

**“Presidential Leadership and the Price of Politics”
Featuring
Bob Woodward
January 21, 2014**

Mr. Woodward began his remarks by pointing out the obvious gridlock in national policy making, most apparent in the disregard between the Obama White House and Congress.

- But beyond simply noting this stalemate, Mr. Woodward wanted to explore why it has come to this.

Mr. Woodward pointed out that there's plenty of blame to go around - for both Republicans and Democrats.

- House Speaker Boehner and the Republicans have used looming national (and international) crises -- such as raising the country's debt ceiling to avoid default - as leverage to try to pry politically resonant concessions out of the President.

But he reserved his most extensive criticism for President Obama. Despite Republican obstructionism, Woodward asserted that Obama is the country's CEO, and it is up to him to negotiate and find a way to strike deals to address our country's pressing concerns. Mr. Woodward laid out two general reasons Obama has not grasped how to wield power effectively, despite the fact that the Executive office has become institutionally more powerful since the Nixon Presidency.

- First, Mr. Obama seems to recognize that his personal background has not made him a likely candidate to be President. This has engendered a certain humility, and he

is therefore mindful about throwing his weight around - i.e. exercising power.

- Second, by not overcoming or masking his disdain for political opponents, he has eschewed friendly relationships (even faux ones) that would have been instrumental in helping to find agreements on important public policy issues.

Like other World Affairs Council speakers over the last year or so, Mr. Woodward assesses that objectively, the circumstances and trajectory of US national power are looking up.

- But as long as political issues in Washington are allowed to go unresolved, this will act as a drag on American prosperity and influence.

In his comments, Mr. Woodward then made an interesting segue, telling anecdotal stories about Hillary Clinton and George W. Bush, and former President Gerald Ford. Both stories make the point that we should not be overconfident in our contemporary political analysis.

- Ms. Clinton told Woodward once that she likes to quote George W. Bush from one of Woodward's books. When asked about how history would judge him, Bush is reported to have replied that he didn't know, that this would take some time, and by then we would be dead.
- The other story recounts when Ford assumed the Presidency in 1974 after Nixon's resignation, followed soon thereafter by his full pardon of the former President. Many contemporaries, including Woodward, thought that this was a prearranged, slimy deal. Many years later, it

came to light that Ford pardoned Nixon, even expecting it to cost him personally. Ford thought that the national interest warranted getting past Watergate, and moving on to other critical aspects of the country's business.

So, if it takes a long time for a historical reckoning to shake out (Bush), and sometimes we prematurely just get it wrong (the Ford pardon), perhaps in 2040 the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) will be viewed as a roaring success.

Paul F. Herman, Jr.
Florida State College at Jacksonville