



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2012 Volume III: The American Presidency

Introduction

by Bryan Garsten, Professor of Political Science

The office of the presidency is so familiar to Americans that we often forget how innovative it was at the moment it was created. In this seminar we rediscovered how difficult it was for the American founders to decide upon the details of the office. We read the debates at the Constitutional Convention about whether there should be more than one executive, whether re-election should be allowed, who precisely should control war-making powers, and other key aspects of presidential power. We then looked at key moments later in American history, from Andrew Jackson's controversial use of the veto to kill the Bank to debates about war powers in the wake of Vietnam. We found that even as the details of the controversies changed, certain themes arose repeatedly throughout the history of the presidency.

The Fellows demonstrated that the topic of the presidency could be made fresh when viewed from a variety of perspectives. One unit delves into the details of the constitutional convention, while another focuses on the psychological issues surrounding our choice of which candidate to support. Several Fellows looked closely at presidential biographies to try to identify key leadership traits, and to bring out the humble beginnings of some of our presidents. Other Fellows focused on the actions of particular presidents themselves and on the scope of their power: What did presidents do for the sake of women's equality, and why didn't they do more? Another set of Fellows opted for a more comparative approach, placing the American presidency alongside presidencies in Latin America, or alongside the presidency of the Navajo Nation. Finally, several Fellows asked penetrating questions about what presidents actually do, articulating different roles that they play in the polity and asking how much leeway they have to interpret the Constitution for themselves. Taken all together, the units offer a novel set of interpretations and questions about an office that remains the most distinctive part of the American constitutional system.

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