

# AMERICAN POLITICS

**“What Factors contribute to a ‘Failed’ presidency? Illustrate your answer with examples from the period 1961-2004”**

On the surface, the most straightforward way of deciding who can be deemed a successful president is whether they complete a second term of presidency by gaining a victory upon re-election after completion of their first term. The biggest ‘failure’ of a president is surely not being victorious in election for a second term of power, or worse still not being elected in the first place. More crucial is to establish the key ‘factors’ as to why a particular president ‘failed’ to successfully fulfil two terms of power. It would be too simplistic to state that, in recent times, Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, Clinton and Bush have all been successful for they have all completed, or in Bush’s case set to complete, two terms of Presidential power. In many cases Presidents have been extremely competent in some areas while systematically failed in others. It is also important to be aware that there can be polarising opinions, by different factions, as to whether a President has been a success or failure.

The President is represented as a symbol of American people for the simple reason that he is the only solitary official of America, excluding the vice president, that the whole country elects. The presidency, as with any imperative institution is in constant transition. Historically he receives the utmost respect and admiration by the American people, however recent presidents and controversies have significantly discredited the position. A major problem for the president is that due to the diverse culture in America, there are many different groups and so they will be judged by them as to how representative they are of their needs in his policies and bills. For instance during the 2004 U.S elections, in the post election polls, the key factors that voters stated determined who they voted for were, moral issues-22 per cent, job

opportunities/the economy-20 per cent and terrorism/security-19 per cent. Obviously people's priorities change from campaign to campaign and the president needs to be aware of these priorities and ensure he meets them. Earning clear public support is a key element to a President's status and ultimate success, if Congress are under pressure from the public then they are more likely to give their support to a presidency.

Over the years there has been great debate and mixed feelings on how powerful the President should be, on the one hand he can be seen as too powerful and unbounded by restrictions while on the other there is the opinion that he is too inhibited by provincial politicians confining themselves to short term advantage in place of long term strategies. The American President has varying power domestically to what they have abroad, often described as a 'Lion' in terms of foreign power but a 'Fox' at home. There is a narrow margin in the public's opinion as to whether a president has much or too little power.<sup>1</sup> For example President Johnson 1963-68 became a victim of his own power. By using his inflated powers he went into a Presidential war with Vietnam, without gaining Congress approval. This evidently proved to be disastrous for Johnson, due to number of deaths and resulted in the Presidential powers being checked and regulated by Congress.

The appointment of President John F. Kennedy in 1960 marked the beginning of the 'Imperial Presidents', where the Presidency's power and control swelled, this theme was brought to an abrupt end by President Nixon in 1974. It is problematic to impartially assess or decide whether Kennedy can be deemed a success or failure due to his brief reign, his likable characteristics and the overwhelming sense of tragedy of his assassination. The major failing for Kennedy was that people from within

---

<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Wallace, 'Understanding the US Presidency', (Simon and Schuster International Group, 1991) P4

Southern States, in his own party, rejected his Civil Right Bill. “Presidents from the 1960’s onwards could no longer fully depend on the support his party once supplied due to the escalating decline in party identification and resulting emergence of American’s declaring themselves ‘independents’. *“The president could no longer rely upon his party, for his party no longer relies upon him”* .<sup>II</sup> It therefore became customary to vote against your own party.

Some presidents, in spite of this, sought to strengthen party ethics and veracity, they included Ford, Reagan and JFK. They all emphasised their belief in the merits of their political party. As Ford endorses in 1975, *“As president and as a member of the Republican Party and the leader of the Republican Party, I have a obligation to try and strengthen and rebuild the Republican Party Organisation in many, many states.”*<sup>III</sup>

Historically a major contribution to a ‘failed’ presidency is if the President does not work in unison with his congressmen from both political parties. The key is to defend your own party but at the same time not place your party label under unnecessary pressure. Successful presidents are judged in terms of how successful they are in leading Congress, they need their goals to be accomplished by getting their bills passed through by Congress. Since the 1960’s the primary concern of a successful President is to drive his legislative program, if he fails to convince Congress to ratify his basic bills then he is deemed a failure.<sup>IV</sup> There are several examples of Presidents who have done this triumphantly and those who have not. President Clinton 1992-2000, tried to pass masses of bills through Congress early on

---

<sup>II</sup> Malcolm Wallles, *‘Understanding the US Presidency’*, (Simon and Schuster International Group, 1991) P7

<sup>III</sup> Ibid, P8

<sup>IV</sup> Clinton Rossiter, *‘The American Presidency, The powers and practices the personalities and problems of the most important office in the World’*, (Great Britain, 1957) P83

in his reign however many of these failed, e.g. Health Care bill, allowing homosexuals into the army etc. The 'honeymoon' period of Clinton's Presidency was not a success especially considering he had a united Congress, consequently he lost Congress after his second year in power. However this was almost a turning point in favour of Clinton's presidency. He demonstrated that a divided Congress could still work successfully in harmony, this required Clinton to hold intense negotiations with Congress. He then consistently passed through small but noteworthy bills, in a similar vein to President Reagan 1980-88, with the most substantial being the budget.

President Johnson 1963-68, used President Kennedy's assassination to his advantage by receiving sympathy from Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act. He wanted to give blacks equality, allowing them an education and into the army etc. Congress would look immoral and insensitive if they let it after Kennedy's drive to have it passed before his tragic assassination. He built the ideal of 'Great Society' as part of his 'grand plan', this included the introduction of two grants. The Voting Rights Act followed the Civil Rights Act. While Johnson looked impressive on a domestic front he failed in his many of his foreign policies, as already stated the Vietnam War was crucial in this failure and due to his magnified power.

President Nixon 1968-74 could be seen as having served the ultimate 'failed' Presidency due to the fact that he is the only President forced to resign mid-term, as a result of the 'Watergate' scandal. Nixon had a troubled time from the beginning as it was one of the first times ever that there was a Democratic Congress and Republican Presidency and therefore it was particularly problematic for him to get his bills passed by Congress. This obviously seriously affects how successful a Presidency can be, although Clinton later proved it was possible to work in synchronisation. This divide also looked unfavourable on Nixon as the 1970's were seen as time to 'get things

done'. His eventual end of Presidential power was crippled with controversy due to the 'Watergate' Scandal, he lost the support of officials within The White House and the respect of public opinion soon followed. This loss is a devastating blow to any President and with the threat of impeachment he was left with no option but to resign.

President Ford succeeded Nixon, but was always undermined by his association with him and only held two years of power. Both Ford and then Carter suffered from 'post imperial Presidency'. This shows that it is possible to fail as President because of someone else's mistakes, with reference to my comment in the opening paragraph about not being elected in the first place could be seen as a failure; many people believe had it not been for the Monika Lewinski scandal under President Clinton, then Al Gore would have won by a landslide in the 2000 elections.

President Carter's, 1976-80, major failing was that although he had a united Congress his relationship with them was poor, he attempted to pass too many bills but did not hold regular meetings nor did he offer them any incentive or 'a bear hug', to accept his bills. Congress became increasingly individualistic and became concerned only with domestic or even local issues. Carter lost power after one term due to the state of the economy and the hostage situation in Iran, with many people at the time deeming it a straightforward 'failed' presidency.

Reagan re-established that it was possible to work in agreement with Congress, and regained some respect to the role of Presidency, passing many bills through in his first term. He passed his budget and crucially to the people lowered taxes, he successfully exploited the Media to reach out and stay in contact with the American people with his sincerity. However this accomplishment was to be under false pretences and

during his second term it was discovered the economy was heavily inundated with debt.

From the moment Bush Snr made his “Read my Lips...no new taxes” speech he was doomed to failure. The country was still in debt and making promises that he clearly would be unable to abide to was no-way to regain the trust of the American people. He only lasted one term of Presidential power, 1988-1992. Although George Bush jnr has just regained control for a second term in 2004, many people still deem him a failure, the country has its biggest record of un-employment levels and is once again in debt, even though the economy was booming when Bush took over from President Clinton in 2000. Bush is mocked in the media for his illogical use of English language and incoherent speeches.

The media is a key institution in determining how successful a President is, it is a direct opportunity for him to increase his power by speaking directly to the people, ‘speak American to America’. Congress does not get this opportunity. The televised press conference is the biggest opportunity for Presidents to attain public support and is very important to whoever is the current president. They have services and means for a successful campaign by already being in the public eye that an opponent does not, the president needs to ensure he lays out his future legislative policies.

Evidently it is complex to decide whether a Presidency has been totally a success or ‘failure’ nor can you simply compare one Presidents success to another. However the factors stated are key contributions to how a President fairs. On the whole, the middle ground president appeals to most people, one that fulfils his duty to work relentlessly in completing a legislative program that involves every problem in American Society.

If a president weakens the office's power through ignorance or spinelessness then he will be considered a failure.