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Clinton and Obama Struggle for Power

by Sheldon Richman

Many Americans are spellbound by the historic contest for the Democratic presidential nomination between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Forgetting the political context, it is indeed something spectacular, even inspiring. A woman and a black man have reached a pinnacle that just a few years ago seemed impossibly far off.

If it were happening outside politics, it would be something to appreciate.

But we can't forget the political context, and it's the nature of that context that should keep us from truly rejoicing in Clinton's and Obama's achievements.

When we strip away from the process they are engaged in the democratic mythology and red, white, and blue bunting, we are left with the spectacle of two people vying for raw power. They say they want to lead and inspire. What they really want to do is rule — us.

This is a contest to determine who will decide how to spend a significant part of our incomes, who will make war or peace, and who will achieve his or her "vision" by manipulating us with carrots and sticks.

There was a time when the people saw a president as little more than a clerk. He saw that the laws passed by Congress were executed. Yes, he was commander in chief of the military, but that only meant he directed the army *after* Congress declared war. He certainly couldn't take the country into war on his own. The express powers of the presidency described in the Constitution were seen as rather meager, and the people liked it that way.

Obviously, the idea of what a president should be has changed radically. How much so is the subject of Gene Healy's new book, *The Cult of the Presidency: America's Dangerous Devotion to Executive Power* (Cato Institute).

"The chief executive of the United States is no longer a mere constitutional officer charged with faithful execution of the laws," Healy writes in a book excerpt reprinted in *Reason*. "He is a soul nourisher, a hope giver, a living American talisman against hurricanes, terrorism, economic downturns, and spiritual malaise. He — or she — is the one who answers the phone at 3 a.m. to

keep our children safe from harm. The modern president is America's shrink, a social worker, our very own national talk show host. He's also the Supreme Warlord of the Earth."

Lots of presidents have encouraged this way of thinking of the office, especially Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt. But every man who held the office in the second half of the 20th century has done so. Maybe they thought it was necessary for the good for the country. If so, it shows only how little they understand the individual and social benefits of freedom and the free market. Some would say that society today is too complex for Jeffersonian notions about freedom. On the contrary, the more complex society is, the more it needs government to stay out of its way.

More likely, those who have worked to inflate the office were driven by pure ambition. They were determined to make their mark on history, and the hell with our freedom.

George W. Bush has taken this up a notch with his Unitary Executive Theory, under which he may on his own invade and occupy countries, ignore congressional restrictions on his power, wiretap without a warrant, authorize CIA torture, send suspected terrorists to other countries to be tortured, and hold the people he declares "enemy combatants" indefinitely without trial.

The presidency now is an office with virtually open-ended powers. All the officeholder needs is a crisis to justify new authority, and there's never been a shortage of crises, whether economic or foreign in nature.

This is the backdrop to the historic power struggle between Clinton and Obama. Neither has condemned the blank-check presidency as a threat to the American people. Neither has pledged to forswear autocratic powers. On the contrary, both have indicated that they will be activist presidents on the domestic and foreign fronts. So has John McCain.

As the great political philosopher Peter Townshend said, "Meet the new boss. Same as the old boss."

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