H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gary L. Rose. *The American Presidency Under Siege.* Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1997. xiv + 230 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7914-3338-6; $22.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-3337-9.

Reviewed by Joe Cammarano (Providence College)
Published on H-Teachpol (January, 1999)

Should We Worry about Weak Presidents and a Weakened Presidency?

Several books have been written in recent years lamenting the decline of presidential leadership in the United States. Gary Rose contributes his version of this lamentation with the publication of this book, but rather than focus–as most do–on the failure of the individuals who serve in the White House, Rose examines the systemic explanations for the crisis in presidential leadership. Rose believes that those who focus on the misdeeds, incompetence, and mistakes of individual presidents miss the fundamental problem of the modern presidency. Instead, he argues, "We need to focus on the systemic impediments to presidential leadership in order to fully understand how the presidency has reached its current state of immobility" (p. 12). In doing so, Rose presents an impressive picture of the causes of presidential failure, and sets up his conclusions that measures must be taken to restore a strong presidency.

To understand the siege that the presidency is under today, we must examine both external factors that threaten the presidency (such as the ever-burgeoning power of interest groups and the development of candidate-centered campaigns) and internal factors (the explosion of bureaucracy in the executive branch and within the White House staff). Rose effectively tells a story familiar to most students of the presidency: as the scope of responsibilities and expectations that presidents must bear continue to increase, the ability to use the party to exercise leadership has declined. These developments lead to a besieged presidency, and has made it virtually impossible for individual presidents to succeed.

Like many political scientists, Rose contends that stronger political parties afford presidents greater potential for decisive leadership. Parties provide stability, teamwork among political elites, accountability for government actions, and linkage between the president and the American people. Rose's discussion of the decline in political parties (an excellent summary of political, technological and social trends) leads him to conclude that presidents are vulnerable in a system of weak parties, as interest groups and Washington insiders tend to control the context of public policy debates. Broad programmatic presidential initiatives like the Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" are not possible in this atomistic political universe. Instead, when presidents try to lead, as President Clinton tried to do with his "New Covenant," they are bound to be defeated, since the decline in party power makes such initiatives virtually impossible to push through a system dominated by special interests.

Once he establishes the reality and the consequences of weak political parties on the presidency, Rose offers case studies of the two recent Democrats who have served in the White House to show how presidents can't govern in a system of weak parties. In his discussions of presidents Carter and Clinton, Rose again points to the problems of working within a system that has no unifying force. Of course, many of the problems these two presidents faced were of their own making. In our current electoral system, those who help presidents get elected tend to become the closest policy advisors of presidents. This is not always a good idea. Rose writes: "While such individuals might be quite adept at managing presidential campaigns, it is doubtful that they have the experience necessary for guiding legislative measures through the many minefields of the congressional decision-making process" (p. 95). Still, the greatest challenge for presidents is the lack of strong parties, as parties provide at least a glimmer of hope for presidents who wish to lead.

Given the centrality of weak political parties in his formulation of the current presidential dilemma, Rose offers two chapters on political and legal reforms that will strengthen parties and the presidency. The chapter on party reform has many proposals trumpeted by other strong party advocates, such as pre-primary conventions, reforming the campaign finance system to fun-

nel resources to parties rather than candidates and free advertising time to the parties. Rose offers additional party reforms that are often overlooked by those who focus on the presidency, such as lobbying reform, which will reduce the power of interest groups, and the reintroduction of political patronage as a mechanism for greater presidential influence over the executive bureaucracy. He also contends that legal reforms must also be made: presidents must have more control over the bureaucracy, need the line-item veto, and should be able to serve as many terms as the electorate will permit. The combination of party reforms and legal reforms will, in Rose's view, strengthen the leadership capacity of the office, and will likely lead to stronger presidential leadership.

Rose's book is a useful read for anyone who teaches American politics, particularly those who need to teach the presidency, but who are not presidential scholars. It is also an excellent book for advanced undergraduate students, who will appreciate Rose's systematic analysis of the presidency in the context of current political realities. Where Rose falls short, however, is in making a persuasive argument for why we need a strong president. In his final chapter, he outlines his case for a strong presidency, something that might have been better done in the first or second chapter. The only elected official with a national constituency, Rose argues that presidents are the best venue for reducing the deficit, dealing with social problems, and addressing crime.

There are several reasons why this argument is unpersuasive. First, there is much evidence to refute the argument that presidents are more fiscally prudent than Congress. The current federal budget could be seen as testimony to the benefits of a political system without strong parties. With divided government, neither party is able to enact its agenda, and it is in the interest of both the current president and Congress to appear as if they are acting responsibly. Second, many social problems like crime, racism and ethnic strife are not problems that presidents can directly address through policy leadership. In fact, it is in these areas where the individual presidents may be more influential than the office of the presidency. In other words, the ability of presidents to move the American people in these areas is determined not by the ability to shepherd through comprehensive policy agendas. Instead, the greatest potential of presidents is in their use of the office to move the hearts and minds of the citizenry. No reform is needed for such power, just presidents with a desire to use the "bully pulpit" for promoting social progress.

Perhaps the most important reason to question Rose's thesis is that there is little evidence that the American people desire strong political parties, or, perhaps, even strong presidents. In an era where democratic impulses are more powerful than are the desires for strong authority, an argument for strong parties and presidents may be misplaced. Perhaps the fundamental problem with the current presidency is not its vulnerability, but the expectations of strength placed upon it by political scientists and political commentators. Maybe the time of strong presidents with broad policy agendas has passed, and political science needs to catch up with the greater societal trends that have led to a questioning of strong leadership. If this is the case, then a better way to understand the modern presidency is to look not at the ability of presidents to develop and implement comprehensive strategies, but to look at the ability of the presidency to adapt to the mercurial flow of political power and influence. In other words, we may need to look more at the tactical potential of the office and, yes, the individual abilities of presidents, to fully understand and appreciate the modern presidency.

Strong presidents have emerged from a weak office at various points in our history without any political or legal reform. In this century a strong presidency (or the expectation of one) has developed in part from the Progressive notion that presidents can use their rhetorical powers to move the institutions of government. Also, presidents have increasingly used the public as direct players in the process of political bargaining. The argument that, in trying to do everything, failed presidential initiatives and a presidency that can't dominate our political system is a problem that merits dramatic systemic reform, is debatable.

Overall, Rose has produced a wonderfully readable and interesting book on the problems of the modern presidency. It should be a great use to students and faculty alike. Its focus on systemic aspects of the presidency is a refreshing change from the usual obsession in popular culture with individual presidents and their personal strengths and weaknesses. However, in failing to address the considerable impact of personal resources and motivations of presidents, the analysis fails to reveal the fundamental reality of presidential history, that, even with a weak office, there have any, most likely will be, strong political context provide as much guidance to students of the presidency as the constitutional, legal and political developments of the office.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other

permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

Patrick H. O'Neil, Ph.D. Assistant Professor Department of Political Science Northern Arizona University Flagstaff AZ USA 86011-5036 tel. 520.523.6538 fax 520.523.6777 http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/pho2/

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Joe Cammarano. Review of Rose, Gary L., *The American Presidency Under Siege*. H-Teachpol, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2650

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.