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Two-Term Limit Nears Adoption

The action of the Lower House of the Texas Legislature Tuesday in approving the proposed Federal Constitution amendment limiting presidential tenure to two terms merits approbation. It should be followed by quick action of the Senate on similar lines which might make good the forecast that the amendment may be adopted within a few days' time. Only ratification by four states is necessary now to put the proposal into the Constitution.

The machinery of power is so strong in the hands of any President that, short of a national upheaval, any man who once becomes President nowadays is certain of almost indefinite tenure if he wants it. It is next to impossible to defeat an incumbent for a party nomination. The party machinery is in the hands of the officeholders and the wire pullers who want no change for the two reasons that any shift at the top may cost the party hacks their jobs and election chances are better with a President than with any other candidate on whom the nation must be sold.

The rank and file of American voters have little choice as to a nominee of any party. They are presented in finality a choice between men named to run by an infinitesimal fraction of the electorate.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, who broke the third-term tradition, had a strong enough veneration for it not to risk his chances by frankly stating he wanted re-election in either 1940 or 1944. He went to elaborate lengths and even some pretty petty deceptions to build up an illusion that he had been drafted. He was far from the first President who could have had a third term. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, two great Americans from any standpoint, made clear why they thought the practice contrary to the ideals set up by a Constitution which did permit any number of terms in practice. Either could have been re-elected. Offhand the names of others certain of re-election, if they agreed, can be recalled—Andrew Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge. James Madison might have come through on the basis of a war that, if not successful, was at least a dogfall. Ulysses Grant, despite the scandals of his administration, might have had a third term. He wanted it, but his party leaders talked him out of it.

The case of Coolidge, of a presidential nonentity but a re-election cinch, is a noteworthy study in the power of the position. He had been given the terrific buildup that is two thirds automatic and one third applied pressure for any President. The year 1932 doubtless would have smashed Coolidge, as it did smash Hoover, as it would have smashed Al Smith or Franklin Roosevelt or anybody else, but Coolidge could have come back in 1928.

Too much power accumulates in the hands of a long-time President. He becomes in time an absolute monarch.

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