

## II

# Will American Caesars Arise?

MAY A TIME ARISE when the American government sinks to the condition of a plebiscitary democracy, that is, a regime in which a mass electorate ratifies the personal rule of some strong unscrupulous leader? Constitution or no constitution, may the Imperial Presidency pass into the hands of autocrats, nominally chosen by the popular will, but in truth restrained neither by the laws nor by the public interest?

Just now such an alteration of the executive branch may seem improbable. In consequence of having made two or three relatively minor blunders in foreign affairs, Ronald Reagan was bullied and defied by a Congress that the opposition party dominated—this despite Mr. Reagan's personal popularity. At present the danger is not that the President might become an autocrat; rather, the question now is whether a swaggering Congress will permit the President to carry on adequately the high duties assigned to him by the Constitution, including the conduct of diplomacy (even with South Africa) and the appointment of justices and of judges.

Yet present circumstances may be exceptional; a case may be made that the general long-term drift of America's pattern of politics is toward increased concentration of power in the person of a crowd-pleasing arbitrary President. The Framers of the Constitution, two centuries ago, conferred upon the new office of the President powers almost identical with those possessed in Britain by King George III, in 1787—though of course they

did not so declare publicly. But the Framers had no intention of making their chief executive officer a Caesar, on the model of Augustus. Nor does any eminent politician or publicist nowadays advocate openly such concentration of power in the executive. Nevertheless, large political changes sometimes occur without many people having willed or even discerned them.

Thirty years ago there was published a much-reviewed book about this question: *The Coming Caesars*, by Amaury de Riencourt, a youngish, adventurous Frenchman. I happened to meet him in 1957 at Bruges, and found him endowed with that gift for striking generalization often possessed by leading French writers, most notably perhaps by Tocqueville.

Unless measures of restraint should be undertaken soon, Riencourt argued three decades ago, the United States would fall under the domination of twentieth-century Caesars:

Caesarism is not dictatorship, not the result of one man's overriding ambition, not a brutal seizure of power through revolution. It is not based upon a specific doctrine or philosophy. It is essentially pragmatic and un-theoretical. It is a slow, often century-old, unconscious development that ends in a voluntary surrender of a free people escaping from freedom to one autocratic master. . . .

Political power in the Western world has become increasingly concentrated in the United States, and in the office of the President within America. The power and pres-

tige of the President have grown with the growth of America and of democracy within America, with the multiplication of economic, political, and military emergencies, with the necessity of ruling what is virtually becoming an American empire—the universal state of a Western civilization at bay.

Riencourt was not predicting a *coup de main* or some cabal of that notorious “military-industrial complex.” In his words,

Caesarism can come to America constitutionally, without having to alter or break down any existing institution. The White House is already the seat of the most powerful tribunician authority ever known to history. All it needs is amplification and extension. Caesarism in America does not have to challenge the Constitution as in Rome or engage in civil warfare and cross any fateful Rubicon. It can slip in quite naturally, discreetly, through constitutional channels.

Was Riencourt’s warning extravagant? Not at all: what he predicted in 1957 came to pass only six years later, in consequence of the murder of President Kennedy. Caesarism slipped into the White House constitutionally, if not naturally, with the accession to power of Lyndon Johnson. For some five years the United States was dominated by a Caesar from Texas, and most people did not much notice the difference. At the end of his elected term of office, true, Caesar Johnson would find it prudent to relinquish power, being unable to navigate in a sea of troubles. Like many a Caesar before him, Johnson was undone by military failure, despite his *panem et circenses*; and as had occurred in Roman times, a rebellious senator would strip him of the purple. It is worthwhile to digress at this point, I think, and sketch the character of Lyndon Johnson; for the first American Caesar may have his emulators before the end of this century.

#### *Johnson in Power*

BEING A syndicated columnist during the Kennedy and Johnson years, I kept a close eye upon the rise and triumph of Lyndon Johnson. Yet it was not until years after he retired from public life that I came to

understand fully how evil a public man he was.

In the closing weeks of the presidential campaign of 1964, the Adult Education Council of Chicago sponsored a debate between Hans J. Morgenthau, the author of the three-volume *Politics in the Twentieth Century* (1962), and this writer. Morgenthau spoke for Lyndon Johnson, I for Barry Goldwater.

Professor Morgenthau was effectively mordant, as usual. He said of Senator Goldwater that he was “a wonderful human being,” generous, kindly, lovable. But he must not be elected, for Goldwater scarcely could entertain two ideas consecutively. President Johnson, on the other hand—so Morgenthau continued—though unscrupulous, grasping, and selfish, was remarkably intelligent, “with a mind like a steel trap.”

What a miscalculation by Morgenthau! In 1964 Morgenthau was the principal advocate of the doctrine that the aim of foreign policy is to pursue the national interest realistically, regardless of sentiment and ideology. But in Vietnam, Johnson was to ignore that doctrine, ruinously and stupidly, for Caesars rarely will brook the defiance of lesser breeds without the law. Then Morgenthau would reproach him. Goldwater lost the election of 1964 primarily because of the “trigger-happy” issue; but it turned out to be Johnson’s ruthless finger on the trigger that fired confusedly in every direction but the right one.

On the wall of my library hangs a photograph of myself with President Johnson and others in the Oval Office. We are smiling; it is well to be civil to Caesar. I was there (at the insistence of Mrs. Preston Davie, patroness of the Robert A. Taft Institute of Government) to present to the President a copy of my book about Senator Taft, just published; for Johnson had delivered a funeral eulogy of his senatorial colleague. This occasion, in 1967, had its comic relief. In the lives of American Caesars occur many ludicrous episodes.

My strong-willed wife, Annette, insisted upon accompanying me to the White

House. We penetrated to the Executive Mansion's inmost defenses, until presently we found ourselves halted before the desk of the last sentry, a veteran Marine sergeant in dress uniform, the President's Cerberus. "Identification, please!"

Annette fumbled in her purse; she had brought the wrong one. Nearby, in dudgeon, stood Howard Samuels, then Undersecretary of Commerce, with two young aides hovering nervously behind him; Samuels had neglected to put into his briefcase any acceptable document of identification. "But I'm the Undersecretary of Commerce. . . ." "No identification, no admittance," declared the iron sergeant.

Having shown my passport, I was permitted to pass on; but the sergeant barred Annette's way. "Every person has to have his own identification, Miss."

Annette's purse contained no driver's license, no passport, no scrap of. . . . But yes, there was something: a playing card, the jack of hearts. At the Magic Castle club in Hollywood, old Blackstone the magician had performed a mystifying card trick for Annette, years earlier, and this souvenir card, her name written upon it, lingered in her purse.

Thrusting the knave into the sergeant's hand, Annette cried triumphantly, "Here it is!"

The sergeant stared bemused. "You're Annette? I'm supposed to accept this for your identification?"

"Yes, you are!"

"Well, then, pass on, Miss."

Up the elevator we went, with the desolate Samuels lamenting outside the barrier, "You let her in with only a jack of hearts, and I'm the Undersecretary of Commerce!"

In the Oval Office, with President Johnson, were Mrs. Preston Davie of the Taft Institute, complacent, and two senators who had been on good terms with Robert Taft—the younger Byrd, of Virginia, and the younger Tydings, of Maryland. Lyndon Johnson towered tall and masterful, clearly a bad man to have for an adversary. True to his reputation, the President

wheeled and dealt with Byrd and Tydings while photographs were taken. He addressed a few words to me when I formally presented him with my Taft book. No doubt he knew me for a syndicated columnist, but never could have opened any of my serious books. "Stay in school! Stay in school!" Johnson had shouted, over television, to the rising generation. Yet this Caesar had no need of books: he had learnt by experience—"a hard master," Benjamin Franklin had written, "but fools will have no other."

Every inch a Caesar LBJ looked; he might have sat to Michelangelo for the carving of a statue of a barracks emperor. Experience, nevertheless, had not taught this imperator how to fight a war. To fancy that hundreds of thousands of fanatic guerrillas and North Vietnamese regulars, supplied by Russia and China, might be defeated by measures chiefly defensive, plus a great deal of aerial bombing! "Imagination rules mankind," Napoleon had said—Bonaparte, master of the big battalions. Had Johnson possessed any imagination, he would have sealed Haiphong, as President Nixon did later: only so might the war have been won.

Afflicted by *hubris*, Johnson Caesar piled the immense cost of the war upon the colossal cost of his enlarging of the welfare state at home. One might have thought he could not do sums. Both guns and butter! It had been swords and liturgies with earlier emperors.

No, Johnson did not open books. With Septimius Severus, he might have growled, "Pay the soldiers; the rest do not matter." Had he not to counsel him Robert McNamara, creator of the Edsel? Power was all, and surely the power of the United States, under Johnson's hand, must be infinite. All the way with LBJ! There came into my head, there in the Oval Office, a passage from Amaury de Riencourt:

With Caesarism and Civilization, the great struggles between political parties are no longer concerned with principles, programs and ideologies, but with *men*. Marius, Sulla, Cato, Brutus still fought for principles. But now, everything became personalized.

Under Augustus, parties still existed, but there were no more *Optimates* or *Populares*, no more conservatives or democrats. Men campaigned for or against Tiberius or Drusus or Caius Caesar. No one believed any more in the efficacy of ideas, political panaceas, doctrines, or systems, just as the Greeks had given up building great philosophic systems generations before. Abstractions, ideas, and philosophies were rejected to the periphery of their lives and of the empire, to the East where Jews, Gnostics, Christians, and Mithraists attempted to conquer the world of souls and minds while the Caesars ruled their material existence.

All the way with LBJ!

It is with variations that history repeats itself. Ignoring history, LBJ was compelled to repeat it.

I came to understand later that he was the worst man so far to make himself master of the White House. The corrupt antics of Bobby Baker and Billie Sol Estes, both his creatures, did not bring him down, though they should have. One can read in detail about Johnson's connection with those scandals in Carl Curtis's recent book *Forty Years Against the Tide*. Quite ruthless, Johnson was an ill man to cross.

In June 1961 an agent of the Department of Agriculture, Henry Marshall, had been found shot to death in Texas. Marshall had been about to expose the criminal wheeling and dealing of Billie Sol Estes, and in that wheeling and dealing Lyndon Johnson, then Vice-President, had participated. A justice of the peace declared the murder of Marshall to have been suicide.

But in March 1984 a grand jury in Robertson County, Texas, would look into the mystery. A federal marshal and Billie Sol Estes would testify before that grand jury. Under immunity, Estes swore that the killing of Marshall had been decided upon at a meeting at Vice-President Johnson's Washington residence; Johnson had given the order and directed a hanger-on, Malcolm Wallace, to execute it. The grand jury believed Estes, it appears, concluding that Marshall's death had been a homicide; no one was indicted, the grand jury presuming that the murderers were al-

ready dead.

Caesars are not oppressed by many scruples. Like some other Caesars, Johnson, from small beginnings, accumulated while in public office a great fortune. He was given his heart's desire, and the iron entered into his soul withal. Aye, an ill man to deal with, Lyndon Johnson.

Some months after our meeting in the White House, Johnson abandoned his plan to stand for a second term in office. Mobs of students and radicals had been shouting him down for his prosecution of the war in Vietnam; but he might have been nominated and elected again for all those mobs could have done. Roman emperors had dreaded the Roman mobs, and to them had sacrificed the state's prosperity. But Johnson never was lacking in nerve. What brought about his retreat to private life was the bold opposition of a very different sort of public man, Senator Eugene McCarthy. Eugene the Poet, Eugene the Giant-Killer, would fetch down Johnson Caesar.

#### *Eugene McCarthy: Poet as Politician*

HIGHLY UNUSUAL circumstances had brought Johnson a Caesar's powers, with a thumping majority obedient to him in both houses of Congress, and a broken Republican opposition. Circumstances different, but also unusual, brought him down. His own military ineptitude, the desperate eventual unpopularity of a long war in a distant land fought by American conscripts, and the stubbornness and intrepidity of a certain former colleague—this combination of factors ejected Johnson from the White House as swiftly as the assassination of President Kennedy had lifted him up and satisfied his old ambition.

Few chief executives of the United States have preferred poetry to pushpin. Yet a few politicians, usually members of the permanent opposition, have confessed to such eccentric tastes. Our chief living example of this breed is Eugene McCarthy.

The most interestingly complex of all recent aspirants to the presidency, McCarthy obdurately called himself a liberal dur-

ing years when that appellation was sinking swiftly in popular favor—although he abjured all forms of liberalism earlier than Franklin Roosevelt's. (During the past few years, as he now remarks, he has employed the word "liberal" as an adjective merely.) In his political theories, actually, McCarthy has been a conservative: He declared long ago that Edmund Burke was his political mentor, and no one has more warmly praised Tocqueville. He has read seriously and written intelligently. In the White House—*per impossibile*—he might have turned the most imaginatively conservative of Presidents.

Or perhaps not. Once upon a time I had an assistant who was a graphoanalyst, an expert on handwriting. Having examined a specimen of Senator McCarthy's handwriting, my assistant pronounced him rebellious, a hard master, and desirous of power. A touch of Caesar even in Caesar's adversary? However that may be, McCarthy's only considerable assertion of power was his unseating of President Johnson by running a good second in the New Hampshire primary of 1968.

A congenital no-sayer, Eugene McCarthy never ran with the hounds. He was candid and witty always. He and I first met as debaters before a large audience, in Boston. After this exchange, sponsored by the Paulist Fathers, a reception was held for us. Up to Senator McCarthy came a zealous young Paulist, inquiring, "Senator McCarthy, don't you think that Jack Kennedy is the finest president this nation ever has had?" (This occurred during the first year of the Kennedy administration.)

"No," said McCarthy, unsmiling.

Although taken aback, the Paulist returned to the charge: "But surely you agree, Senator, that President Kennedy has given this nation a new hope, a new vigor, a sense of moving forward toward great things?"

"No," said Eugene McCarthy.

The Paulist persisted: "But of course you'll agree with me when I say, Senator, that the Kennedy family have brought to our life a culture, a refinement, a meaningfulness, that we have not known before."

"No," said Eugene McCarthy.

"But—but Senator McCarthy, surely Jack Kennedy is a very nice man personally?"

Eugene McCarthy turned his back upon the Paulist and slowly walked away. He knew how to say no, he was not ensnared by cliché and slogan, and he had a poet's attachment to truth.

Later Senator McCarthy and I debated at the University of Minnesota. During the question period, a man in the audience asked the two of us whether we didn't think that the greatest menace to the United States was the John Birch Society. No, I said, observing that the Birch Society had neither power nor much money. Senator McCarthy seconded me, remarking that the resources of the Birch Society were tiny, by the side of the wealth and influence of the Kennedys and the Rockefellers.

Another person in that Minnesota audience demanded of McCarthy how he could explain his membership in so sinister an organization as Americans for Democratic Action. McCarthy answered, "The ADA have taken so many foolish stands that often I have thought of resigning from that organization. But nowadays it has become worse to be called 'a former member of the ADA' than to be called merely a member, so I have remained within."

McCarthy mentioned privately to me about this time that he had been able to support Hubert Humphrey for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1960, for "Hubert often says foolish things; but when compelled to act, usually he is sensible enough." He remarked that J. F. Kennedy's part in his West Virginia primary contest against Humphrey, what with the buying out of black preachers and other costly tricks, was the most corrupt episode in the history of American elections.

Such was the thoughtful public man, given to keeping his own counsel and no demagogue, who set his face against Lyndon Johnson in 1968, on the issue of the Vietnamese war. Johnson's escalation and ruinous conduct of that war provoked Mc-

Carthy into his audacious presidential candidacy, against a sitting President apparently perfect master of his party; no other Democrat ventured to come forward against the Texan Caesar. But also McCarthy clearly felt an aversion for Johnson on other grounds—though he said nothing of such concerns in his primary campaign.

For instance, in his volume of memoirs, *Up 'Til Now*, McCarthy remarks of President Johnson's naming of the commission to investigate the murder of President Kennedy that it "was a clear demonstration of President Johnson's lack of a sense of the institutional importance of governmental bodies, of his barbarian (in the classical sense) disposition to subordinate, if not destroy or seriously corrupt, institutions by presidential will, and of his personalizing of the office of the presidency." What McCarthy saw in Lyndon Johnson, then, was Caesar.

Against Johnson in his role of Caesar, in 1968, McCarthy played the role of Cato of Utica—with considerably more success than the original Cato. He dislodged from the presidency the ruthless man who was the head of McCarthy's own Democratic Party. A fair number of New Hampshire Democrats may have fancied that McCarthy opposed Johnson for not having prosecuted the Asiatic war with sufficient vigor. Certainly McCarthy was no doctrinaire pacifist and no friend to Communist ambitions. After Senator McCarthy, with his small resources, had beaten the President in New Hampshire's primary competition—winning a majority of the delegates and very nearly equalling Johnson in the popular vote—Johnson surmised that he could not be re-elected; or, should he win office again, that he could not govern effectively. David had overthrown Goliath.

In turn, McCarthy presently was undone by Robert Kennedy, who had not ventured to bell the cat before McCarthy had stood against Johnson. In his memoir, McCarthy is harder on Kennedy than on Johnson—and with good reason. Robert Kennedy's campaign against McCarthy was as unscrupulous as Johnson's campaign against Goldwater had been in

1964. (In the hard-fought California primary, which McCarthy came close to winning, Kennedy proclaimed the complete falsehood that McCarthy intended to move ten-thousand blacks from Watts into Orange County.)

Had Robert Kennedy been elected President, a good many people might have wished for Johnson back again. Vindictive, unscrupulous, lustful, energetic, Attorney General Kennedy of the shrill voice and the three-finger handshake was such a one as never should be chief magistrate. In fighting valiantly to stand between Kennedy and the Democratic nomination, McCarthy for a second time was the adversary of Caesarism.

Despite differences with McCarthy on some prudential questions, in 1976 I found myself announcing on a lecture platform my support of McCarthy's independent presidential candidacy. (This was just after a Texas debate between Frank Mankiewicz—then working *sub rosa* for Jimmy Carter—and me.) I did not know that McCarthy was quite the sort of person then needed in the White House; on the other hand, I did not know that McCarthy wasn't. Sometimes public men with poetic insights possess that armed vision to which the razor's edge becomes a saw.

A president who was no interest's servant—no prisoner of either the big unions or the big corporations—might have acted with decisive courage during the late 1970s. Instead, the country was given the quasi-populist Carter, certainly no Caesar, but infirm of purpose. It is entertaining, if profitless, to speculate on what sort of president the witty gentleman from Minnesota, so free from cant, might have become—he seemingly by nature a mordant critic of central authority, rather than an Ozymandias. But enough! In the lines of a poet more talented than McCarthy, all time is unredeemable:

What might have been is an abstraction  
Remaining a perpetual possibility  
Only in a world of speculation.

Throughout the two centuries of the history of the United States, the safeguards of

the Constitution and the resolute opposition of such public men as Eugene McCarthy have preserved the nation from the triumph of Caesarism. But it does not follow that the vaticinations of Amaury de Riencourt are groundless.

Certain national difficulties and dangers exist today that, in unhappy circumstances, could cause the majority of the American people to turn to some potential Caesar—so long as that Caesar, like the original Julius, should wear an egalitarian mask. An economic depression as overwhelming as that which commenced in 1929—caused, in our own day, by loss of confidence in the dollar (what with the monstrous national debt) and the collapse of the shaky apparatus of credit—would push this peril forward immediately. A second military reverse serious as that of the Indo-Chinese defeat would be no less menacing to our constitutional order. Or a prolonged paralysis of the federal political structure, produced by the over-effective functioning of checks and balances—that is, a stalemate of grand proportions as a result of partisan hostility between legislative and executive branches of government—might open the way for a would-be Caesar, he promising decisiveness and efficiency.

Should such an American Caesar stride

forward, he would be a vulgar autocrat, as Lyndon Johnson was. Riencourt puts this shrewdly:

Americans will accept immense, almost autocratic power over them so long as they do not have to see in it a transcendent authority, and they will always attempt to “humanize” such authority with the help of humor or incongruity. What they always seek to cut down is not effective power but its awe-inspiring character. Through the gap thus opened between appearance and reality, the coming Caesars will march in if left free to do so. We shall legislate against them and rave against them. But there they will be, towering over us, far above such petty attacks, symbols of a mortal disease within our Western Civilization.

Aye, Caesarism veiled by humor and incongruity! I think of that afternoon when Annette and I burst ludicrously into the Oval Office with a knave of hearts as identification; and of Lyndon Johnson, at once cajoling and menacing, made up for photography like a painted pantaloon, getting his way by manipulation rather than by force—most of the time. It is by no means inconceivable that we may look again upon the sardonically smiling countenance of an American Caesar.

—RUSSELL KIRK