James MacGregor Burns, Ph.D. ’47, Woodrow Wilson professor of government emeritus at Williams College, a distinguished scholar, gifted writer, and Democratic Party activist, has produced yet another volume about the health of the American political system and the role of presidential leadership. Burns is perhaps best known for his calls for transforming leadership and his claims that the American political system, as presently constituted, instead most frequently yields merely transactional leadership. His latest volume is timely when public approval of elected officials on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue is at a nadir, and when we are in the midst of the first presidential election since 1952 when neither major political party will have an incumbent president or vice president on the ballot.

His straightforward, uncomplicated account, entitled Running Alone: Presidential Leadership from JFK to Bush II—Why It Has Failed and How We Can Fix It, rests on four basic assertions. First, presidential candidates have increasingly felt fewer attachments to political parties. Instead, they build their own organizations, raise their own resources, and develop their own ideas and proposals. Party leaders, therefore, are less able to control the outcome of the nominating process; parties are less capable of producing coherent policy programs that transcend both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue; and parties as a result are less the unifying vehicles of action that they were in former times.

Second, once elected, presidents have increasingly “governed alone,” independent of party organizations, party platforms, party-generated proposals, and party leaders. Rather than rely on establishing collaborative and close working relationships with congressional leaders or party officials, presidents have sought to lead on their own.

Third, these presidential efforts have failed to produce the genuine, transforming leadership the nation needs. According to Burns, from John F. Kennedy through George W. Bush—the period covered by this volume—we have had a series of failed presidencies.

Fourth, what is needed is “party polarization”—to help facilitate transforming each of our two major political parties “into a disciplined national organization, united by shared values, committed to collective action.”

His argument is not a new one. Indeed, it is strikingly similar to the one that he advanced more than four decades ago in The Deadlock of Democracy: Four-Party Politics in America, when he wrote: “The cure for democracy, people used to say, is more democracy. A half century of hard experience has shown this cliché to be a dangerous half-truth. The cure for democracy is leadership—responsible, committed, effective, and exuberant leadership….” The leadership Burns desires and envisions is centered in disciplined political parties and a set of arrangements that will enhance the prospects that such unified leadership will have the capacity to work its will. He is distressed that “as the parties have weakened, divided government has had consequences the Framers didn’t plan—frequent stalemates, crises of in-
action, crucial legislation stalled for decades.” His persistent plea is for a system similar to that in Britain, “leadership that is both empowered and accountable.”

Instead, what we have had in the last four decades is “more democracy.” Uncomfortable with party leaders dominating the process of selecting nominees, we have moved into an era when those citizens—small minorities of the electorate in many primaries—who are prepared to go to the polls select candidates via the ballot box. The death knell of party leader-selected candidates was 1968, when Hubert Humphrey was named the Democratic presidential nominee without having run in a single primary. Following the raucous convention in Chicago that year, the McGovern-Fraser Commission was formed to develop new and more democratic means for selecting presidential nominees.

Those reforms, adopted by both Democrats and Republicans, have produced a system in which nominees emerge only after having successfully run a gauntlet of primaries. The formal nominating conventions, months later, are no longer deliberative occasions but coronations.

The power to determine who will carry the banner of each party into the November general election has shifted from party leaders to millions of party activists informed by a highly attentive press corps eager to focus attention on the personal qualities, organizing ability, plans, and ideas of individual candidates. The length of the electoral process has grown, as have the fundraising requirements for serious contenders.

The presidential candidates who emerge victorious have had to demonstrate great ambition and stamina, as well as an ability to put (and keep) together a high-performing organization committed to their success. They must convince not simply a few thousand well-heeled contributors to support their campaign financially, but hundreds of thousands of average voters, because campaign-finance reform has capped individual contributions. In our age of expanding democracy, we must want the consequences of what we want. These consequences include lengthy, more expensive campaigns filled with ideas, proposals, and promises that both empower and limit the degrees of freedom of successful candidates. At the same time, voters have an expanded opportunity to view first-hand the stamina, judgment, and capacity of candidates to develop and implement a strategy.

The political parties that James MacGregor Burns so passionately seeks to strengthen must now contend with the many voters who view themselves as independent and split their ballots between candidates from both major political parties. Unified government, with the same party in control of the White House and both houses of Congress, was the dominant pattern during the first seven decades of the twentieth century: during 56 of those 70 years, or 80 percent of the time, a single party controlled both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. During the last 30 years of the twentieth century, however, the 80-20 rule was stood on its head: we experienced six years of unified government and 24 years of divided government.

What has been the effect of these twin patterns of presidents “running alone” and governing within the context of divided government? Has this produced a government in gridlock, incapable of addressing not only problems and crises, but even of simply making sustained incremental improvements?

The answer to that question is, of course, influenced by the preferences and priorities of the individual observer. Whatever one’s preferences, the period since John F. Kennedy’s election has produced an avalanche of federal initiatives. Macroeconomic policies have created an environment for sustained economic growth without inflation. Government has reformed its regulation of transportation, energy, financial services, and telecommunications, while at the same time, voters have an expanded opportunity to view first-hand the stamina, judgment, and capacity of candidates to develop and implement a strategy.
Unnerved by the Urge to Win

Our dinner stirred up all sorts of issues. I have never gotten along with alpha males and am unsure about the line between acceptable competitiveness and nasty aggression. I had difficulty in gym class not just because I was inept but because sports seemed too brutal to me. When is the urge to win not just about performing optimally and more about breaking your adversary, physically or psychically? Assuming your opponent is not a jerk, is it immoral to want to destroy him? To me this kind of attitude, which is common in chess, detracts from the nobility of the game. Chess is said to be a safe way to sublimate aggressive impulses. But is it harmless just because the aggression isn’t physical? The idea of “healthy competition” may be a myth when it comes to chess. Can you really play a friend, go for each other’s jugular, and be buddies afterward?

I have watched thoughtful chess players wrestle at different levels with these issues. Pascal Charbonneau avoids playing chess with his girlfriend, who is an international master. Nor will he play a game with me, although he’ll happily help me for hours with my own chess (although I must wonder if he is actually conflicted about the reverse possibility—that he’d derive unwhole—some pleasure from trouncing me). Nigel Short has eliminated the possibility of playing chess with his wife by humiliating her the first time she asked him. He insisted on doing it blindfolded with just 15 minutes on the clock while she could take all the time in the world while looking at the board.

As for my own attitude toward competition, I can play card and board games with people I love, but I can’t do it casually. I like to go all out in games. So if I think people I care about are going to misinterpret my determination as aggression, I won’t play. Ann [his wife] has tried to interest me in Scrabble, but I’ve turned her down because I don’t want to risk upsetting her. She probably has a better vocabulary than me, but I’m convinced I’d consistently beat her because I’m a better strategist. I also have the infuriating habit of appearing like I don’t give a damn. So she might be deflated to lose to someone who doesn’t seem to be trying.

Paul Hoffman ’78 was a child chess prodigy and now, after a 25-year break from tournament chess, he has started playing again. He has been president of Encyclopaedia Britannica and editor in chief of Discover magazine and has written books about obsession, genius, and madness. His new book, King’s Gambit: A Son, a Father, and the World’s Most Dangerous Game—chess, of course—is about those themes, as well as deception and male competition. When he first had dinner with then-world champion Garry Kasparov, for instance, he was unnerved by the Russian’s “insane competitiveness.”

MONTAGE

Discover

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Roger B. Porter, Ph.D. ’78, is IBM professor of business and government in the Kennedy School of Government and master of Dunster House. His article “A President with a Purpose: Leadership Lessons from Gerald R. Ford” appeared in this magazine’s March-April issue.