

“Merely a ‘bargainer in chief’.” Is this a fair assessment of the American president?

“The power of the president is the power to persuade”, said Richard Nuestadt. Bill Clinton is a recent example, not America’s best ever policy maker, a weak first term and a sex scandal would have signaled the end for most, but ‘Slick Willie’s’ ability to talk his way into and out of a situation have ensured he be remembered as one of the USA’s most successful presidents of all time. But if a president doesn’t have persuasive powers, are they destined for failure? Is the president ‘merely bargainer in chief’ or can he or she be an effective president with minimal oratorical skills? Due to stringent checks and balances on presidential power (laid down in the constitution by the founding fathers in 1789) the president’s powers are restricted in certain areas of his decision making. With people there to question the president’s every move and with separation of powers far more apparent in the US than in other countries like the UK, the ‘power to persuade’ is more important than ever. All areas of America are increasingly scrutinizing the president’s actions (such as Bush’s recent plea for \$89 billion to fund the war on Iraq) and his ability to persuade the legislative (as Bush did in this case), other branches of government and more importantly the American people and media is now a necessity for a successful term in office.

The president’s relationship with the US’s legislative body is very important. Congress can make or break a president’s popularity, and sometimes even their career. Without congress, the president cannot sign and seal treaties (these need to be ratified by congress), he or she cannot confirm appointments (congress have to give the president’s latest employees the ‘once over’) and the president needs the congress to grant him money on most issues (such as the war on Iraq). Tactics used for bargaining with congress often include the use of media; This is when a president uses the media to persuade the people that his argument or policy is the right one, and then congress are usually compelled (though not officially) to agree due to the ‘presidential mandate’ gained from his support on that issue - through this we can see just how important powers of persuasion are, as one area of America, if persuaded, can lead to the persuasion of other areas, the veto; which is when the president can veto a congressional decision, and the EXOP; the executive office of the president. The members of the EXOP often bargain with congressmen and ‘strike deals’ to confirm their support for the president’s policy. The British system, however, has no such bargaining tactics, although the Prime Minister can influence the House of Commons decision through the media and public opinion, the veto and his own private office of officials to persuade for him (EXOP) do not exist - although one could argue these are unnecessary in Britain as the power to persuade is far less important than in the USA.

Other branches of government that the president often bargains with are the supreme court and individual states. The president has absolutely no power over the supreme court, and therefore, cannot bargain effectively with them at all. He, too, has little power over individual states, but he gets round this by striking bargains and with bribes, for instance the president will secure a state decision by promising to launch his election campaign in the state capital.

A very important part of America that the president needs to maintain a good relationship is the media. The media then feeds the American people with its desired information, and so a good relationship with the media means being on good terms with public. To get himself elected in the first place the president has had to bargain with the media and people. When he needs things to be done, he often turns to the

newspaper and offers them an exclusive, or alternatively makes a TV appearance. The president's image is very important, and an example of this would be George Bush's speech to the American people about Iraq. It was filmed on the coast of Long Island in such a way that it gave the illusion he was out at sea on an aircraft carrier. The people admired this, and he gained support. Clinton's oratorical skills during the Lewinsky affair also gained him great respect and his use of newspaper and TV to 'bargain' and maintain his innocence meant he won the hearts of many American people.

Nuestadt's idea of the American president isn't a far cry from the truth. The president has to bargain his way into and out of almost every policy and decision, and his ability to do this well is very important. Saying that, is the president's power limited by his powers of persuasion? Yes, I believe they are. Presidents can do as little or as much as they please, and their appearance and power to persuade the American people is what they are remembered for. In the early 90's (1992 - 1996) Bill Clinton's first term was a failure. He promised health and gun reforms among others. 4 years after being elected, he had achieved little, yet he was able to persuade the American people to vote him in again, and in his next 4 years he did make an impact. You can say that it was the economy that got Clinton reelected, it's strength at the time of the election, but it still needed a presentable, articulate persuader to convince the people that he was the man for them. Summing up, I believe there are many factors to being a successful president, and no, not all of them are persuasive ones. However, I believe, to take advantage of the situations you are faced with, as a President you must be able to bargain your way to achieving your goal and getting the very best outcome from the most daunting situation.