

William E. Leuchtenburg, *The American President:
From Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton*

Marcus Walsh-Führung



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/14806>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.14806

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Marcus Walsh-Führung, "William E. Leuchtenburg, *The American President: From Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Book reviews, Online since 23 October 2019, connection on 31 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/14806> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.14806>

This text was automatically generated on 31 August 2022.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International - CC BY-NC 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

William E. Leuchtenburg, *The American President: From Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton*

Marcus Walsh-Führung

- 1 William E. Leuchtenburg, *The American President: From Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton*
- 2 Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. 886. ISBN 978-0-19-090702-0
- 3 Marcus Walsh-Führung
- 4 As Harry Truman took office in the shadow of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR) demise, the country was not willing to accept him as the new President. Uncertainty about his ability and expectations in the newly appointed President caused fear and discontent throughout America. The nation believed that a Kansas City politician did not have the fortitude or knowledge to be Head of State. Against all odds, at the end of Truman's term, the biographer David McCullough stated, "A son of rural, inland America, raised only a generation removed from the frontier...he had to assume command of the most powerful industrial nation on earth at the very moment when that power, in combination with stunning advances in science and technology, had become an unparalleled force in the world. The responsibilities he bore were like those of no other President before him, and he more than met the test" (324). The idea of an American President is viewed domestically and internationally by supporters and critics in different shades of public opinion.
- 5 *The American President: From Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton* is a survey of the role of the executive branch in the historical experience of the United States. By providing a broad overview of the presidencies from Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton, William E. Leuchtenburg addresses the impact of each President on the oval office and how their actions have altered the direction of the country. In doing so, the author points out the importance of public opinion, when it comes to assessing political and policy agendas of U.S. presidents. This is evident in the structure of the book which allows for a reflection on public opinion as well as a revisionist historical perspective on the history of U.S. presidents. In his book, Leuchtenburg describes how the American people have

judged political agendas from the New Deal to the Great Society, and beyond. To understand the scope of presidential powers, the book focuses on international and domestic politics to discuss the issues U.S. presidents have faced in the 20th century from Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton.

- 6 As the office of the President has become more visible in the American consciousness, it has become apparent that the executive's political agenda has intervened in economic, political, and social ideological debates in society. In this context, the author clearly demonstrates the conflict between big and small government approaches in the American political system. One journalist's observation about Franklin Delano Roosevelt states, "Before the New Deal, the only business a citizen had with the government was through the Post Office. No doubt he saw a soldier or a sailor now and then, but the government had nothing to do with general public" (175). While every President views his interventionist role differently, the FDR presidency changed the way the government intervened with the public. Since the enactment of the New Deal, there has been an ideological divide in the role of government, which has created a political struggle between societal and special interest on how the presidency functions.
- 7 At the same time that presidents expanded their domestic powers, the executive started to widen his legislative reach in international affairs. In his book, Leuchtenburg describes in great detail the different approaches of presidents in promoting American interests abroad. In this context, President Woodrow Wilson's view on foreign policy interests was that, "Congress is quite obviously not equipped...to conduct foreign relations, to speak for national interest in the way that a President can and must" (389). The author demonstrates normative foreign policy differences between U.S. presidents, while detailing the influence of Woodrow Wilson's ideology that has changed the political discussion on how the office of the President approaches international affairs. As the powers and the role of presidents have expanded, there has been backlash from government and citizens on the effects that foreign policy has had on American society.
- 8 From the Vietnam War to the Civil Rights Movement, segments of society have felt that government encroaches on civil liberties. As a result, public opinion and restraints from the United States Congress have restricted the role of the President. The author illustrates how Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson were challenged by political and policy decisions that resulted in domestic upheaval from the civil rights movements and in the loss of life in Vietnam War. However, despite domestic unrest and geopolitical instability, Leuchtenburg quotes one journalist during the Johnson administration who wrote that the office of the President has become a "[p]residential government," which "far from being a threat to American democracy, has become the major single institution sustaining it –a bulwark for individual liberty, an agency of popular representation, and a magnet for political action and leadership" (452). Even as the office of the President became strong, all the presidents from Eisenhower to Johnson struggled with domestic and foreign policy mistakes, which defined their legacy.
- 9 The author argues that the office of the President has not contributed to the development of statecraft and has not provided the necessary reassurances to the American people since the Nixon administration. Leuchtenburg describes Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton in an unfavorable light. For example, during

the beginning of the Clinton administration, a journalist observed that “Clinton and the Washington political class were quarreling like a couple who would have split up years ago except for the kids” (713). In discussing Reagan, Bush, and Clinton, the book provides a warning of a dark underbelly in American politics where the President expands the power for the advantage of his office and to protect his individual legacy. The author concludes by making a call for action to the citizens of the United States to use domestic institutions in the protection of their civil liberties against the vested interest of the elite in influencing the President’s decision-making processes. While this has always been the case in American politics, the author believes that the political and societal imbalances resulting from the elite’s influences are eroding the fabric of society.

- 10 During the first half of the twentieth century, presidential leaders demonstrated democratic norms that the United States strived to adopt in times of disparity. However, this has changed with the presidency of Donald J. Trump, who has gone against the normative and ethical foundation of the presidential office since his election. The historical account provided in Leuchtenburg’s book illustrates the political dynamics and struggles that have challenged the executive branch and how the public views the role of the President.
- 11 The book, *The American President: From Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton*, portrays U.S. presidents in the 20th century and how they intersect with national life. This provides an in-depth historical analysis of the mechanisms of the American Republic and its elected leaders. In discussing the history of U.S. presidents, Leuchtenburg interweaves the history of 20th century America with its leaders to produce an original and persuasive analysis.

AUTHOR

MARCUS WALSH-FÜHRING

Marcus Walsh-Führung, Universität Bremen