

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Introduction: Presidential Failure*

**M**ost people think the government can't organize a two-car funeral.

Back in the 1990s that was one of President Bill Clinton's favorite sayings, reflecting the deep and pervasive skepticism Americans feel about government.

Today things are much worse.

As one alumnus of the Clinton administration put it, instead of worrying that the government can't organize a two-car funeral, "now they worry that one of the two cars should have been recalled and the other can't go anywhere because Congress is still fighting over whether to fix the road."<sup>1</sup>

For most of their lives, Americans have experienced a blizzard of governmental failure. This has not always been so. The grandparents and great-grandparents of these same Americans knew a federal government that rescued the coun-

try from the Great Depression, defeated Germany and Japan in World War II, and transformed the United States into an economic and military superpower. Since then, Americans have experienced humiliation in Vietnam, setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan, a disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina, a ruinous financial crisis and economic meltdown, the botched rollout of Obamacare, and continuing impotence against terrorism. Little wonder there is a sentiment out there that the country is on an inevitable and precipitous downward slope that the government can't do anything about.

This sentiment is evident in the disenchantment among the citizens who voted for “hope and change” with President Barack Obama. At the beginning of the new century more than half of all Americans were satisfied with the way things were going in the United States. And then a long slow decline began, uninterrupted by changes in leadership and party or by events good and bad.<sup>2</sup>

Today we face a crisis of competence in the American presidency. Although contemporary American politics has been categorized as the most polarized in decades, another theme is emerging—competence. This theme is so pervasive that questions about competence have joined arguments between the right and left as a driver in the political conversation. In a Pew Research poll in early 2015, citizens were asked, in a series of open-ended questions, to use one word to describe President Obama. The most frequent responses? “Good” and “incompetent.”<sup>3</sup> Citizens have lost faith in their leaders and in the government they are supposed to run.

### Why do presidents fail?

This question deserves an explanation. Americans need to understand the background of presidential failure. This book will argue that successful presidential leadership occurs when

the president is able to put together and balance three sets of skills: policy, communication, and implementation. When there is no balance, when the components of leadership are out of whack, failure follows. There is nothing new about this theory of leadership. As far back as the 1920s, Mary Parker Follett, one of the seminal figures in leadership studies, argued that the talent of a leader was the ability to think holistically.<sup>4</sup>

To understand this better, take a look at the following diagram. Note that the circles are all equal in size. That is because each piece is as important as the next.



Think about it for a minute.

Would we remember the famous line from Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1933 inaugural address—"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself"—had it not been followed up by the "bank holiday" and other actions that halted the economic free fall of the Great Depression? Would Ronald Reagan's "Tear down this wall" have stuck in our minds had the Soviet Union remained strong and intact? Would Bill Clinton's considerable rhetorical skills have saved him from being convicted in the Senate after his impeachment by the House had unemployment been at 10 percent in the winter and spring of 1998 instead of at 4.5 percent?

The answer to all of these is no.

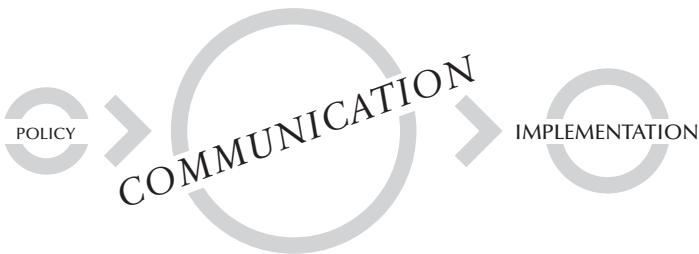
This same model of leadership applies to leaders of other large enterprises. As in politics, leaders in business fail when they cannot execute. In a well-known book on business leadership, Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan put it this way: "When

companies fail to deliver on their promises, the most frequent explanation is that the CEO's strategy was wrong. But the strategy by itself is not often the case. Strategies most often fail because they aren't executed well. Things that are supposed to happen don't happen."<sup>5</sup> In politics as in business, the ability to deliver matters. Modern presidents may get elected because of their ability to inspire us and make us feel good. But they succeed, both in the short term and over the long term, by their actual ability to do good.

When presidents fail they often have trouble getting all three things—policy, communication, and implementation—right at the same time. And it's getting worse. In our highly specialized era, presidents have at their disposal all sorts of experts in policy, people who crunch numbers and build mathematical models. Presidents also employ scores of people who write memorable lines for their speeches and stage perfect backdrops for the television cameras. And they have at their beck and call an enormous workforce, the federal bureaucracy, which is supposedly dedicated to making those policy dreams come true. Yet despite having all this expertise at their disposal, modern presidents are failing to put it all together and, hence, are failing the leadership test.

This book will focus on execution and implementation. It begins with an important observation by the political scientist Samuel Kernell.<sup>6</sup> In his classic book, *Going Public*, Kernell shows that modern presidents have spent more and more time talking to the public and traveling—which means less time on the job. In other words, modern presidents have lost the balance required for good leadership; they spend so much time talking that they mistake talking for doing. Their closest advisers tend to be the people they campaigned with, people who are skilled in the art of communicating but not

in the art of governing. When modern presidents move into the White House, they bring their political teams with them and proceed to keep campaigning. Much ink has been spilled about the “perpetual campaign”—the nonstop attention to politics and public opinion that doesn’t end on Inauguration Day—that our recent presidents have embraced. Instead of the balance illustrated above, too many presidents actually behave as follows:



The obsession with communication—presidential talking and messaging—is a dangerous mirage of the media age, a delusion that inevitably comes crashing down in the face of governmental failure. This moment is perfectly illustrated in a cartoon by Mike Peters, which appeared during the Reagan administration. The actor-turned-president is seated in the Oval Office, surrounded by television cameras, about to give a national address on the recession, and an aide is saying to him, “Mr. President . . . Don’t you understand? This is real. . . . This is actually happening. . . . We can’t *change* the script.”<sup>7</sup>

In *Overreach: Leadership in the Obama Presidency*, the scholar George C. Edwards III argues that presidents often have a false sense of their ability to persuade the public to support them. “There is not a single systematic study that demonstrates that presidents can reliably move others to support them. Equally important, we now have a substantial lit-

erature showing that presidents typically fail at persuasion.”<sup>8</sup> Edwards focuses mostly on the difficulty presidents have persuading the public to support them in legislative battles. But if presidents cannot avoid legislative failures through their communication strategies, how can they hope to avoid implementation failures?

Policy and implementation failures end up having severe and long-lasting impacts on presidential power (far more so than communications failures), and presidents have a hard time rebounding from them. And yet almost no one talks about the skills presidents need to avoid the kinds of failures that are so devastating to their presidencies—the skills of presidential management. Up to a point, this is understandable: After all, management skills are distinct from rhetorical skills and much less interesting—until, that is, their absence causes the entire presidency to crash and burn.

The challenge for modern presidents is to add some governing skills to their campaign skills—or, in other words, to stop talking long enough to figure out how to govern. We have had the “imperial presidency” and the “rhetorical presidency”; perhaps it is now time to focus on what the political scientist James P. Pfiffner calls the “managerial presidency”—the relationship between the president and the bureaucracy he or she controls.<sup>9</sup> The managerial presidency does not mean presidential micromanagement—the classic examples of which are President Lyndon B. Johnson sitting in the White House picking bombing targets during the war in Vietnam and President Jimmy Carter controlling the schedule for the White House tennis courts. But it does entail a deep understanding of the capacity (or lack thereof) of the many different organizations in the federal government. If presidents spent as much time on

the business of the government as they do on their next press conference or “message event” (as they are called inside the White House), they might figure out how to mine the federal government for its vast knowledge and resources and learn how to see the warning signs in order to preempt large-scale screwups.

As it is, however, modern presidents are distant from the government they run. As a former Obama administration official put it, “The president is nominally in charge of so much that it often feels like the power dynamic inverts, and that the White House exists to take blame for the misdeeds of others—very often agencies or bureaucrats over which you have essentially zero control.”<sup>10</sup> Note the self-pitying tone in this statement, a tone that is often attributed to President Obama himself. White House reporters traveling with President Obama on Air Force One have been stunned to have the president come back into their cabin for “deep background” discussions to complain about the things the executive branch is doing—with no apparent awareness that he is the boss of that branch.

Until we elect presidents who stop feeling like victims of the federal government and instead learn how to lead it, our presidents will continue to fail.

THERE IS A RICH and varied scholarship on the modern American presidency. It begins with Richard E. Neustadt’s 1960 classic *Presidential Power*, which argued that the president’s power is ultimately tied to his power to persuade other elites.<sup>11</sup> The Nixon years brought forth a renewed interest in the expansion of presidential power and the question of whether or not presidential power had expanded beyond the

expectations of the Founding Fathers. In 1973, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. published *The Imperial Presidency*, and that term quickly became part and parcel of the conventional dialogue about the presidency.<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey K. Tulis introduced the idea of “the rhetorical presidency” in his 1987 book, which added to presidential scholarship the study of how presidents try to influence public opinion and the effect of that on the institution of the presidency.<sup>13</sup> It was followed in 2007 by Samuel Kernell’s famous book *Going Public*, which presented several key empirical measures that showed that, as the modern presidency evolved, presidents spent more and more time talking to the public and traveling—at the expense of older notions of the job that included negotiating and persuading other elites.

In addition to trying to describe the core of the modern president’s job, other scholars have looked at presidential decisionmaking, presidential advisory systems, and presidential character. The literature on decisionmaking begins with Herbert A. Simon’s insight that public policy decisionmaking operated within “bounded rationality.” The complexity of public policy means that, according to Simon and James G. March, there are cognitive limits to rationality, and thus presidents have to use techniques like “satisficing” and sequential search processes to arrive at a decision.<sup>14</sup> Graham T. Allison’s landmark book on President John F. Kennedy and the Cuban missile crisis further explored the limits to rationality, as did his more recent work with Philip Zelikow.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, there is a large literature on how presidents set up their advisory systems and their decisionmaking structures. In 1985, Terry Moe used the term “the politicized presidency” to describe the centralization of policymaking in the White House, as presidents attempted to gain greater control over the

bureaucracy.<sup>16</sup> The literature on presidential advisory systems explores the virtues of cabinet government versus staff advice and of “multiple advocacy” and “honest brokers.”<sup>17</sup> Richard Tanner Johnson divides presidential advisory systems into formalistic, competitive, and collegial types.<sup>18</sup> In a literature made popular recently by President Obama’s early fascination with Abraham Lincoln’s “team of rivals”—to use the title of Doris Kearns Goodwin’s best-selling book on Lincoln—there is a large literature on the virtues of cabinet government versus a powerful White House staff.<sup>19</sup>

There is also a literature on presidential character, pioneered by James David Barber, which explores the effects of personality on presidential action.<sup>20</sup> Barber’s work, compelling at the time for the neat way in which it attempted to link presidential personality with performance, has gone out of favor. It has been replaced by more nuanced looks at the ways in which presidential personality affects performance. For example, James P. Pfiffner, in *The Character Factor*, argues that presidential character is no simple matter; rather it is a multidimensional issue that has to take into account both public and private character.<sup>21</sup>

Most of this literature seeks to explain the president’s decisionmaking process, but it stops short of the next step—the crucial challenge of implementation, or what happens after a decision is made. There is a separate and important tradition of literature on implementation. Perhaps the best-known work on the topic is Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron B. Wildavsky’s 1973 book *Implementation*, whose subtitle—“How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland; Or, Why It’s Amazing That Federal Programs Work at All”—practically tells it all. Pressman and Wildavsky studied the implementation of economic development programs in Oak-

land, California. Their conclusions echo throughout the years: “We have learned one important lesson from the EDA experience in Oakland: implementation should not be divorced from policy. There is no point in having good ideas if they cannot be carried out. . . . The great problem, as we understand it, is to make the difficulties of implementation a part of the initial formulation of policy.”<sup>22</sup>

These insights were drawn from interviews with federal and local officials. Other studies, such as Martin Lipsky’s important book *Street Level Bureaucracy*, focused on the notion that what happened at the local level was often fundamentally disconnected from what the original policymakers thought would happen.<sup>23</sup> James Q. Wilson’s landmark book *Bureaucracy* explored the wide variety of constraints on bureaucracies that account for their inefficiency and frequent dysfunction.<sup>24</sup>

But for good reason, scholarship has, by and large, tended to divorce implementation from the study of the presidency. Traditional public administration theory, the basis for the professional civil service in most modern governments, assumes that elected leaders decide and civil servants implement. The assumption of “neutral competence” has been a constant since creation of the modern civil service. But as Hugh Heclo understood and as the implementation literature shows, the two cannot really be divorced: Neutral competence is more of a normative ideal than an actual way of behaving.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, as the permanent federal government has grown larger and more complex, it has also become more difficult for presidents to evaluate whether the government has the capacity to implement. In a book about how presidents test reality, John P. Burke and Fred I. Greenstein compared the approaches of Dwight D. Eisenhower and Lyndon B. Johnson to Vietnam.

They argued that “the notion of political reality testing applies equally to two broad components of policy making—the political component of selling policies and mustering the support necessary to win approval and the substantive component of devising and analyzing policies and the means for implementing them.”<sup>26</sup> They show how Eisenhower had the greater understanding of the implementation challenges, while Johnson had the greater understanding of the politics.

If implementation is important to federal decisionmakers in Washington well below the level of the president, why is it not also important to the president himself? As we will see, if the decision is right but the implementation is wrong, failure takes a serious toll on presidential power. Sometimes it causes his bid for reelection to be defeated; sometimes it so diminishes his power that he cannot achieve anything else of importance. Thus, central to the managerial presidency is the ability to chart not just the public reaction to the policy nor congressional acceptance of it, but the impact of the policy and the trials it will encounter in the implementation process on the presidency itself. Or, as former president Clinton told an audience at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., a few years ago, “They hire you to look down the street and around the corner.”<sup>27</sup>

In the business world, the key to the successful execution or implementation of a strategy is understanding an organization’s capacity. The same is true in government—with the difference that the organizations are bigger and that they are, by and large, monopolies. Dysfunctional private-sector organizations will eventually reveal themselves in their balance sheets. In the absence of competition, public-sector dysfunction can go on for decades before the consequences become obvious. As we will see in chapter 2, when we look at the

failure of the Iranian hostage rescue mission in Jimmy Carter's presidency, no fewer than six major governmental commissions since World War II had questioned the capacity of the military to complete a mission requiring extensive cooperation and planning among the various services branches. And yet many presidents up to and including Carter had essentially been captured by the status quo in the military and refused to undertake the hard work of military reform. Reform was eventually undertaken in 1986, six years after the hostage rescue failure, with passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act. But it took a wave of embarrassing military failures, most especially Vietnam and the hostage rescue mission, to make that happen.

In politics as in business, success often depends on understanding and changing the organizational culture. In fact, there are consulting firms that service corporate America by performing "cultural diagnostics." What this amounts to is understanding, and often changing, the belief structure of the organization. In chapter 3, we will look at President George W. Bush's foreign policy team in the months leading up to 9/11. They came in with a set of beliefs about the world, a culture formed by the Cold War experiences of their most senior members, which kept them from focusing on the rising threat of terrorism. As we will see, this threat had been documented by the permanent government (although it too was in transition from the intelligence challenges of the Cold War to the intelligence challenges of the twenty-first century). But a cultural gap between the new team and the old caused the new team to focus too late on a strategy that might have disrupted Osama bin Laden's organization. The same kind of blinders kept the Bush administration from seeing contrary evidence regarding the existence of weapons of mass destruc-

tion in Iraq, and it kept them from understanding the looming financial crisis even though the permanent government was providing them with data that should have steered them down a more productive path.

Execution or implementation is a tricky business even when the strategy is right. In chapter 4, we will see that the Bush administration had, in fact, developed a completely new strategy for emergencies in the post-9/11 world, and yet a failure to integrate that strategy into the many layers of government led to its disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The existence of a brilliant strategy turned out to be meaningless, since it had not been operationalized in a way that it could be used to respond to a natural disaster instead of a terrorist attack. As many other leaders could have told the Bush team, getting the strategy right is only half the game; making sure the entire organization “gets it” is the other half.

In chapter 5, we will look at the spectacular crash of the HealthCare.gov website that botched the rollout of President Obama’s much-touted health care initiative. This failure was, in part, a function of organizational capacity. The task of building the site was given to an organization, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, that was already understaffed and overburdened with a complex mission. Success was also jeopardized by the president putting the wrong people in the wrong jobs (a frequent precursor to implementation failure). Variations on this theme were also responsible for another highly embarrassing failure during the Obama administration: the failure to see the inability of the Department of Veterans Affairs medical system to cope with the urgent medical needs of veterans.

An important caveat to the case studies in these chapters: The presidential failures I examine deal with two Demo-

cratic presidents (Jimmy Carter and Barack Obama) and one Republican president (George W. Bush). For the most part, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton are left out of the story. This is not the result of any prejudices on my part (I did work for and admire Bill Clinton), but simply that I am looking at a certain kind of presidential failure—failure that stems from an inattention to underlying governmental capacity. Arguably, Ronald Reagan’s biggest failure was the Iran-Contra scandal, in which the executive branch secretly facilitated the sale of arms to Iran in order to fund the anti-government Contras in Nicaragua, thus contradicting a law passed by Congress. President Clinton’s biggest failure was the scandal arising from his sexual affair with a young intern. Both of these events hurt their popularity, weakened their presidencies, and kept them from accomplishing more, but they are not the result of distance from the government they ran.

In chapter 6, we will look at the behemoth that is the federal government in order to see what it is that makes execution so difficult for so many presidents. While many of the principles of execution or implementation are familiar to anyone who leads a large organization, the modern federal government exists on a scale that dwarfs even the largest private enterprises. And it responds not just to the president but to an equally powerful collection of 535 bosses in Congress. The sheer scale of the enterprise presents challenges to anyone attempting to lead it and to figure out what it can and can’t do. But I will make some suggestions that might help a future president get a better handle on these challenges.

Although the modern federal government is enormous and difficult to understand, we have evolved a system of picking presidents that values certain skills above others. And so, as

we will see in chapter 7, the modern presidential nominating system rewards communications skills over governing skills. No wonder modern presidents fail so often; their job is harder and their governing skills are worse than those of their predecessors. Some modern presidents have come to the job with very thin or even nonexistent executive experience.

The argument in this book is that there is nothing inevitable about presidential failure. It is not “baked in” to the modern presidency, and it is not always due to circumstances beyond their control. The modern presidency is not impossible, but it does require a reorientation of the presidency itself—toward the complex and boring business of government and away from the preoccupation with communicating.