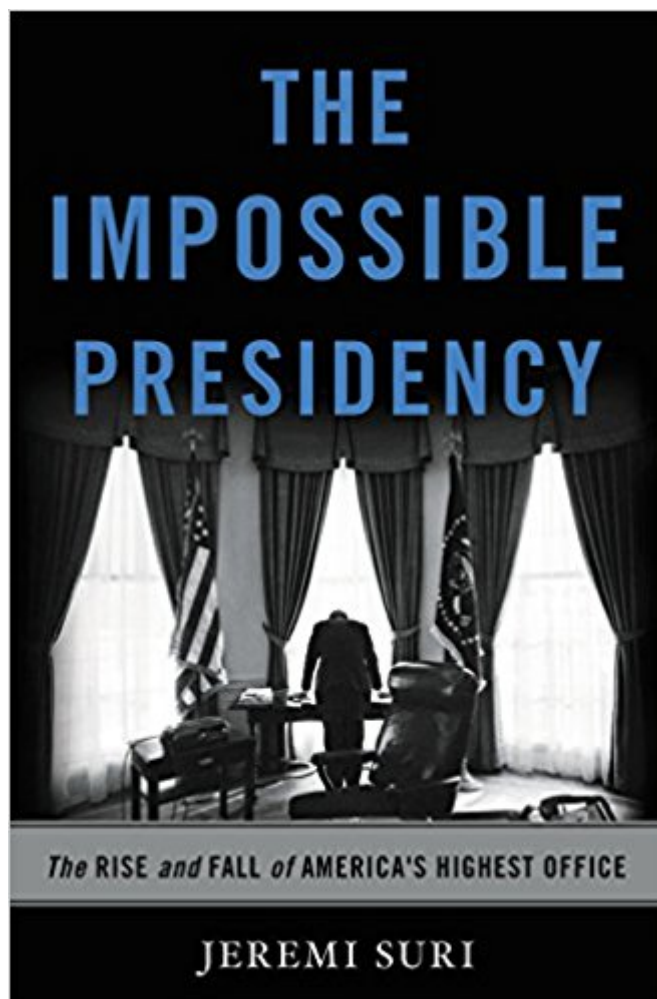


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# The Impossible Presidency: The Rise And Fall Of America's Highest Office



## Synopsis

A bold new history of the American presidency, arguing that the successful presidents of the past created unrealistic expectations for every president since JFK, with enormously problematic implications for American politics. In *The Impossible Presidency*, celebrated historian Jeremi Suri charts the rise and fall of the American presidency, from the limited role envisaged by the Founding Fathers to its current status as the most powerful job in the world. He argues that the presidency is a victim of its own success—the vastness of the job makes it almost impossible to fulfill the expectations placed upon it. As managers of the world's largest economy and military, contemporary presidents must react to a truly globalized world in a twenty-four-hour news cycle. There is little room left for bold vision. Suri traces America's disenchantment with our recent presidents to the inevitable mismatch between presidential promises and the structural limitations of the office. A masterful reassessment of presidential history, this book is essential reading for anyone trying to understand America's fraught political climate.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Kirkus Reviews: "[A]n illuminating look at the highest office in the land and its occupants....Lively and well-grounded, offering good measures by which to judge our best and worst presidents and their methods of governing." "Why do our elected monarchs continue both to inspire and disappoint us? Jeremi Suri answers that question with a brilliant account of what America's most important presidents accomplished and why they inevitably failed to live up to their promise. Written with grace

and authority, his book is one of the wisest histories of U.S. politics I have read in years."-Michael Kazin, author of War Against War: The American Fight for Peace, 1914-1918

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Great power and great responsibility, as a superhero's uncle once noted, go hand-in-hand.

Nowhere might this be more true than the position of leader of one's country. In "The Impossible Presidency," Jeremi Suri examines nine US presidencies in depth with the thesis that after a "rise" of the office, there was a subsequent "fall" following Franklin Roosevelt's tenure, after the office became too large for one person to manage successfully alone. Since George Washington's time, there has been a dramatic change in regards to public expectations, responsibilities and media exposure of the POTUS that the Founders could never have imagined. Because recent presidents like Bill Clinton and Barack Obama (dubbed here "magicians of possibility") have had to focus on multiple immediate crises, they have been prevented from successfully addressing the core issues that their voters wished. According to Suri, Donald Trump's presidency was the natural culmination of this trajectory, making certain changes necessary for the office to be sustained. Washington, described as a "father figure," had limited power and very specific goals for the newly-created position. In his State of the Union address, Washington emphasized the partnership between the president and Congress. According to the author, the first President's job was to protect the liberty without and within the fledgling nation. With Andrew Jackson's election, however, came a president who purposely tried to shift more power to "the people," i.e. white men who were not representative of the elite in power, widening the scope of who could run as a candidate. By the time Abraham Lincoln came along, the country was at serious risk of splitting permanently apart, making Lincoln's strengths as an orator crucial to seeing the country through the Civil War. The final two presidents before the "fall," Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt were the last ones whose acts as POTUS were not derailed by various crises. With JFK, Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan, however, such crises as the Bay of Pigs and the invasion of Grenada, pulled their attention away from other issues they'd planned to address. With Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, the president's days were also "too full and fragmented," and this resulted in disillusionment from their base. Overall, the book's style makes it easy to read, and the author has a knack for summarizing these historical figures' impact in a way that is memorable and meaningful. The end is short on solutions to the problem of an overburdened presidency, but the rest - with perhaps the exception of pairing Clinton and Obama -

does a fine job of discussing each president's term's strengths and weaknesses, in light of the author's thesis.

In his classic 1973 book *The Imperial Presidency*,<sup>1</sup> The Imperial Presidency historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. warned that the American political system was threatened by "a conception of presidential power so spacious and peremptory as to imply a radical transformation of the traditional polity." Jeremi Suri feels that we have created not an "imperial presidency" but rather an "impossible presidency." We have given the office such enormous power, reach, tasks and responsibilities, that it has become an impossibility for any person to competently fulfill the office. The Constitution makes the president commander-in-chief, chief executive, and head of state. The office has also seen the presidents become head of their political party, chief legislator, moral leader of the nation and chief clerk, responsible for the efficiency of the government. Suri argues that "Power elicits demands that exceed capabilities." In every area foreign and domestic, the presidency falls into the trap of mission creep. Modern presidents fail because they have "overcommitted, overpromised, and overreached." Rather than lead; they manage crises. This is an excellent point. We, perhaps because of the media, have expected the president to be "consoler-in-chief"; commenting upon and becoming involved in almost every domestic tragedy. They are distracted by these often minor domestic issues and as a result often make hasty, undisciplined decisions that are poor solutions or choices. This is not what Jefferson had imagined. Jefferson had wanted a philosophical and aesthetic presidency that would be somewhat remote from everyday cares; an office which the author feels should be used to bolster our long-term economic, social, and military priorities. A philosophical moral leader rather than a "do-er", Jefferson felt, was the antidote that would prevent tyranny. President Trump, Suri believes, is the result of Americans' desire for a president that will use power to solve problems, rather than be a great moral leader. In fact, Suri argues he was elected precisely because he was not a political leader; he had never held public office, and had no desire to act like a traditional "public servant". This is possibly because his predecessor was chosen, for among other reasons, to be a moral leader. Was this election, in which no candidate claimed to be a great moral leader a reaction to the questionable executive ability of President Obama? In the first part of "The Impossible Presidency" Suri examines the leadership of successful presidents: Washington, Jackson, Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt; while in the second part he examines the unsuccessful presidencies of Kennedy, Johnson, Reagan, Clinton and Obama. While Suri makes some excellent points, the burdens of the office are not new; for as

President McKinley said: "We have had all the honor there is in this place (the White House), and have had responsibilities enough to kill any man."

This is a survey, an overview of the U.S. Presidency, from its conception at the Continental Congress through the present day. It's an attempt to place the advent of Donald Trump in a context going back to 1789, tracing the trajectory of the office. The author doesn't attempt a full history of all the 44 presidencies before this one, but, rather, punctuates his narrative with the more decisive ones: Washington, who founded and shaped the office; Jackson, the first populist president; Lincoln, the crisis of the Union; TR and FDR, progressives of differing temperaments but who placed the U.S. on the world stage; JFK, another crisis presidency. (Oddly, he hardly mentions Woodrow Wilson). He follows this with a "decline and fall narrative" tracing trouble-prone presidencies, mostly discussing LBJ, Reagan and Clinton, esp. the latter two. The disappointing Obama presidency and the appearance of an "anti-president" (his term) in the form of Trump seems in his telling to be a predictable trajectory. He doesn't focus on what Trump may mean or do, seems almost to look beyond him to a future re-alignment of the office. It is valuable in discussing the presidency as a reflection of certain key personalities who re-shaped the office and the country at decisive moments; it's not so much the institution, staff or underlying traditions. As such, it's a useful retrospective on the office, and one way of explaining its increasing problems over the last 50 years or so.

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