

## **How powerful is the American President?**

The Founding fathers of America believed in a separation of powers, a system of checks and balances and a federal system of government. That way power would be diffused and decentralised and tyranny would be avoided. Implicit in the constitution is the principle of checks and balances. This refers to the belief that the founding fathers had that no one branch of the constitutional and government system would dominate the rest. Thus President and congress often have to approve the appointments and actions of each other, with the supreme court in the background protecting the integrity of the constitution. There the president is not all powerful. After Watergate, presidents continue to find it a struggle to assert their authority. Regan's authority was compromised by the "Iran gate" affair; Bush faced criticism for the inadequacy of his domestic policy agenda; and Clinton suffered the defeat of his main policy proposals. All of them were frustrated by congresses unwillingness to conform to the president's agenda, highlighting again a weakness.

In the British system of parliamentary government, a PM with an overall majority is more or less assured of getting his/her policies approved but the US system deliberately make it hard for the executive to get policies through the system, this avoids tyranny but it frustrates proposals of change – e.g. Clintons health bill.

Although the president of the United states is often regarded as the most powerful head of state in the world. It is never the less a constitutionally limited presidency. The powers of the executive, vested in the president, are set out in article 2 of the constitution, but they are enmeshed in a separation of powers.

The constitution powers of the president, as seen as the perspective of 18<sup>th</sup> century conditions, were regarded as the minimum necessary to ensure efficient and unified government. The president has the constitutional power to recommend bills to congress and manage the governments budget, to make treaties with foreign states and direct federal administration. As well as being head of the executive branch – with jurisdiction over the government bureaucracy – he was also to be the commander and chief of the armed forces.

The growth of presidential power during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has certainly been great, but has not been absolute, and the presidents' powers are limited in many respects. The presidents powers under the constitution may have expanded but as have the congress and the courts and therefore the president still has to work within a "separation of powers". Even with a friendly majority in congress, presidents proposals may be rejected or amended.

The president may be the head of an economic super power, but it is not the only super power in the world, and domestically that power is not solely the white houses. Within the US a degree of economic power has been asserted by congress, and always the multinational organisations constitute a formidable power beyond that of the president.

In terms of military and diplomatic initiatives, America has not always been successful and, when power is personalised, it is the president who inevitably takes the blame. The growth of democracy may have enhanced the power of the president, but the trend towards personalised politics has also produced more polarised politics, with the president having as many political enemies as well as friends.

Although there is no doubt that the executive is powerful, it could be argued that the president is only the public spokesperson.

The founding fathers would barely recognise the American presidency today. Yet its effectiveness is still influenced by the constitutional devices, which they employed to prevent an over-powerful executive. The president is the victim of a deep paradox

within the American political psyche – a craving for clear leadership but a distrust of those who exercise power. The changing role of the USA also presents the president with another paradox – while it is now the worlds only super power it is no longer the worlds economic colossus: Japan, Europe and in the future China are major rivals. With the collapse of soviet communism even the president’s role as leader of the western democracies is no longer so clear-cut. In Mervin apt description “Presidents are “Gulliver figures”, giants in theory but in practice tied by a multitude of restrictions.