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The Strategic President: Persuasion and Opportunity in Presidential Leadership

George C. Edwards

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How do presidents lead? If presidential power is the power to persuade, why is there a lack of evidence of presidential persuasion? George Edwards, one of the leading scholars of the American presidency, skillfully uses this contradiction as a springboard to examine--and ultimately challenge--the dominant paradigm of presidential leadership. *The Strategic President* contends that presidents cannot create opportunities for change by persuading others to support their policies. Instead, successful presidents facilitate change by recognizing opportunities and fashioning strategies and tactics to exploit them.

Edwards considers three extraordinary presidents--Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan--and shows that despite their considerable rhetorical skills, the public was unresponsive to their appeals for support. To achieve change, these leaders capitalized on existing public opinion. Edwards then explores the prospects for other presidents to do the same to advance their policies. Turning to Congress, he focuses first on the productive legislative periods of FDR, Lyndon Johnson, and Reagan, and finds that these presidents recognized especially favorable conditions for passing their agendas and effectively exploited these circumstances while they lasted. Edwards looks at presidents governing in less auspicious circumstances, and reveals that whatever successes these presidents enjoyed also resulted from the interplay of conditions and the presidents' skills at understanding and exploiting them.

The Strategic President revises the common assumptions of presidential scholarship and presents significant lessons for presidents' basic strategies of governance.

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