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Book Reviews

Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal

by Stephen Skowronek. Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2008. 192 pp. Cloth, \$34.95; paper, \$16.95.

Why did George W. Bush, once the beneficiary of the highest presidential approval ratings ever, end his tenure with the lowest marks on record? The answer, according to Stephen Skowronek, can be found in the patterns of “political time” (p. 18). Just over 15 years ago, Skowronek’s *The Politics Presidents Make* changed the way we think about presidential leadership, the history of the office, and their entwined significance for American politics. In *Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal*, he repackages and further develops the ideas that made his original work compelling, and does so with captivating results.

This brief, accessible text is a collection of five essays, four of which are revisions of previously published material. Beyond offering one-stop shopping for those unfamiliar with Skowronek’s work, the collection represents a continuation of his project to identify “broad historical patterns in presidential leadership,” explain the “political dynamics at work behind them,” and draw out implications for “the institution of the presidency and the workings of the American political system as a whole” (p. xi).

The first two essays offer a lucid introduction to Skowronek’s “political time” thesis and accompanying analytical framework, which compares presidents across time to reveal underlying patterns of presidential leadership. Eschewing conventional linear history, Skowronek’s concept of political time suggests that presidents who occupied parallel positions within regime eras—such as Andrew Jackson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, who hastened the rise of dominant political-institutional regimes, or Franklin Pierce and Jimmy Carter, who presided over their collapse—confronted similar political struggles to assert and legitimize authority.

Using the final four presidents of the twentieth century as cases, his third essay classifies these struggles for authority into four recurrent political configurations: the politics of disjunction (Carter), reconstruction (Ronald Reagan), articulation (George H.W. Bush), and preemption (Bill Clinton). The most intriguing element of this essay is Skowronek’s illumination of a second storyline—superimposed upon his political time thesis—regarding the “altered circumstances of late-twentieth-century politics” (p. 90). Specifically, he identifies how the rise of entrepreneurial and rhetorical politics has not only personalized the presidency

and established its “postmodern” character (pp. 81, 114–115), but altered presidential struggles for authority as well.

This second thesis takes center stage in Skowronek’s essays on George W. Bush, the most provocative portions of this collection. The first draws the connection between Bush’s location in political time and his “leadership posture,” a constructed “framing device” that serves as “an assertion of political authority” (pp. 118, 119). Skowronek identifies Bush’s belief that “definitions effectively asserted can create their own reality” (p. 122) as the foundation of his posture as a president who “leads by definition” (p. 121). Yet, the effectiveness of Skowronek’s argument is diminished by his conflation of Bush’s efforts to define political reality and the stubborn inflexibility with which he went about this task. As David Zarefsky contends, the need to define political reality is the work of all contemporary presidents; the fundamental quality of Bush’s posture was that he did so with unwavering rigidity, a characteristic shared with fellow “orthodox innovators” (p. 135) struggling with the politics of articulation.

Akin to those with whom he shared a moment in political time, Bush pursued a course that left him appearing “dangerously out of touch with reality and lacking in credibility” (p. 143). Yet, he was able to break from their pattern and secure reelection. Does this signify that the unbridled presidentialism that inspired Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.’s imperial presidency thesis has been realized? Skowronek doesn’t think so. His final essay argues that the Bush-as-unitary-executive years resulted from the convergence of “a uniquely virulent configuration of developmental dynamics” (p. 161) including the altered conditions of postmodern politics, lockstep partisan support, the events of September 11, and, importantly, a moment in political time that invited presidential overreach. This assessment is enlightening, but (as Skowronek admits) not very comforting.

Skowronek’s collection is an important contribution to our understanding of presidential leadership in American politics. Interestingly, its primary deficiency exists beyond the confines of the text—its nonexistent epilogue on the election of Barack Obama. Reading Skowronek during this moment in secular time provokes the question of what moment in political time Obama will occupy. Is he a preemptive leader, opposed to a regime that has temporarily lost its way? Or a reconstructive leader, following an incumbent for whom the politics of articulation during his first term degenerated into the politics of disjunction in his second? Only time will tell.

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Power and Military Effectiveness: The Fallacy of Democratic Triumphalism by Michael C. Desch. Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. 248 pp. \$45.00.

It is fast becoming conventional wisdom among international relations scholars that democracies are uniquely advantaged when it comes to winning wars,