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The Hardest Job in the World

Global Summit 2022 & Book Notes

After a several week hiatus for the Thanksgiving holiday and the opening of the first Global Summit in Redlands, California, the Global Summit will return to Erie on Sunday, Dec. 11 with a presentation by John Dickerson at Gannon's Highmark Events Center, 620 Peach St. The title is "The hardest job in the world," referring to the American presidency.

On Monday, Dec. 12, also at Gannon's Highmark Events Center, Al Hunt and PBS Newshour's Judy Woodruff will discuss the state of American politics. On Tuesday, Dec. 13, Allen Carroll, who heads the story maps team for Esri, a global leader in geographic information systems (GIS), will address "The Future of Maps: How the Art and Science of Mapmaking Continues to Evolve." The event is at the Jefferson Educational Society, 3207 State St. All programs will start at 7 p.

In this ***Book Note***, we'll look at several key insights in John Dickerson's book ***The Hardest Job In the World: The American Presidency.***

– Andy Roth



John Dickerson. *The Hardest Job in the World: The American Presidency*. (New York: Random House, 2020).

So, what's the hardest job in the world?

Not exactly a trick question, for, as the headline and introduction above asserts, according to John Dickerson it is the American presidency. Dickerson, anchor of CBS News' *Prime Time* and former anchor of CBS's *Face the Nation* among several other responsibilities at CBS, makes that assertion in a sprawling book that itself is a metaphor for the very claim it asserts. [1] Awash in information providing a global view of the American presidency's origins and its evolution into some overwrought version of an elected monarch, the book's chief value rests in the brilliance of several of Dickerson's observations – one of which is not the idea embedded in its title, "*the hardest job in the world.*"

It's not.

There are multiple contenders for that honor. I nominate pediatric oncologist, compared to which just about any other job you can name is the proverbial "skate."

"The hardest job in the world" also smacks of American exceptionalism, the notion that has bedeviled America in its various incarnations from almost the beginning. It asserts that America "differs qualitatively from other developed nations because of its national credo, historical evolution, or distinctive political and religious institutions" resulting in American assertions of its "categorical superiority" over all other nations. [2] At its most noble, it is the sentiment expressed in Abraham Lincoln's oft quoted description of America as "the last, best hope of earth." [3] At its most jingoistic, it is any of many claims that America

is the richest, the freest, the strongest, etc. nation in the world, including the assertion that the American leader's job is "the hardest job in the world."

Still, there is no arguing that the American presidency is a difficult, if not fraught, job. It's a cliché to remark upon how its occupants dramatically age during their tenure. Entering relatively fresh faced and eager, they leave with their hair gray, their faces creased with stress lines. All leadership positions tax and test their occupants; in particular, those who most seethe with stress rely upon a leader's political skill in balancing competing interests and selling others their vision. Ask any mayor or university president "how hard their job is"; if they're candid, which usually only occurs in retirement, you might be surprised. [4]

Whether or not the American presidency is the most difficult job in the world, it is a very, very, very difficult job. The scale of its responsibilities daunts all but the most egotistically self-assured. In fact, although I no longer recall which presidential candidate said it, in one of Theodore H. White's *The Making of the President ...* books a presidential aspirant is alleged to have remarked while looking out the window of an airplane flying over the American heartland, "It takes a big ego to think you're the one who can lead this vast land." He, it was a "he," implied that maybe an ego so large might not be a healthy thing for either its possessor or the nation he would lead.

It's possible that the scale of the job might be beyond any one person's ability – a case Dickerson is at some pains to make. Fiona Hill, who spoke at the Global Summit in early November, noted that the American presidency combines at least three jobs other nations divide: head of state, commander-in-chief of the military, and chief executive officer. At the very least, those jobs require entirely different skill sets, not to mention aptitude, depth of knowledge, and breadth of vision. The head of state embodies the nation's values, beliefs, and, one hopes, its virtues. The commander in chief is the "democratic republican," which does not refer to political parties but to our form of government, warrior chieftain. Once upon a time it was the role one must have mastered to become head of state; vestiges of that ancient lineage still linger in the public's consciousness. The chief executive officer is the person who manages the vast enterprise that is modern government.

So, one needs to find a warrior with an M.B.A. who also embodies those truths Americans claim to be self-evident: a belief in the equality of all and their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Oh, it doesn't hurt if they are also empathetic, good looking, quick of wit, cordial and glib, and as comfortable in their rectitude as the couple in Grant Wood's "American Gothic." Dickerson writes that if you want to be president, you need to combine the traits and skills of "Executive in Chief, Commander in Chief, First Responder, Consoler in Chief, and Action Hero President." [5]

Maybe it is the hardest job in the world.

It's not the job requirements that make the American presidency so daunting; it's the scale of the enterprise one is tasked with making make sense that swallows – can swallow – those who undertake it.

Why do Americans obsess so over who is or might become president? Henry Ford, not the automobile titan but a late-19th century historian remarked in 1898, “The truth is that in the presidential office, as it has been constituted since Jackson’s time, American democracy has revived the oldest political institution of the race, the elective kingship.” [6] As Shakespeare’s Richard II could tell you, being king might be nice, but as Richard sat upon the ground telling sad tales of the death of kings, he would also tell you it comes with sharp edges surrounded by ambitious people bearing knives. [7] Some even pretend to be your friend.

The monarchical metaphor helps us understand both the pressures a president encounters and, paradoxically, the fears of those who elect him. Those “fears” come in two flavors. One is as old as the republic, the other only sprouted in the past 30 to 40 years. The old fear was the founders fear of giving the chief magistrate, as they originally called the office holder, too much power for fear he would evolve into a monarch, which they had only just cast off. The other fear results from the fact that so far it has only been a “he.” Americans embrace patriarchy without ever actually acknowledging such. For many Americans, “matriarchy” remains a step too far. But that sentiment might be waning. Hilary Clinton did win the 2016 popular vote by more than three million votes and, of the names now being considered as possible successors to President Joe Biden, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer tops the list.

Most Americans, however, are content to let monarchy be a British reality TV show. Beyond the office’s obvious centrality in the nation’s political life, there are two interrelated reasons for Americans’ sometimes obsessive focus on it. First, and this has been true since the Washington administration, the office is the perfect media foil. It makes the job of gathering news easy – a sort of one-stop shop for ambitious reporters under deadline pressure. Rather than doing the hard work of deep background digging, one can get a story just by attending to happenings at the presidential office. At first, in the world of print it was tedious, but that accelerated in the 19th and early 20th centuries only to be eclipsed by the speed of electronic media with its bias for the immediate and visual. 21st century social media takes it to its logical (illogical?) conclusion with instantaneous tweets making presidential news a perpetual motion (emotion) machine.

Obviously, it's more complicated than that but in either a virtuous or vicious circle news of happenings emanates from the White House to be reported, analyzed, digested, and regurgitated by various media pundits whose reports then spawn reactions from the administration as each feeds on the other. Sometimes you don't

even need “happenings.” You just need to gather a group of bloviating talking heads on Sunday morning (or in the noxious weeds of cable news networks it can be any day or night of the week) and they then speculate about what might be going on, why it might be going on, and what it might or might not mean. That they might be only marginally more informed than their audience is of profound but usually unnoticed importance. I was about to say ironically, but maybe it’s not ironic at all but the natural culmination of an old, old process. Former President Donald Trump represented either the apotheosis or abyss (depending upon one’s point of view) of the entire phenomenon as he allegedly watched news all day for affirmation of his worth feeding his vanity or for hints of criticism feeding his fragile ego’s anger.

Why is this true? Why do we obsess over the presidency and presidential elections?

The second reason for our national obsession was identified by President John F. Kennedy in remarks he made, interestingly enough somewhat confirming the above comments, at the National Press Club in January 1960. Kennedy noted “... only the President represents the national interest. Upon him alone converge all the needs and aspirations of all parts of the country, all departments of government, all nations of the world.” [8] Kennedy added that in our federal system presidential elections are the only national plebiscites in which the American people – the “We the People...” who founded the U.S. Constitution and who hold certain truths to be self-evident – can express their opinions and preferences. It is a point not often consciously noted: presidential elections are the only national election. All others are local. Either very local as in townships and counties or only a bit more general in statewide contests. Regarding national offices, congressional representatives are local elections; U.S. Senators are statewide elections.

Only the presidency is contested nationally.

And in that fact two phenomena converge. One, it’s the only time the American people get to speak as a national entity and, two, all of that energy is focused upon a very small subset of people, only one of whom emerges victorious. Upon the shoulders of the victor falls all the hopes, aspirations, fears, and dreads of the American people. Whether or not that makes the job the hardest in the world is irrelevant, but it makes the job of supreme importance to the American people and to the future of the American experiment.

It is Dickerson’s thesis that recent presidents – maybe most presidents – have not been up to the task. In some instances it’s because they were simply not up to it, but in most instances it’s because almost no one can measure up to that challenge. Dickerson suggests of the 47 people who have held that office, less than a quarter

of them met the challenge – George Washington, James Polk, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and maybe Ronald Reagan.

Why?

Well, I won't steal Dickerson's thunder. Briefly, however, he thinks a major part of the problem confronting the American presidency is the disconnect between presidential campaigning and the job's actual responsibilities. Regarding the latter, the job is obviously a leadership job, but Americans frequently elect competent campaigners and incompetent leaders.

What is the disconnect between campaigning and leadership?

The first is an extended exercise in selling oneself; the latter is an extended exercise in visioning and team building. Two very different things. The former is much like a job interview; the latter much like doing the job.

Dickerson's analysis reminded me of a personal experience. Some years ago, the institution at which I worked hired a new provost. I was part of the team making the selection. At a dinner for the ultimate candidate, I and the others were wowed by his poise, knowledge, and communication skills.

He was hired.

We never saw that person again.

On the job, he was an utter failure lacking vision, team building skills, and one of the worst public speakers I have ever heard.

But he was a fabulous interview.

Recent presidential elections have had some of the same flavor.

Campaigning involves large doses of posturing and performing. Although that has been true since the beginning – think Andrew Jackson and “Old Hickory” or “Honest Abe” Lincoln or “Rough Rider” Teddy Roosevelt – Dickerson is very good at describing how the electronic media exacerbates the phenomena proving the veracity of Roger Ailes' famous quip after Richard Nixon's 1968 victory. Because of the power of TV, Ailes opined that Nixon would be the last politician elected president.

All the rest would be entertainers.

Who can say Ailes was wrong?

Electing entertainers, whether reality TV stars like former President Trump or presidential candidate Bill Clinton playing his saxophone on the Arsenio Hall Show – the American people have often not elected leaders. Dickerson provides a primer on leadership that at times gets bogged down in secondary characteristics as he neglects to note that a leader's primary responsibility is to define a vision for the future, to articulate a path to its achievement, and to inspire followers to join in the pursuit of its attainment. He is spot-on, however, when he says as a manager, a leader's essential job is to build a team, to differentiate between what needs to be done and what would be nice to do, and to be the "decider."

Regarding "team builder," Dickerson evaluates presidents by the caliber of those who work for them. It's like the old leadership training notion Peter Drucker identified – "A" people hire "A" people; "B" people hire "C" or lower people. You can measure a leader by the quality of the people around him or her. Dickerson is also very astute in discussing President Eisenhower's decision making "Four-Quadrant" system. Knowing what's important and what's not, what's urgent and what's not defines whether or not a leader will succeed. Dickerson's analysis of Eisenhower's system and various president's success or failure revealed by it is worth the price of the book alone.

What's to be done to fix Americans' current propensity to elect entertainers and not leaders? Dickerson provides a cafeteria menu of ideas and options, but the most important boil down to three things: fix the primary system, fix Congress, and learn (remember?) how to act like Benjamin Franklin.

Regarding the primary system, I couldn't agree more with Dickerson. Most Americans think the primary system an ancient aspect of American elections. In part that is true, but the full-blown primary system we are now burdened with is actually less than 60 years old. It is one of the offsprings of America's year of horrors – 1968. We've discussed it before in a number of *Book Notes*, during my presentations at the Jefferson Society on "America In 1968," and on my podcast *The American Tapestry Project*. In a super-condensed summary, in pursuit of a more participatory democracy, the post-1968 Democratic Party instituted direct primaries in order to thwart the "smoke-filled room's" influence and to empower the people. The Republican Party, not sensing the danger, went along.

The result, however, was the ironic empowerment not of all the people, but of each party's most passionate and dedicated wing – those who always vote. Sounds benign; in some ways it is, in others not so much. It results in a purity of party policy that coalesces around the edges squeezing out the middle. But the middle and the art of compromise are what the American system was built upon.

The challenge is how to get back to that centrist, consensus-building approach to politics in which actual politicians who know how to get things done once again have a chance against the entertainers of the right and the left flouting their “angertainment”? Dickerson argues for a return to “sausage making.” That is, to bringing back some version of the “smoke-filled room” in which those who know what needs to be done can once again have a voice.

In short, we need to devise a system that involves both primary elections and some restraining system that tempers primaries’ inherent bias towards each parties’ extreme edges. Dickerson has some centrist ideas about how that might be done, including open primaries, rank choice voting, and other tactics promoting compromise, which was once the genius of American politics.

Dickerson also advocates fixing Congress so it can resume its position as a co-equal branch of government, which is really an argument for taming the beast of partisan gerrymandering. Gerrymandering is old. It is named after Elbert Gerry of Massachusetts, a federalist period politico who mastered the art of designing congressional districts to get foreordained results. How to fix gerrymandering is complicated, for it requires not one solution but also 50 – one for each state. Nonpartisan commissions have worked in several states, but the challenge remains and neither party seems eager to engage with the issue.

Why?

Probably because they’ve forgotten, if they ever knew, Dickerson’s third solution, which is to act like Benjamin Franklin. We’ve discussed this in multiple **Book Notes** – two earlier this year on Franklin himself and recently in another **Book Note** on James Madison.

What does it mean to act like Benjamin Franklin?

It means to be civic minded and public spirited; it means to work for the common good; and it means to remember and to master the art of compromise. Franklin was the embodiment of all of those foundational American virtues that extreme primaries and gerrymandering have driven out of the public square.

For Franklin, the pursuit of the common good that profited all Americans meant sacrificing some of one’s own selfish interests. In his inimitable folksy way, this most sophisticated of Americans understood that the common good required, like any good joiner (carpenter) seeking a tighter fit, shaving a bit from this side and a bit from that side so that the joint will be stronger to the benefit of all. It is the art of compromise that Madison believed to be the soul of American politics.

For a more pointed discussion of all of these ideas, join me on December 11 at Gannon University to hear John Dickerson discuss “the hardest job in the world” and how to fix it.

Next week in **Book Notes** we’ll begin a three-part series on *The American Way of Christmas*.



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“The Hardest Job in the World” available at [The Hardest Job in the World by John Dickerson: 9781984854537 | PenguinRandomHouse.com: Books](#) accessed November 27, 2022.

End Notes

1. “About John” at [John Dickerson.com](#) available at [About John Dickerson - John Dickerson Official Website](#) accessed November 27, 2022.
2. “American Exceptionalism” in **New World Encyclopedia** available at [American exceptionalism - New World Encyclopedia](#) accessed November 28, 2022.
3. Lincoln, Abraham. “1862 Annual Message to Congress, Final Remarks” at **American Battlefield Trust** available at [Abraham Lincoln's 1862 Annual Message to Congress, Final Remarks | American Battlefield Trust \(battlefields.org\)](#) accessed November 28, 2022.
4. Asghar, Rob. “The Toughest Leadership Job of All (It’s Not What You Think)” in **Forbes** available at [The Toughest Leadership Job Of All \(It's Not What You Think\) \(forbes.com\)](#) accessed November 28, 2022.
5. Dickerson, John. **The Hardest Job In the World: The American Presidency**. (New York: Random House, 2020), p. vii.
6. Cited in John Meacham. **The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels**. (New York: Random House, 2018), p.14.
7. Cf. Shakespeare, William, **Richard II**, III, ii, ll. 155-170 in which the King upon his return to England learning of his encroaching defeat says:

For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings:
How some have been depos’d, some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed,

All murtherd...

8. John F. Kennedy, *"The Presidency in 1960, Address by Senator John F. Kennedy, January 14, 1960 at National Press Club, Washington D.C."* at **John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum** available at ["The Presidency in 1960," Address by Senator John F. Kennedy, January 14, 1960 | JFK Library](#) accessed November 29, 2022.

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