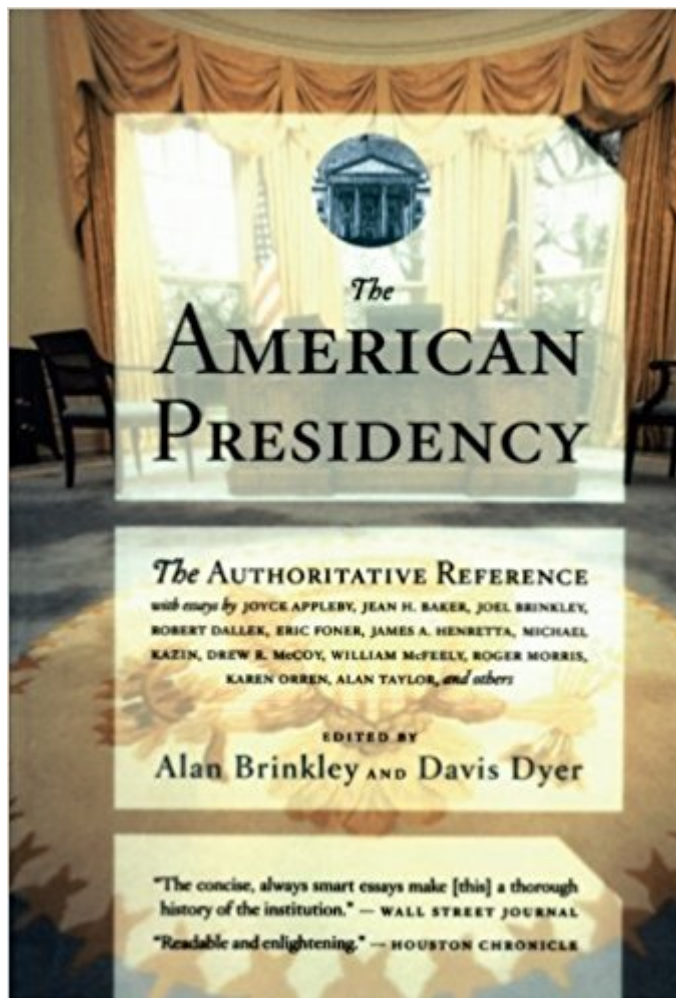


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The American Presidency



Synopsis

An incisive and accessible reference on the American presidency, with essays by the nation's leading historians. An indispensable resource for the curious reader and the serious historian alike, *The American Presidency* showcases some of the most provocative interpretive history being written today. This rich narrative history sheds light on the hubris, struggles, and brilliance of our nation's leaders. Coupling vivid writing with unparalleled scholarship, these insightful essays from well-known historians cover every presidency from the first through the forty-third.

Book Information

Paperback: 572 pages

Publisher: Houghton Mifflin (January 21, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0618382739

ISBN-13: 978-0618382736

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.4 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.5 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 11 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #145,848 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #125 in [Books > Reference > Encyclopedias & Subject Guides > History](#) #141 in [Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Reference](#) #311 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > United States > Executive Branch](#)

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IntroductionArticle II of the United States Constitution provides a spare, even skeletal description of the role of the president of the United States. The president, it says, will be vested with "executive power," will be commander in chief of the nation's military forces, and will have the power to make treaties and appoint judges and executive officers with the advice and consent of the Senate. "He shall from time to time give to the Congress information on the State of the Union" and recommend measures for the legislature's consideration. The president will receive ambassadors and will "take care that the Laws be faithfully executed." Otherwise, the Framers had almost nothing to say about what the president would do or what kind of person the president would be. Through most of American history, however, the presidency has been much more than a

simple instrument of executive power. Presidents, far from merely executing laws conceived and passed by others, have been the source of some of the most important shifts in the nation's public policy and political ideology. They have played not only political, but social and cultural roles in American life. They have experienced tremendous variations in their power and prestige. The presidency has hidden its occupants behind a vast screen of delegated powers and deliberate image-making. And the office has been critically shaped not just by individuals but by powerful social, economic, and cultural forces over which leaders have little or no control. Characterizing the American presidency "the task that this book has set for itself" is, as a result, very challenging. We start by distinguishing the presidency from the presidents, the office from those who held it. This book is not, then, a collection of presidential biographies, although it provides much biographical information about each of the forty-two men who have served as president. Rather, its focus is how these individuals have perceived and used the office, and how the office has changed as a result. Since George Washington's Inauguration in 1789, there have been periods of greater and lesser change, of turbulence and calm, of advance and retreat in the American presidency. Across these many years, however, four broad themes stand out: the symbolic importance of the presidency, which transcends its formal constitutional powers; the wide swings in its fortunes; the influence wielded not only by the president but also by his advisers; and the role of contingency and context in shaping the office and particular presidencies. Among the salient characteristics of the American presidency is that it has usually played a role in American life that extends well beyond the formal responsibilities of the office. Almost all presidents "whatever they have or have not achieved" have occupied positions of enormous symbolic and cultural importance in American life. They have become the secular icons of the republic "emblems of nationhood and embodiments of the values that Americans have claimed to cherish. Exaggerated images of the virtues (and occasionally the sins) of American presidents have helped shape the nation's picture of itself. Stories of presidential childhoods and youths have become staples of popular culture and instructional literature. Parson Weems's early-nineteenth-century life of Washington, with its invented stories of chopping down a cherry tree and throwing a silver dollar across the river, contributed greatly to the early self-image of the American nation. The popular *Boys' Life of Theodore Roosevelt* influenced generations of young Americans and helped form twentieth-century images of the presidency and of the nature of leadership. Just as Americans have often exaggerated the virtues of their presidents, so they have often exaggerated their flaws. Charges of presidential misconduct and moral turpitude have repeatedly mesmerized the nation for two centuries. The scandals that plagued Ulysses S. Grant, Warren G. Harding, Richard M. Nixon, and

Bill Clinton have molded both scholarly and popular views of those presidencies. But these most famously bedeviled presidencies are hardly alone. Thomas Jefferson, one of the most revered of all Americans, was savagely attacked in his lifetime as a revolutionary, a tyrant, and a miscegenist. John Adams and John Quincy Adams, pillars of personal rectitude, were harried throughout their presidencies by accusations of corruption, fraud, and abuses of power. Rutherford B. Hayes, a paragon of propriety (and sobriety), was known during his unhappy administration as "His Fraudulency" for having allegedly stolen the 1876 election from Samuel Tilden. Harry Truman, a folk hero today for what Americans like to remember as his plain-speaking honesty, was buffeted for years by charges of "cronyism" and "corruption" for creating what Richard Nixon and many others in 1952 liked to call the "mess in Washington." Almost everything a president does, in the end, seems to much of the nation to be larger than life, even that least dignified of political activities: running for office. During the first century of the American republic, most Americans considered the presidency so august a position that candidates for the office were expected not only to refrain from campaigning, but to display no desire at all for the office. In reality, of course, most of those seeking the presidency did a great deal to advance their own candidacies. In public, however, they accepted their nominations and, if successful, their elections as if they were gifts from the people. In the twentieth century, campaigning for president became almost a full-time job, both before and after election, and no one could hope to be elected in our time by pretending to have no interest in the White House. But the perpetual campaigning has given the presidency a different kind of symbolic importance; for presidents, and presidential candidates, are now ubiquitous figures in our media culture, their presumed personalities and their projected, carefully crafted images a focus of almost obsessive attention and fascination. The gap between the image and reality of the president and his office has been enormous at some moments, relatively narrow at others, but always there. The reality of George Washington's life was for many years almost completely replaced by the hagiographic myths created by Weems. Abraham Lincoln, widely and justly regarded as America's greatest president, became soon after his death a kind of national saint, his actual character as an intensely and brilliantly political man obscured behind generations of paeans to his humility and strength "by his law partner William Herndon, by his White House aides John G. Nicolay and John Hay (whose account occupied ten volumes), by the poet Carl Sandburg (who limited his to three). Franklin Roosevelt, a wily figure whose evasiveness and inconsistency infuriated even his closest allies, became and for generations remained "Our Friend," the heroic battler against depression and tyranny. But even less exalted figures have inspired their myths "the aristocratic William Henry Harrison portrayed as the simple product of a

log cabin who liked hard cider from a jug; the gruff, stubborn, and ultimately rather ineffectual Ulysses S. Grant considered, for a time, a great and noble conciliator; the cool, detached, intensely pragmatic John Kennedy, who became a symbol of passionate idealism and commitment. Another distinctive characteristic of the American presidency is the tremendous variation in the fortunes of the office. At times it has been a position of great power and enormous prestige—“an almost majestic office whose occupant dominated and helped shape the public life of the age. At other times it has been weak and relatively ineffectual. The number of issues with which presidents must deal has, of course, continuously expanded as the nation has grown larger, wealthier, more powerful, and more interconnected with other nations and international institutions. But the ability of presidents to deal effectively with those issues has ebbed and flowed. In the early years of the republic, presidents had great influence over the behavior of the relatively small federal government and were usually able to win support for their goals from Congress. The three presidents who served during the turbulent 1850s found themselves—“because of their own limitations and the character of their time—“almost powerless in the face of an increasingly assertive and fractious Congress. Lincoln seized wartime authority that gave him unprecedented, many believed almost dictatorial, power. Only a few years later, Andrew Johnson and Ulysses Grant found themselves almost entirely subordinated to the will of Congress—“a situation that continued through most of the rest of the nineteenth century. The twentieth century witnessed a dramatic expansion of the presidency’s importance and power, and also a significant growth in the constraints facing individual presidents. In their relations with Congress, twentieth-century presidents—“like their nineteenth-century counterparts—“included men who have been both commanding and disastrously weak. Social crises strengthened some presidents and weakened or destroyed others. War and cold war exalted some presidents and brought others to ruin. Some modern presidents—“Woodrow Wilson, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon—“experienced moments of towering achievement, only to suffer painful defeats and humiliations soon after. Others, most notably Harry Truman, rose from what seemed the ruins of their presidencies to political success and historical regard. A few, like Franklin Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, enjoyed cordial relations with the growing press corps in Washington, but most of their fellow presidents found those relations contentious and difficult to manage. The president, the political scientist Clinton Rossiter wrote exuberantly in 1956, is “œa kind of magnificent lion, who can roam freely and do great deeds so long as he does not try to break loose from his broad reservation. . . . There is virtually no limit to what the president can do if he does it for democratic ends and through democratic means.” • Rossiter’s view fit comfortably into the exalted image of the presidency at the height of the cold

war. But a generation later, in 1980, Godfrey Hodgson, an astute British observer of American life, offered a starkly different evaluation in a book whose subtitle, *The False Promise of the American Presidency*, summarized the prevailing assumptions of his time. "Never has one office had so much power as the president of the United States possesses," he wrote. "Never has so powerful a leader been so impotent to do what he wants to do, what he is pledged to do, what he is expected to do, and what he knows he must do." And yet, a year after Hodgson wrote, Ronald Reagan entered the White House, reasserted the centrality and authority of the office, and changed the image of the presidency once again. It is not just the gap between image and reality that makes American presidents elusive and intriguing figures. It is also the problem that both contemporaries and historians experience in trying to separate the president as a person from the things done in his name. Even in the nineteenth century, when presidents worked with tiny staffs, wrote their own speeches, and lived relatively openly, the president was never wholly master of his own fate. His cabinet, his party, the party's newspapers, and many others acted at times under the authority of the presidency and created a haze over the president's own intentions and motives. Historians have often struggled to separate George Washington's own actions, desires, and achievements from those of his powerful ally Alexander Hamilton. Andrew Jackson's towering image, during his lifetime and since, is the product not only of his own imposing personality but of the actions of such powerful associates as John Eaton, Roger Taney, Amos Kendall, and Martin Van Buren. In the twentieth century, the president came to be served by a vast and sprawling staff, presided over an even vaster and more sprawling bureaucracy, and became subject to increasingly sophisticated methods for shaping his image. And the biographers of modern presidents often find it difficult to chronicle a subject's life in the White House because the man himself seems often to disappear into the sheer enormity of his office. Changes in the once simple process of housing a president's papers is one indication of how the office has grown. The papers of every president until Herbert Hoover are housed in relatively confined spaces in the Library of Congress. The papers of every president beginning with Hoover are housed in large presidential libraries, which are not just testimonies to the eagerness of presidents to memorialize themselves, but also to the enormity of the records of modern administrations. The paper trail of modern presidents is not a result of presidents themselves writing more; in fact, most of them probably write less than their nineteenth-century predecessors did. It is a result of the steady increases in presidential staffs and the dispersion of presidential power into many corners of government. How can we separate those parts of the New Deal or wartime leadership for which Franklin Roosevelt is himself responsible from those that are the work of the large assemblage of talented, energetic, and ambitious men and

women who acted in his name? Did John Foster Dulles shape the foreign policy of the Eisenhower years, as many people believed in the 1950s, or was Eisenhower himself at the center of the process, as some historians have argued since? Was Ronald Reagan the bold and decisive leader his admirers describe, or the passive, uninformed, detached president that his critics—and some of his closest associates—have portrayed? There are no simple answers to any of these questions because the modern presidency is the creation of a single man and of many people whose actions the president may never see. Assessing the presidency is, finally, complicated by the difficulty of evaluating the importance of political leadership in relation to other forces in shaping historical events. This is a long-standing subject of debate among historians and other scholars, but it is also a concrete historical problem. Most historians would agree that events are seldom inevitable, that the specific actions of individuals can affect, sometimes even fundamentally shape, the course of history. But most historians today would also agree that the decisions of individual leaders are not the only, and often far from the most important, factors in explaining the past. Sometimes tiny contingencies exert enormous effects, as did the butterfly ballots and hanging chads in the 2000 election. But time and again, large social, economic, cultural, and demographic changes limit the options and overwhelm the assumptions of leaders. American presidents are not only figures of power, therefore, but also products—sometimes as beneficiaries, sometimes as victims—of the character of their times, as they themselves have often noted.

“Self during the lifetime of a generation,” Theodore Roosevelt once observed ruefully, “no crisis occurs sufficient to call out in marked manner the energies of the strongest leader, then of course the world does not and cannot know of the existence of such a leader; and in consequence there are long periods in the history of every nation during which no man appears who leaves an indelible mark in history. . . . If there is not the war, you don’t get the great general; if there is not the great occasion, you don’t get the great statesman; if Lincoln had lived in times of peace, no one would know his name now.”

Might we remember the talented and intelligent James Garfield as among our greatest presidents if he, rather than Lincoln, had presided over the Civil War? Would Franklin Roosevelt be the enormous historical figure he has become if he had not had a depression and a war to fight? Would Richard Nixon have fallen so ignominiously if he had not been president during a time of great turbulence and social division, a time he described in his memoirs, self-servingly and extravagantly but not entirely falsely, as a “season of mindless terror,” an “epidemic of unprecedented domestic terrorism” driven by “highly organized and highly skilled revolutionaries dedicated to the violent destruction of our democratic system”? Would Ronald Reagan have enjoyed such extraordinary political success if he had not entered office on the heels

of an era of intense economic anxiety and international humiliation? Would George W. Bush have become a towering international leader, at least for a while, without the events of September 11, 2001? Understanding the presidency requires, of course, taking seriously the role that individuals play in history, and there are many occasions in which one could imagine a very different history if a different leader had been in place. At the same time, however, the fates of the various presidencies are inexplicable without attention to the character of their times. The essays collected in this book, the work of a distinguished group of scholars, present concise and thorough accounts of the important events of each of the forty-three presidencies. But they also attempt to do more than that. They are deliberately and frankly interpretive, offering assessments of individual men and of both great and small events. They are also, in varying degrees, contextual, situating presidents in their time and suggesting how the character of American society and culture shaped the character of presidential performance. Each of the scholars contributing to this volume has had to contend with a large, at times overwhelmingly vast, literature on almost every American president. But we believe that these essays have something fresh and new to say about all of them and about that most awesome and frustrating of offices: the presidency of the United States. THE EDITORS Copyright © 2004 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Company.

good source of notes

Must read for PoliSci majors

Exactly what i was looking for

Great history

I have huge holes in my American History education and I purchased *The American Presidency* to get an overview of some eras I was only slightly acquainted with. I highly recommend the book for anyone who wants to brush up on the presidents or to learn about them for the first time. The essays include presidential policies and politics as well as biographies.

This is an outstanding read and very informative. Although I needed it for a graduate class, I find it an excellent read that has increased my interest in the historical significance of the office of the president.

Even though i only had to read this book for school, it did to turn out to be a very interesting and informative book and i really enjoyed it

I am only halfway through the book, which I am using to build up on knowledge in preparation for the Foreign Service Officer Test. The book is composed of essays written by different historians, and usually focus on the president's achievements and faults, how he rose to his political career, and a brief biography (in the essays of short-term presidents such as William Henry Harrison and James Garfield, most of their essay is a biography since they died before accomplishing much). The essayists do a great job at providing the reader with fact-based information, which may encourage further reading. Especially interesting are the essays on presidents whom most Americans are unaware but were actually "great" (in my opinion, William McKinley). The essays range anywhere between 10-30 pages per president. I would certainly recommend this book for anyone interested in descriptive, informative facts about our nation's presidents!

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