

Summer 2010

Review of Running Alone: Presidential Leadership from JFK to Bush II: Why It Has Failed and How We Can Fix It

James V. Koch
Old Dominion University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/economics_facpubs

 Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Koch, James V., "Review of Running Alone: Presidential Leadership from JFK to Bush II: Why It Has Failed and How We Can Fix It" (2010). *Economics Faculty Publications*. 10.
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/economics_facpubs/10

Original Publication Citation

Koch, J. V. (2010). Review of running alone: presidential leadership from JFK to Bush II: why it has failed and how we can fix it *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 12, 131-132.



PROJECT MUSE®

*Running Alone: Presidential Leadership from JFK to Bush II:
Why It Has Failed and How We Can Fix It* (review)

James V. Koch

Journal of Cold War Studies, Volume 12, Number 3, Summer 2010, pp. 131-132
(Review)

Published by The MIT Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/392784>

attempting such a fully international history of food aid are substantial, but the payoff may be equally so. Cold War historians should commend Ahlberg on her achievement. Then, one hopes, they will pick up where she leaves off.



James MacGregor Burns. *Running Alone: Presidential Leadership from JFK to Bush II: Why It Has Failed and How We Can Fix It*. New York: Basic Books, 2006. 278 pp. \$26.00.

Reviewed by James V. Koch, Old Dominion University.

James MacGregor Burns is a distinguished and well-published student of the American presidency and leadership. The more than twenty books he has authored have been careful, largely non-polemical, and well received. He received both a Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1971 for his *Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970).

In *Running Alone*, Burns returns to these familiar topics. However, this effort more avowedly reflects Burns's distinctive political sentiments, experiences, and subjective judgments. Although the title suggests that all nine of the U.S. presidents who occupied that office from 1961 through 2007 are analyzed and given consideration, the coverage in fact is highly uneven, with 35 percent of the 199 pages of text devoted solely to John Kennedy and only 1 percent to Gerald Ford. Despite the sparse accomplishments of the tragically abbreviated Kennedy presidency, Burns's attention to Kennedy leaves no doubt that he is enamored with the man, that political era, and the milieu. It is never difficult to ascertain where Burns's heart lies.

This is much less a book about transformational leadership versus transactional leadership (a subject on which Burns's contributions have been seminal) and much more a treatise about the plight and proposed future of today's Democratic Party. Leadership is about the effective exercise of power, but the well-known 1959 essay by John R. P. French and Bertram Raven on the sources of power and similar scholarly literature are not the centerpiece here. Instead, the focus is on each president's decision-making and whether he "ran alone" (p. 4); that is, whether he ran as a real or perceived outsider independent of the political and economic establishments.

Burns forthrightly asserts that running alone and governing alone are recipes for presidential failure. Rather, the secret to success is to imitate Franklin Roosevelt—use the established party apparatus, advocate a partisan platform that can be easily contrasted to that of the opposition, and appeal to masses of potential voters who otherwise might choose to stay home on Election Day.

In Burns's view, every president from Kennedy to George W. Bush too often has run alone or governed alone and therefore has underperformed or failed. If Burns sees an exception, it appears to be Ronald Reagan, whose rhetoric often suggested running alone, but who nevertheless heavily used Republican Party structures and personnel,

developed an easily understood set of programs, and captured the hearts of masses of voters who in the past either had not voted or had voted Democratic.

Burns sees Bill Clinton's "triangulation," the program of the moderate Democratic Leadership Council (closely associated with Clinton), and presidential policies that attempt to occupy the "vital center" (p. 46) as recipes for long-term failure. One might get elected advocating a centrist platform, but ultimately, according to Burns, one cannot effectively govern in this fashion for the simple reason that such an approach eventually turns off legislative leaders and the ruling party's vital constituencies (such as organized labor in the case of the Democrats).

Burns's political leanings are easy to divine. Essentially he shares *The New York Times* editorial board's view of the world. He labels Ronald Reagan "radically conservative" (p. 107) even though Reagan captured 45 states in 1980 and 49 states in 1984. Perhaps Burns's perception of the U.S. political spectrum is a bit dated and requires some adjustment. George McGovern's electoral debacle seems to have receded from his view.

Burns's rejection of centrist approaches to presidential effectiveness reminds one of Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2004), which argued that Kansas voters did not really understand what was best for them when they voted Republican. One can make that case, but one can also put forth attractive alternative explanations relating to the nature of Democratic candidates, the images associated with the major issues they chose to identify, and the greater effectiveness of Republican Party fund-raising and voter-turnout activities.

Burns energetically calls for greater political polarization and evokes sports competition metaphors to describe the political arena he believes would best serve an American president and ultimately the American people. This hypothesis is problematic. Nationally, an increasing proportion of state legislators and U.S. congressmen and senators represent constituencies in which legitimate electoral competition is largely absent. This has been accompanied by increased partisanship, one aspect of which is the reluctance of many elected officials to give significant consideration to issues that they do not believe have an impact on their voters. Many observers believe this has led to racial polarization and many of the economic policies that Burns decries. Political polarization, then, yields mixed benefits.

In the end, successful presidents such as Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan thrived because they were able to assemble broad, popular coalitions that were centrist in their day. Presidents who fail to do so (Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush come to mind) typically fail.

This is not a book that will win James MacGregor Burns, now in his 90s, another Pulitzer Prize. Even so, he has points to make, and, for those who wish a stylized but highly readable, anecdote-filled critique of the decision-making of selected U.S. presidents, it is an attractive, stimulating read.

