WHERE POWER STOPS

The Making and Unmaking of Presidents and Prime Ministers

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PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by
Profile Books Ltd
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London
WC1X 9HD

www.profilebooks.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Dante by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 333 0
eISBN 978 1 78283 599 8

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INTRODUCTION

WHERE POWER STOPS

THERE IS A STORY that often gets told about modern presidents and prime ministers, and sometimes gets told by them as well. The politician spends half a lifetime working tirelessly towards the top job, with the goal of making a real difference once he or she gets there. These politicians are driven by personal ambition, of course, but they also harbour genuine hopes of doing some good. Then, when they finally reach the summit, they discover that the power of the office is nowhere near what they had assumed. They issue their instructions. Dutiful officials nod along encouragingly. But nothing really changes. Once the door to the Oval Office or No. 10 closes behind them, and they settle their feet under the desk, the new president or prime minister finds out that it's just another room and just another desk. It feels like true power is still somewhere out of reach.

An emblematic version of this tale is recounted by Jonathan Powell in his book *The New Machiavelli*. Powell was Tony Blair's chief of staff in Downing Street, and he saw at first hand his boss's frustrations with the limits of his ability to get things done. Powell describes Blair's enthusiasm, on becoming prime minister, for undertaking an immediate programme of reform. He wanted to start making a difference straight away. But the more he agitated for change, the less responsive the machinery

of government proved to be. There was an empty space where Blair had believed his prime ministerial authority would reside. 'The new Prime Minister pulls on the levers of power,' Powell writes, 'and nothing happens.' It wasn't just Blair, and it's not just prime ministers. George W. Bush prided himself on his ability to make a decision. But according to those who worked closely with him, Bush never learned that just because he was president it didn't follow that his decisions would turn into actions. Too often he was deciding into the void.

Usually, these stories are presented as a kind of morality tale. In politics you should never assume that there is a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. It's better to know how little is waiting for you, like a weird inversion of the parable of the Wizard of Oz. In place of the Yellow Brick Road is the greasy pole, which has to be ascended to reach the Emerald City. Yet the successful climber finds that his or her fate is not to encounter a shrunken wizard at the end of it. Instead it is to become that person: the impostor behind the curtain.

How do politicians react when they discover themselves in that position? Some, like Bush, never quite acknowledge it. Others, like Blair, decide to do something about it. Blair concluded that he had to build the machinery that would enable his administration to deliver on its ambitions. He called this instrument 'the Delivery Unit'. It was designed to make sure that the levers in Downing Street were connected to the rest of government. Yet, even after ten years in power, Blair was frustrated with how little he had managed to achieve. One reason he was reluctant to leave office at the end was a nagging feeling that he was only just beginning to get the hang of it. Real power still felt out of reach, somewhere over the horizon. Since quitting front-line politics, Blair has made himself into a salesman for the idea of 'Deliverology', which promises to help politicians around

the world with the problem of actually getting things done. It's a pretty threadbare prospectus. Perma-tanned and increasingly wizened, Blair cuts a tawdry figure these days. Here is another version of the morality tale. The wizard has spent so long behind the curtain that he doesn't realise how diminished he appears when he steps out in front.

There are other ways of responding to the deficit of power at the summit of politics. The truly paranoid politician believes that the reason the levers are not working is that someone has cut the strings. Faced with the frustrations of office, it is always tempting to imagine that there is a conspiracy at work to prevent meaningful change. Blame it on the 'deep state' – or, in the politer British version, on 'Sir Humphrey'. Probably no one is immune from this suspicion, especially in the long reaches of the night. All the politicians I write about in this book had moments when they believed that dark forces were at work to prevent them getting their way. But only one has turned this belief into his governing philosophy. Donald Trump's response to any setback is to claim that he is the victim of a deliberate attempt to subvert his authority. He cannot accept that there are inherent limits to the power of his office. So any manifestations of those limits become further evidence of the conspiracy against him. These are the dangers of electing a confirmed narcissist to an office that is not as powerful as it seems.

That said, it is not true that none of the levers works. Some do, all too well. Another temptation is to keep pulling until you find one that produces a direct response. Inevitably, for both presidents and prime ministers, this tends to be the lever that links to the armed forces. Again, Blair is emblematic here, but he is far from unusual. Chastened by his inability to get traction with his domestic agenda, Blair latched gratefully on to the opportunity presented by 9/11 to turn himself into a player on the international stage. It wasn't just that he wanted to put the world to rights according to his own lights. It was also that he was able to do so, more easily than he could put his own

government right, because the instrument to hand was military force. The same was true of Bush. But it has equally been true of politicians as otherwise different from each other as Thatcher and Clinton, Obama and Trump. The power of the office they hold is least constrained when it comes to taking action abroad. That is why presidents and prime ministers, who almost never get elected on a foreign policy platform, often find that foreign policy is what ends up defining their tenure at the top. The international arena is where they can make the biggest difference, for better or for worse.

The trauma of 9/11 – and what followed – reveals another fundamental truth. The power of presidents and prime ministers is hugely dependent on the accidents of history. For Thatcher, the Falklands War completely altered what it was possible for her to achieve in office. Without the Argentine invasion of April 1982, over which she had no control, her premiership would have been very different. For Gordon Brown, the financial crisis of 2007–8 reconfigured what he could accomplish, as it did for Obama's presidency. Such unforeseen events do not suddenly endow presidents and prime ministers with superpowers: the frustrations of trying to get things done remain just as intense (as both Brown and Obama discovered). But they do provide an opportunity to break out of a rut.

Obama's one-time chief of staff Rahm Emanuel is credited with coining the memorable line 'Never let a crisis go to waste'. Elected leaders chafing against the limits of their power can take comfort from the thought that something is bound to turn up that will alter their situation. That is often why they cling on, even past the point when it would appear easier to give up. It is why, for instance, Theresa May clung on after the 2017 British general election and through the countless months of Brexit travails that followed. As they say of the weather in Texas – if you don't like it, just stick around. But as with the weather in Texas, it isn't all that reassuring to know change is coming. It doesn't leave you any more in control of your fate.

There is one further response available to politicians who find that high office feels like getting access to a control panel that no one has bothered to plug in. They can reject the premise that lies behind the metaphor. The mistake is to think of the exercise of power as like operating a machine. It isn't levers you push and pull to get things done: it's people. The instruments of politics are human beings, and it is their hopes and fears, their resilience and their frailty, that you have to operate on. A successful president or prime minister needs to know, above all else, what it is that makes other people tick. That's why this book starts with the presidency of Lyndon Baines Johnson, the master manipulator of human weakness.

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LBJ is a hero to many contemporary politicians, from across the political spectrum. Why? Because he showed that it is possible to escape the fable of the Wizard of Oz. Johnson went behind the curtain and, notwithstanding the empty space he found there, decided that he would make things happen anyway. First as Majority Leader in the US Senate, then as President, Johnson achieved his goals by his ruthlessness, his relentlessness, his attention to detail and the sheer force of his political personality. Johnson passed the legislation that had defeated his predecessors, including the great civil rights reforms of the mid-1960s. He did it despite not believing in it (or at least, as a lifelong Southern racist, never having shown any sign of believing it). He did it in part simply to prove that he could. He threatened and bribed, he caressed and cajoled, he literally pushed and pulled his fellow politicians – Johnson rarely met anyone without giving them a hug or a tug with his big, bearlike hands – until they bent to his will. Johnson is the politician other politicians look to when they want reassurance that anything is possible if you set your mind to it. And so long as you don't have too many scruples.

As heroes go, Johnson remains profoundly flawed. He was an exceptional politician, but he did not buck the wider trends that bedevil lesser leaders. He was extraordinarily dependent on his good fortune: the presidency came his way not by his own efforts but because of the terrible fate that struck down his predecessor, John F. Kennedy, who may have been on the brink of dispensing with Johnson's services before his assassination. Johnson was a vicious and paranoid man, prone to lashing out at enemies real and imagined. He invariably suspected that the political establishment was plotting against him; often he was right. His signal achievements were in domestic policy, but he too was unable to resist the temptations that came his way to wade in overseas. Johnson's tragedy was that he did not need a war to make the office of president live up to its billing. He had already done that by his own efforts. But he dared not retreat from the war in Vietnam he inherited for fear of appearing weak. So he kept pulling at that lever long after he knew he should stop.

The other reason why Johnson looms so large – over this book and over the recent history of political leadership – is because of an additional piece of good fortune. Johnson has been lucky in his biographer. The heroic figure worshipped by so many aspiring politicians is the one who emerges from Robert Caro's epic four-volume life of Johnson (the fifth and final volume is still to come), which has become required reading for would-be leaders. Caro's LBJ is the ultimate up-by-his-bootstraps politico, a man who masters his destiny by mastering all those who come within his orbit. Caro shows how Johnson conquered each political institution he reached by learning its rules and then learning how to make them work to his advantage, starting with local politics in Texas, then on to Washington, up through the House and the Senate, and ultimately arriving at the presidency itself. LBJ made the political weather wherever he went, and many people now read Caro to try to find out how.

Caro's thesis is that, as Johnson rose in politics, we discover

more and more of who he really was. So when he finally reached the most powerful position of all, we get to see the person behind the political mask. As president, Johnson's racism fell away and his essential compassion for the oppressed and the dispossessed came through. Power corrupts, as Caro acknowledges, but 'what is seldom said, but what is equally true, is that power also *reveals*'. The highest office reveals the true nature of the man. It's a nice idea. But I don't buy it. Instead, I think almost the opposite is the case. The presidency didn't show us some essential truth about Johnson. But Johnson shows us some essential truths about the presidency.

Like most politicians, Johnson's character was pretty set by the time he reached the top. He didn't change as president. He was the same unscrupulous, driven, opportunistic, cruel, avaricious, sentimental, domineering, capacious, compelling, faintly monstrous figure he had always been, even as a young man. What was different were the circumstances in which he found himself. At each stage of his career that distinctive personality probed and tested the limits of power, looking for outlets for his desire to dominate. Where he found them reveals what can be done by a president – and also what can't. Johnson's personality works like the political equivalent of a barium dye, passing through the corridors of power and illuminating the hidden passages and concealed blockages that would otherwise be almost impossible for an outsider to detect. America's political institutions have never been laid so bare as they are by Caro, even though he is ostensibly just writing the life of a man. That is what political biography can do: once we understand the character of the person, we can follow that character behind the curtain and get to see what is really there.

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In this book I write about Johnson and seven other recent American presidents and British prime ministers (along with

one would-be president who never made it, John Edwards, for reasons I'll explain shortly). In each case I start from the premise that the personality of the politician helps explain the scope and the limitations of the office. None of these people was fundamentally changed by their time in power. The person who arrives at the summit of politics is recognisably the same as the person who comes down from it. Who they really are was set well in advance. What changes are the circumstances in which they find themselves and their expectation of what can be done while they are there.

The presidents and prime ministers I describe here are readily identifiable as the people they were when much younger. Their childhoods did much to shape their political futures, and so did their educations. Thatcher, Blair and May all went to Oxford, and the subsequent careers of each cannot be understood without seeing how differently they experienced student life. Each of their premierships was an extension of what they learned at university, not just about how the world works but also about how they might fit into it. It is also striking how many of these politicians saw themselves as future leaders from a very young age. All of them were capable of envisaging themselves in high office, no matter how remote from it they were. The teenage Theresa May, growing up in a Gloucestershire vicarage, truly believed she would be prime minister one day. This was a ridiculous idea. It was also entirely correct.

There is a selection bias here. I do not – with the exception of Edwards – write about any of those many thousands of individuals who also believed they would lead their countries one day but never made it, or even came close. But the fact that the subjects of these essays were the exceptionally lucky ones does nothing to diminish the importance of their sense of destiny. If you have a dream and it comes true, remembering that other people's dreams usually don't will not make your experiences feel less remarkable. If anything, it makes them even more so.

The source material for these stories varies from case to case. Some come from memoirs written by the leaders themselves (Blair, Brown). Some are from books written by colleagues or friends (Clinton speaking with Taylor Branch, Obama as described by Ben Rhodes). Some are the work of sympathetic biographers (Caro on Johnson, Charles Moore on Thatcher). Some are from semi-hostile biographies (Rosa Prince on May) or even from what are little more than hatchet jobs (Bob Woodward on Trump, Tom Bower on Blair). Yet it is striking how consistently the theme of character being destiny comes through in each of them. It is not just Johnson's personality that works as a kind of barium dye. Once we get to see the type of person we are dealing with, we start to get a picture of the true shape of their political power. Inevitably, the dye reveals a different trace in each case. Where the power stops shifts as different political personalities come and go. In that sense, reading Caro as a how-to guide for political leadership is probably a mistake. Only LBJ can do what LBJ did. But in seeing how it was done, we get to understand the limits of the possible.

There are a few other broader lessons we can draw. It helps to arrive in office knowing who you are. Johnson's preternatural calm on the day of Kennedy's assassination – when his long foretold destiny suddenly came into focus – is the ultimate example of how self-knowledge may be the most valuable political commodity of all. This is not the same as having a sense of self-worth. Johnson probably never got over a feeling of inadequacy, despite all his extraordinary accomplishments. It was what drove him. Obama, always poised and self-contained, knew his own worth full well. Yet he accomplished less as a result, because he never really pushed the limits of what he could achieve. Thatcher, despite her reputation for knowing her own mind, was surprisingly fragile in her confidence and scatty in her convictions. Yet she understood, with an almost uncanny instinct, what someone with her

personality could achieve as prime minister, especially when the occasion arose. She did not know much about the country she governed. But she knew how to seize her moment when the chance came to govern it.

Blair was far more self-confident and sure of what he believed than Thatcher was. But it did him little good. He persisted in trying to make the office of prime minister suit his convictions rather than trying to adapt those convictions to the limits of what the office made possible. Clinton was perhaps the most intelligent man ever to occupy the Oval Office. His mind was voracious, almost carnal in its appetite for new information and fresh insights. It was too much. He couldn't contain the intelligence he had within the space of the role he occupied. It spilled out, and too often it went nowhere.

It is sometimes said that it doesn't do for a president or prime minister to be too smart: a second-class mind is more likely to make for a first-class leader. Like many such generalisations about politics, there's some truth to it, but also plenty that it misses. There are lots of different ways for a politician to be intelligent, and there are many things that politicians can know which are unknown to anyone on the outside. What matters is whether they know what it is that they know. And if they do, whether they understand what that knowledge is good for.

This brings us to Trump. If Johnson is where this book starts, Trump represents a troubling place to end up, and not just because his story is not yet done. Does he fit the broader patterns of political leadership I describe here, or is he somehow outside them? In many ways, Trump exemplifies the idea that the personality of the politician reveals the character of the office he occupies. Trump's persona is not going to change. He is unnervingly consistent to what he has always been:

showman, chauvinist, charlatan. What he is doing is testing how far a man like that is able to push the boundaries of what a president can be. He has been more successful than many people believed was possible. His willingness to say anything – and possibly to believe anything – in order to get his way turns out to be a surprisingly effective means of maximising his authority. Given that a majority of Americans revile him, he has done quite a lot with the limited power he has. Perhaps he too bucks the fable of the Wizard of Oz. He simply refuses to acknowledge the existence of the curtain. He wants people to see!

What makes Trump so unnerving, however, is his seeming lack of any self-knowledge. He is not really probing for the limits of what the presidency allows, because that would require him to accept that there are limits. He does what he does regardless. The Trump I write about here is both more and less than a president should be. More, because he is behaving as though his power were truly as he believes it to be. Less, because he is also behaving as though the presidency were just another job (businessman, reality TV host, mafia boss). Much of the time he does not seem to appreciate where he is. None of the other politicians I write about is anything like as cavalier as Trump, or anything like as erratic. Why would someone whose personality is so fixed be so unpredictable in office? Because that personality makes him incapable of seeing the presidency as its previous occupants have seen it, as an office that comes with certain expectations of how to behave. Trump is, in institutional terms, unhinged.

Does that mean he is mentally unfit to be president? During his time in the White House Trump has been dogged by repeated rumours about his intellectual incapacity – he has been variously described as a 'fucking moron', 'like an eleven-year-old child', a 'dope', an 'idiot' and 'dumb as shit'. And that's just how his former aides and colleagues speak about him. Plenty of psychiatrists have pushed back hard against the

so-called 'Goldwater rule', which prevents them from diagnosing the psychological failings of public figures at second hand. For many, this injunction bars them from simply stating the obvious: Trump is out of his mind.

But we should be wary of assuming that this is enough to place Trump beyond the pale of conventional political leadership. Most of those I write about here have had their sanity questioned. Blair was widely thought to have lost his mental bearings during and after the Iraq War. Brown was pursued by stories of titanic rages and prolonged depressions. I have spoken to people who believe that the true story of May's premiership has been suppressed, given that as a type-1 diabetic she faces potentially serious cognitive handicaps, including an inability either to process new information or to change her mind. That would explain Brexit! These kinds of accusation come with the territory: presidents and prime ministers are often thought to be psychologically undone by office. It is one of the ways we express our discomfort with anyone aspiring to that kind of power.

Max Weber, writing one hundred years ago, made the case that the risk of madness is not simply an accidental by-product of high office. It is an essential part of it: a feature, not a bug. Presidents and prime ministers have to deal with the mental strain of bearing enormous political responsibility without necessarily having the personal authority to match. The leaders of modern states hold the lives of millions in their hands, and yet they often can't even get the people in the next room to do what they want. It might make anyone a little crazy. Leadership is a constant tug of war between the rules of political accountability and the law of unintended consequences. That has not changed in the time since Weber wrote. One reason it is so hard to be a president or a prime minister is that the voters hold the wizard responsible for what happens. Even though the wizard is just the impostor behind the curtain.

By far the sanest president or prime minister of recent

times was Obama. He went out of his way to maintain an even keel, even in the face of the most outrageous provocation. He made sure that he stayed connected with his family and that he got enough downtime. Is it possible to be too sane for the presidency? Certainly there were moments when Obama's insistence on keeping his cool looked like a missed opportunity. Sometimes one longed to see him let rip. But that was not his style. Nor was it what got him elected.

This is the other deep tension that resides in the character of anyone who pursues the highest office. The personality traits that can win you the crucial election may not be the ones that suit the role to which you have been elected. Campaigning, as the slogan goes, is not governing. Obama the candidate was known to his inner circle as '"No drama" Obama'. During his long, bruising, underdog campaign in 2008 to wrest the Democratic nomination from Hillary Clinton, and then for the duration of the shorter but equally high-wire act needed to win a general election that was taking place as the world economy was having a heart attack, his level temperament was a golden asset. Refusing to get ruffled got him over the line. But when he became president he needed other skills too. His preference for cool analysis over impulsive decision-making and his insistence that he would not be baited by his baying opponents – as his wife, Michelle, memorably said in 2016, 'when they go low, we go high' – were still assets. But they were not enough.

Personal development is very difficult over the course of a political career, especially when being who you are has made you what you have become. Why would political leaders whose approach to politics won them office abandon that approach once they get there? Trump stormed to the Republican nomination and ultimately the presidency in 2016 with a scorched earth campaign that recognised no limits and took no prisoners. He defeated his rivals by mocking them, belittling them and, when the opportunity arose, lying about them. That is how he has carried on conducting himself as president, to

continuing howls of outrage from his opponents. But who is to say he is wrong? If high office doesn't change who politicians really are, we shouldn't expect them to change how it makes them behave.

Some politicians reach the top without having to win an election to get there. It was Johnson's misfortune, until it became his good fortune, that his temperament made him a terrible presidential candidate, with a record of abject failure before he finally inherited the top job by chance. He failed as a national candidate because he could not adjust the manipulative and Machiavellian skill set that had served him so well in the Senate to the people-pleasing demands of a presidential campaign. But becoming president by default meant that he did not have to adjust who he was in order to reach the Oval Office, where that skill set served him well again. Once it was time for him to fight an election in his own right in 1964, he had already shown he could get things done. The job of president suited him, despite his being fundamentally unsuited to winning it.

Theresa May also reached the top without fighting a general election in her own right. When she faced one in 2017, by choice rather than by necessity, the skill set that had got her to Downing Street let her down. The tenacious, colourless, undeviating politician who tiptoed over the corpses to inherit the crown in the aftermath of Brexit morphed on the campaign trail into the deathless Maybot: cold, mechanical and seemingly without a personality of her own. Jeremy Corbyn, a politician for whom campaigning has been the lifeblood of his entire career, ran rings round her. Nevertheless, May somehow survived the experience, and her premiership was kept afloat by the dutiful doggedness that remains her calling card as a politician.

Change is hard for politicians. But what makes political leadership so precarious is that it is relatively easy for voters. If we get tired of our politicians, we can get rid of them.

The qualities that we once appreciated in a leader can turn surprisingly quickly into what we loathe about them. LBJ's deviousness caught up with him in the end. Blair's sincerity came to seem like sanctimony. Obama's coolness turned into aloofness. May's steadfastness made her come across like a robot. Sooner or later Corbyn's simplicity will come to appear like idiocy. Another truism of democratic life is that all political careers end in failure. Perhaps it would be easier to say that no political personality is built to last at the very top. The demands of the highest office are never fixed.

Yet if there is one quality that is indispensable for anyone at or near the summit of political life, it is stamina. This does not have to be physical stamina, though that helps. Corbyn has a reputation for being a lazy politician. He takes time off in lieu whenever he is expected to record a TV interview on a Sunday. He rarely strays outside his comfort zone. But there has been nothing lazy about his political career. As a backbench MP he stuck it out for decades, even when he had very little to show for it. Corbyn hung in there, where others might have given up. As a result, he was still around when his chance came. What Corbyn and May have in common, and in spades, is resilience. Another way of describing an inflexible political personality is to call it durability.

The British and US political systems are different, so the kinds of chances they throw up for resilient politicians will be different too. The presidency is open to genuine outsiders in a way that the prime ministership is not. No one could reach No. 10, as Trump reached the White House, without ever having stood for election before in any capacity. A presidential campaign, running over two or more years, with its relentless requirements for fundraising and attention-seeking, makes distinctive demands. It suits personalities as different as