," he says. "It's much more complicated. Your first reaction is: *I've been set up*. Second is: *I have to think differently*. Third is: *Maybe they had it right*. And it isn't long before they ask, who am I gonna talk to about *this*?"

The problems a president faces, Eisenhower said, are "soul-racking. . . . The nakedness of the battlefield, when the soldier is all alone in the smoke and the clamor and the terror of war, is comparable to the loneliness—at times—of the presidency, when one man must conscientiously, deliberately, prayerfully scrutinize every argument, every proposal, every prediction, every alternative, every probable outcome of his action, and then—all alone—make his decision."

All alone—because just when a new president needs allies, his circle of trust shrinks. No one, with the possible exception of his family, treats

him the same, and no one, with the exception of his predecessors, knows what this is like. "The sycophants will stand in the rain a week to see you and will treat you like a king," House Speaker Sam Rayburn warned Truman when he took office. "They'll come sliding in and tell you you're the greatest man alive—but you know and I know you ain't." Everything a president says, even to his inner circle, is analyzed, interpreted, acted upon; even questions are read as decisions. So he trains himself: no idle comments, no thinking out loud, and grows increasingly guarded; he worries that people only tell him what they think he wants to hear. "The Presidency," Kennedy observed, "is not a very good place to make new friends." He and his brother Bobby used to imagine a book they'd write one day—*The Poison of the Presidency*.

But that poison is not something they can talk about; how can you complain about a burden you fought to bear? Thomas Jefferson called the presidency "a splendid misery." They face only hard choices and high stakes: the easy decisions never make it to the president's desk. When Eisenhower was ridiculed for playing so much golf, Truman, no friend of Ike's at the time, defended him: "I am sure that the problems of the President follow him around the golf course . . . and anywhere else he may go." But they bond in the locker room, since they all got into the game, "dared greatly," did not remain on the sidelines. If there is a club manifesto, it is Teddy Roosevelt's gauntlet, thrown down to all the armchair generals and righteous pundits: "It is not the critic who counts, not the one who points out how the strong man stumbled," he argued. "The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred with sweat and dust and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again . . . who, if he wins, knows the triumph of high achievement; and who, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly."

That also accounts for a regular club refrain, when they refuse to criticize their successors on the grounds that presidents act on information—and bear responsibilities—that outsiders can't fathom. "No one," Kennedy told historian David Herbert Donald early in 1962, "has a right to grade a President—not even poor James Buchanan—who has not sat in his chair, examined the mail and information that came across his desk, and learned why he made decisions." Truman and Eisenhower went for a drink together after Kennedy's funeral; they talked about how no one ever really understands why presidents make the decisions they do: