

Using the Video Unit 7: The Modern Presidency

A) Pre-Viewing Activity and Discussion

Before viewing the video, discuss the following questions:

- * To what extent do modern presidents resemble the expectations of the founders?
- * Why have presidents become so important to modern American government?
- * In what political arena does the president typically find the greatest occasion to exert his skill and authority?
- * Why does our Constitution entrust the power to declare war to the Congress?
- * Do the high expectations that Americans have for the presidency ensure disillusionment with the incumbents?

B) Video and Discussion

The video includes three segments. If you are watching on videocassette, watch each segment and pause to discuss it, using the questions below. If you are watching a real-time broadcast on the Annenberg Channel, watch the complete video and then discuss.

1. Getting the Job Done: The Johnson Treatment

Today, the responsibilities of the president are vastly greater than at any time in our history. The president is our nation's public face to the world, commander-in-chief, chaplain to the nation in times of crisis, and head of his political party, among many other things. In modern times, there is one president who used the power of his position better than many who came before him, and many who have come since. Lyndon Baines Johnson became our 36th President of the United States in the blink of an eye, but he had been preparing for the role throughout his career. He had been a congressman, senator, and a vice president, and along the way he had become a master at getting what he wanted. The so-called "Johnson treatment" describes Johnson's unique style in getting others to support his favored policy and political positions. A look at how Johnson marshalled the Civil Rights Bill through Congress shows how the Johnson treatment was used to overcome entrenched legislative opposition, but it also demonstrates the power of a skilled and highly involved president.

Discussion Questions:

- * What skills did President Johnson use to gain passage of the Civil Rights Bill?
- * Can other presidents replicate the Johnson style or is it unique to one individual?

2. Ronald Reagan: The Great Communicator

President Ronald Reagan's efforts to mobilize public and political support for his mammoth tax cut of \$784 billion (about 1.5 trillion in today's dollars) are a testament to his "great communicator" reputation. The sheer size of the cuts made it a difficult sell to many in Congress, but the president used a speech to the nation to move aside his congressional opponents. Reagan's speech is a classic example of a president "going public" to roll out a major policy proposal. The president's personal advisors helped him hone a message designed to garner broad public appeal. Reagan's efforts to sell his tax cut were among the many times he employed the "people strategy" during his two terms as president.

Discussion Questions

- * To what extent has the development of the modern media helped presidents?
- * What are the advantages for presidents of going public?
- * What are the disadvantages for presidents of going public?

3. Robert Reich: Locked in the Cabinet

The president's cabinet is made up of his 14 cabinet secretaries and others he may include such as the vice president and the directors of key federal agencies. In general, however, presidents in the last few decades have come to depend less on the cabinet for advice and help and more on other staff and advisors within the White House Office and the Executive Office of the Presidency. Robert Reich, President Clinton's appointee for Labor Secretary as well as his close friend, directly experienced the marginalization of Clinton's cabinet. Reich learned early on that the key to power in a presidential administration is access, and that the staff in the White House's West Wing had a distinct advantage over others.

Discussion Questions

- * Why do presidents rely so heavily on staff in the White House Office and the Executive Office of the Presidency?
- * What did Secretary Reich take his campaign for a higher minimum wage to the press? Was this a good strategy?

C) Post-Viewing Activity and Discussion (10 minutes)

1. The Ideal President (10 minutes)

Take a few minutes to think about and then list all the qualities that you expect in a president. Compare your list of desirable traits to that of others. Discuss your lists with others and evaluate the likelihood that any one person can ever match the expectations. What does this tell us about our expectations of presidential leadership?