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Michael Patrick Cullinane and Clare Frances Elliott, eds. Perspectives on Presidential Leadership. An International View of the White House

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*Michael Patrick Cullinane and Clare
Frances Elliott, eds. Perspectives on
Presidential Leadership. An
International View of the White House*

Hans Krabbendam

¹
This valuable collection of essays serves two purposes. It contributes to a systematic evaluation of the quality of presidential leadership from a perspective outside America. And it shows a variety of approaches to presidential leadership. Thirteen “Commonwealth” authors created this outsider perspective by examining the quality and legacy of thirteen presidents. This volume grew out of a 2011 British survey where participants ranked American presidents. The editors and creators of the survey acknowledged that their criteria included subjective elements. They also recognized that such surveys tell us a lot about academic audiences in the (former) British Empire, about the qualities they appreciate in a president’s performance, and about what they think will inspire or haunt future generations. The particular national background of the volume’s authors makes presidents with a strong social agenda more agreeable.

²
The second objective of the volume is to introduce a literary approach when evaluating presidents, as when it reads Lincoln through Walt Whitman eyes, or assesses

Truman from a Canadian prime minister's perspective. These essays show that leadership invites a variety of levels of reflection, but the volume nevertheless does not contribute a comprehensive enough approach. As interesting as the views of Walt Whitman on Lincoln are, it distracts from the effort to design a framework for evaluation. Such a project would have benefited more from, for example, Richard Carwardine and Jay Sexton's volume on *The Global Lincoln* (2011).

3

For this volume the definition of leadership includes the skill to set a national agenda, the president's accomplishments in foreign affairs, whether or not the president raised a moral voice, and whether he had a positive effect on later developments. These standards are fair, but the criteria for selecting the presidents worthy to be examined remain unclear. If one is looking to explain good performance, it is a bit surprising to miss John Adams and Woodrow Wilson. If cultural legacy were the significant variable, one would expect Ulysses Grant and John Kennedy to be included.

4

The volume is a mix of presidential success and failure, but these are not yet integrated into one system. This may result from there being so many different causes for failure. Some presidents were too principled to secure patronage jobs (John Quincy Adams), others went on a personal vengeance tour, lacked balancing skills and fell victim to their racial biases (Andrew Johnson). Such features were serious obstacles to a president's effectiveness. It also mattered very much in whose shade one was standing. Truman suffered from the light of Franklin Roosevelt, and Johnson from the dazzling John Kennedy. Even more, the significance of the decade(s) in which one served could lift or depress one's reputation. Harding had no chance in the 1920s with his negative political reputation and was found guilty by association. This is important to note, as a change in the appreciation for a decade (as has happened to the 1950s and 1960s) affected the praise for and ranking of presidents as well.

5

It becomes apparent that it is getting harder for new presidents to penetrate the top ten favored in the survey, because the executive in earlier times had so much more leeway to shape the political system. Moreover, the expectations placed upon the occupant of the White House have increased over time and this puts more pressure on

later presidents. They can barely hope to live up to the task. The best chance to rank high is to manage a crisis well. So Theodore Roosevelt can never replace one of the top three – Washington, Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt– suggesting that a successful foreign policy trumps domestic results (also evident in the case of Reagan and Bush Sr.). And vice versa: that a productive domestic agenda cannot compensate for painful foreign policy events, which LBJ's record demonstrates.

6

One of the best articles is by Michael Cullinane on Theodore Roosevelt. TR's presidency contained all the necessary elements to serve as a model for presidential assessment. He made an imprint on social and political structures, balanced economic powers, handled personal relations, initiated a doctrine (the TR corollary to the Monroe Doctrine), offered successful arbitration, and secured his own legacy.

7

The prominence of foreign policy is to be expected from a collection of essays by non-Americans and it is an approach that can be developed further. How has Washington been perceived from the British side? How did a Canadian premiership compare to the US presidency in its chances and constraints on exerting leadership? How would other regions and continents assess presidential performance? Eastern Europe, Africa, China, to mention a few, might differ greatly in their appreciation of the US executive.

8

The collection works well in lining up criteria that in the perception of a certain coherent group assess a president. These criteria include the length of office and life which increase the chances for a lasting appreciation. FDR with his 12 years in office is the champion and cannot easily be reduced in importance. Two terms are better than one. Towards the end of the series of essays, in articles on Clinton and Obama, the emphasis moves towards the creation of one's legacy. The Clinton essay shows that while he tried hard to connect the decade of economic prosperity to his agenda, his centrist politics determined his middle-of-the-road performance. This reminds us of the necessity for a general exploration of measuring the effects over time. When and for how long does a policy sponsored by a president exert its influence? Here it is suggested that we must take into consideration the formulation of a

“doctrine.” Presidents who were able to articulate a coherent major direction for their foreign policy, captured in a doctrine, have a fair chance of leaving a mark. Whether Obama’s doctrine (military intervention as a last resort, and economic alliances) is specific enough to build a legacy, remains to be seen. For the time being, this collection proves that opening up an international perspective on the US presidency provides us with a fruitful and promising subject for investigation.

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