Scholars Discuss the Future of the Presidency at Reagan Symposium

As the nation moves forward under a new Obama presidency and reflects on policies from the Bush administration, the debate among eight eminent scholars at Regent University’s fourth annual Ronald Reagan Symposium on February 6 was especially timely.
This year’s Reagan symposium focused on presidential powers and how those powers have evolved over time. Scholars from Yale, Princeton and other notable institutions examined issues surrounding five questions: Has the presidency become too powerful? Would the Founding Fathers approve of today’s presidency? Does the presidency threaten our system of checks and balances? How has the presidency contributed to public distrust of government? Do we rely too much on presidential leadership to solve our problems?

Panelists were: Stephen Skowronek, Pelatiah Perit professor of political and social science at Yale University; William Howell, associate professor in the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago; Robert Spitzer, professor of political science at SUNY/Cortland; Brandice Canes-Wrone, professor of politics and public affairs at Princeton University; Jeffrey Tulis, professor of political science at the University of Texas; George Edwards III, distinguished professor of political science at Texas A&M University; Gene Healy, vice president at the Cato Institute; and Hugh Hecho, Clarence J. Robinson professor of public affairs at George Mason University.

“The central question is, ‘Do we rely too much on the presidency?’ It's clear that we do, expecting the president to solve problems that the office was never intended to solve,” said Healy.

“Both parties subscribe to a messianic view of the presidency,” he asserted, noting that the American public may bear some of the responsibility for expanded claims of presidential power because of the public’s demands for solutions.

Skowronek reviewed the debate about reverting to a strict constitutional view of the presidency. He outlined the history of progressive reformers who built the current powers of the presidency. “They concentrated power at the center and thrust the president into a vanguard role, elevating the presidency into the only national office,” he explained.

“The idea of concentrating power in the presidency continues to grow,” Skowronek added, noting that those governing in the 21st century “should follow the examples of those who kept American government vital for so long and would do well to take a page from their playbook.”

Serving up a contrasting viewpoint, Spitzer noted that under the Constitution, the legislative branch was designed to be the most important of the three branches of government.

However, the Constitution’s system of checks and balances has proven to be “toothless,” Spitzer said. He cited examples of how few times Congress has exerted its powers of impeachment and veto override, as well as how often Congress approves treaties and presidential appointments.

Wrapping up the morning session, Hecho offered some insight into where the office of the presidency may be headed.

“America’s historical identity is grounded in a republic constitution … a complex system of representation,” he said. “Success is measured not in leaders or the common people, but in their interaction back and forth. Our founders were practical politicians, but in the 20th century a whole new system has insinuated itself into the system. This new system is marked by professional management of campaigns, nonstop campaigning, nonstop fundraising, privileged access to policy makers and sporadic media attention. “It will take a crisis to raze such a system.”

Howell talked about restoring the balance of power among the three branches of government. “Protection and expansion of presidential power was a defining feature of the last half century and the defining feature of the last eight years,” he said.

His comments focused on the 2008 National War Powers Commission Report, which seeks to reform relations between the president and Congress and improve the War Powers Resolution. The report proposed a replacement War Powers Consultation Act that would require the president to consult with Congress regularly in the lead-up to any war and force Congress to vote on the matter.

Edwards talked about strategies for governing. “The new administration will exploit advances in technology to communicate with the public,” he said. “Reaching people is good, but mobilizing them is even better.”

In noting that President Obama is working to mobilize his base of supporters, Edwards commented, “The base can only take you so far. The biggest challenge is winning the hearts and minds of those not inclined to support him.”

Canes-Wrone elaborated on Edwards’ comments regarding technology and presidential communications, noting new opportunities for both domestic and international communications. She also talked about communication challenges, including a decreased ability of the president to command public attention, fewer Americans reading daily newspapers or watching daily news programs, and a smaller audience more likely to tune in to information sources that confirm their opinions.

“The opportunity exists now for a more informed debate and less ‘sound byte’ policy,” she said.

Tulis discussed “Plausible Futures for Presidential Governance.” In reviewing the significance of the 2008 campaigns, Tulis noted, “The campaigns were unsuccessful because there was a much clearer ideological choice between the candidates, with stark differences on both domestic and foreign policies.”

Through this year’s symposium and the previous three, Regent has extended its academic excellence far beyond the campus. “The Reagan Symposium is like dropping a pebble in the water and then watching the concentric circles radiate,” said Robertson School of Government Dean Charles Dunn, as he noted media coverage from international outlets such as C-SPAN and CBN.

“The books published from the lectures delivered at the Reagan symposia have been adopted in courses at Princeton University and elsewhere, and purchased by libraries and scholars around the world.”

Books from the first three Reagan symposia include:

- The Enduring Reagan (to be released in 2010)

For additional information, please email the Reagan Symposium coordinator: reagansymposium@regent.edu.