

Bill Clinton and Unilateral Executive Power

Ryan J. Barilleaux and Christopher Kelley
Miami University (Ohio)

ABSTRACT

In the waning weeks of his administration, President Bill Clinton took a number of actions that drew renewed attention to the issue of unilateral executive power: he used his power to declare large tracts of western lands off-limits to development, he issued pardons for a number of controversial figures, including Susan McDougal and Marc Rich, and he issued regulatory changes that tied the hands of the incoming Bush administration. He did all of these things at a time that the Modern Presidency thesis suggested he should have been at his weakest. While the actions of President Clinton received a considerable amount of media attention, they were not isolated uses of executive power, nor did Clinton's use of unilateral powers stand out as unique among his predecessors. In this paper, we will fit President Clinton as one among a number of Presidents since the Nixon administration that consistently pushed the envelope of executive power when the traditional skills of the president—bargaining and persuading—were impossible.