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‘The role of the President was the most important factor in explaining the advancing position of African-Americans between 1861-1965.’

I. Overview and Argument

- * 1861-1965, 21 presidents. How many *really* advanced the position of African Americans?
 - Most would fit Nick Bryant’s description of JFK > “bystanders” (or worse!)
- * Few US historians today would accept premise of this Q
 - focus instead on local studies, on ordinary people, on organizing traditions, on women (i.e. Q associates social change with men!)
 - shift away from ‘high politics’ in US historical writing > not only presidents, but also away from leaders (incl. Martin Luther King, Jr)
- * So why this Q? Exaggerated attention to presidents, esp. in US popular culture
 - US market for big presidential bios (Caro on LBJ, Goodwin on Lincoln), films (*Selma*, 2014)
- * BUT useful as framework for thinking about forces of historical change in period

2. “The Role of the President”: What can a President do, anyway?

Executive office = limited powers, not “presidential government” (Congress makes laws)

- **Main powers** (relevant ones indicated): election; make treaties; commander-in-chief; veto; appointments; give congress information and recommend measures.
- **ALSO** ‘Executive Orders’ = “executive power”, power to administer, govern

AND CRUCIALLY—Bruce Miroff (1981): political theatre, “appearances as well as actions”

4 presidents who did most for civil rights drew directly on all these powers:

- Lincoln—Proclamation of Emancipation (1863)—military act
- FDR/ HST—executive orders—created FEPC (1941), deseg. US military (1948)
- LBJ—State of Union address (1964): > shaped and set legislative agenda

REMEMBER expansion of executive authority: greater federal capabilities, esp. 1930-60s

3. “Most Important Factor”: Presidential Power and Civil Rights

* Section: focuses on a handful of the crucial events in African American advancement bet. 1861-1965, capturing the role of presidential power amid wider dynamics

LINCOLN—Proclamation of Emancipation (Jan 1863) > war measure to free *slaves in Confederate-occupied territory* (left 800k slaves in border states)

- Eric Foner (2019): the Proclamation “*stretched constitutional authority to its limits*”

YET RECONSTRUCTION (~1865-1877) > America’s “Second Founding” (Foner, 2019)

> seated in Congress, not the White House

- **13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments:** passed by, *and* empowered Congress

[* Still, *culturally* the Proclamation would endure: “Lincoln’s ready hand...struck off our bonds” (1913)]

* One would have to look with some suspicion at those who suggest betw. mid-1860s-1890s the executive branch was the major—or even a—factor in black advancement

FDR—shied away from race relations > because of southern Democrats in Congress
> BUT **Fair Employment Practices Commission** (1941)—“biggest achievement on race relations since Reconstruction” (Zelizer, 2012)—*exposed* level of racism, esp. in business
> president pressured to create FEPC, to appease March on Washington Movement
> “civil rights unionism”, mass tactics, blk workers, far more significant factor, 1935-45

BROWN vs. Board of Education (May 1954)—LANDMARK ADVANCEMENT

- Kevin McMahon (2004) a rare scholar who argues legal overthrow of segregation was “an institutional mission” of FDR > a fanciful claim
—*sustained* NAACP legal/ organizing strategy—to attack edifice of segregation
—Supreme Court, not President: ‘Judicial Activism’ a main factor, 1940s-60s > *Brown* not only key case (also *Shelley vs Kraemer*, *Sweatt vs. Painter*, etc)
—**EISENHOWER** > presidential *inaction* was also ‘important factor’ in advancing forces opposed to African Americans (i.e. Massive Resistance)

4. “Advancing Position”: African Americans’ Views of Change

How much did African Americans *during civil-rights era* recognize the president as a factor?

* **Martin Luther King, Jr.** > 1957-63 made several public requests for presidential action - magazine articles, open letters, 75page ‘appeal’ to JFK to ‘prohibit segregation’
- King: “It is no exaggeration to say that the President could give segregation its death blow through a stroke of the pen” [1961]

SOURCE INTERPRETATION: we must recognize King’s statements not as straightforward reflections of his beliefs, but his politics--they are attempts to prod presidents

LBJ—unquestionably major achievements > primary aim of administration

—Civil Rights (1964) and Voting Rights Act (1965) *and Fair Housing Act (1968)*
—Result of LBJ’s conviction and ability as > “Master of the Senate” > set legislative agenda

YET even STEVE LAWSON (2003) judges events of ’64-’65 “show the inability of a president as shrewd as Johnson to manage totally...the cause of black militancy.”

ALSO—REGION and DIFFERENT GROUPS > presidential action did not have a uniform effect (see above, Proclamation)—mattered more to some Af Ams, than to others

> many activists in mid-60s, in both Deep South *and* urban North, president not key figure
> “community organizing tradition”—development of leadership among ordinary people
- Ella Baker, “People have to be made to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves”
- **Christopher Schmidt (2019)** > sit-ins across South, c1957-62, placed students at center of movement, were central in debates about Constitutional law
- **Charles Payne (1995)** Voter registration in Mississippi and George, 1961-64

5. Conclusions

* President not the most important factor > limitations of office, limits of vision
* One *might* suggest that a certain president (Lincoln, LBJ) warrants this label, but the Q seems to prod us to identify a more *sustained* force, from 1861-1965
* What are the main force/s of historical change here?

Further Reading:

- David Chappell, ‘Civil Rights: Grassroots, High Politics, or both?’ *Reviews Am. Hist.* (Dec. 2004)
- Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (Penguin, 2001)