

BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE PRESIDENCY

To understand the institution of the presidency as it has evolved in the United States, it helps to read as many books as one can about individual Presidents. Much in the American experience has depended on the character and talents of that man in the White House.

Books about the 38 men who have variously diminished, enhanced, and, in some cases, abused the power of the presidency range from the superb to the mediocre. Many Presidents—Theodore Roosevelt among them—have yet to receive first-class scholarly treatment.

In chronological order, after the collected letters and biographies of the Virginia dynasty and the Adamses,* we have such major studies of Presidents and their times as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s **Age of Jackson** (Little, Brown, 1945, cloth, 1963, paper).

Andrew Jackson made the presidency, in the Roman phrase, "the tribune of the people." Schlesinger gives us a life-size portrait of "Old Hickory," an analysis of his frontier-style presidency, and a class interpretation of the tumultuous politics of the Jacksonian Age.

Charles Grier Sellers, in **James K. Polk, Jacksonian, 1795-1843** and **James K. Polk, Continentalist, 1843-1846** (Princeton, 1957 & 1966), chronicles most of the life of Jackson's successor, the controversial former congressman and governor of Tennessee, who led the United States into its first foreign military adventure, the war with Mexico.

Historical treatments of Abraham Lincoln, the nation's closest approximation to a secular saint, have ranged widely in tone, from hero-worship to the debunking of what Richard Hof-

**The Wilson Quarterly*, Autumn 1976, page 129.

stadter described as Lincoln's "self-made myth."

Carl Sandburg's massive **Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and The War Years** (Harcourt, Brace, 1939, 6 vol., cloth; 1954, abr. ed. 1 vol., cloth; 1974, paper; Dell, 1959-75, 3 vol., paper) evokes the man, his humor, and the deep sorrows of the Civil War with a wealth of anecdotal detail and quoted letters.

But for World War I, Woodrow Wilson might have gone down in history as a domestic reformer. Instead, his dramatic postwar efforts on behalf of the League of Nations have eclipsed his productive first "New Democracy" administration. Perhaps the best portrait is drawn in Alexander and Juliette George's **Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study** (John Day, 1956; Dover, 1964, reprint). Their analysis of the impact on the future President of a strict Calvinistic creed and a demanding Presbyterian-minister father remains the most successful "psychohistorical" treatment of any President.

The frequent dismissal of the Presidents of the 1920s as barely worthy of notice can be a mistake. Robert K. Murray's scholarly **The Harding Era: Warren G. Harding and His Administration** (Univ. of Minn., 1969), based on the Harding papers, substantially revises the orthodox view of the portly Ohioan. Murray describes him as "an extremely hard-working President" who had "a superb feel for the right political action at the right time." In **A Puritan in Babylon: The Story of Calvin Coolidge** (Macmillan, 1938; Peter Smith, 1973, reprint), William Allen White, journalist-biographer par excellence, relates "this obviously limited but honest, shrewd,

sentimental, resolute American primitive" to his time, "those gorgeous and sophisticated Roaring Twenties."

In some ways, the most tragic President was Herbert Hoover, elected in the boom year of 1928. His single term ended with the Great Depression. Eugene Lyons's **Herbert Hoover: A Biography** (Doubleday, 1964) covers Hoover's presidency and his later career of distinguished public service.

Countless books have been written about Franklin D. Roosevelt. A good single-volume study is Rexford Guy Tugwell's intimate **The Democratic Roosevelt: A Biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt** (Doubleday, 1957, cloth; Penguin, 1969, paper). The author, a major New Deal figure, concludes that no one ever caught more than a glimpse of FDR's decision-making process, which "went on in his most secret mind."

In **Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox** (Harcourt Brace, 1956, cloth, 1963, paper), James MacGregor Burns discusses FDR's artful domestic policy leadership up to World War II, taking his title from Machiavelli's characterization of the Prince who must be "a fox to recognize traps and a lion to frighten wolves." In a second volume, **Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom** (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970, cloth, 1973, paper), Burns finds duality between the "man of principle, of ideals, of faith, crusading for a distant vision" and the "man of *Realpolitik*, of prudence, of narrow, manageable, short-run goals, intent always on protecting his power and authority."

The three volumes of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s **Age of Roosevelt** (Houghton Mifflin, 1957-60, cloth, 1976, paper) take FDR only through his first term. In **The Crisis of the Old Order**, the author finds the New Deal's origins in the social and economic chaos after World War I, bringing the story through

the elections of 1932. In **The Coming of the New Deal** and **The Politics of Upheaval**, he analyzes the evolution of the presidency as FDR developed his special political style. Two more volumes are in preparation.

We have, as yet, no broad scholarly biographies of the Presidents who have served in the White House since Roosevelt, but there are many excellent treatments of their operating styles, foreign and domestic policies, relations with Congress, and ways of running the White House.

Most retrospective accounts by newsmen and other contemporary observers of the presidency-in-action (down to those by White House dogkeepers and seamstresses) fade quickly. A surprising exception is Irwin H. (Ike) Hoover's **Forty-Two Years in the White House** (Houghton-Mifflin, 1934). This collection of backstage anecdotes and personal observations by a man who joined the White House custodial staff in 1891 provides some legitimate historical footnotes.

Worthwhile "insider" literature for more recent administrations includes **The Ordeal of Power: A Political Memoir of the Eisenhower Years** by Emmet John Hughes (Atheneum, 1963, cloth, 1975, paper) and **Decision-Making in the White House: The Olive Branch or the Arrows** (Columbia, 1963, cloth & paper) by Theodore C. Sorensen. Hughes served as a White House speechwriter. He analyzes the weaknesses as well as the strengths of his sometime employer: Ike's staff system, for example, "essentially left to others the initiative for both information and execution." Sorensen, one of John F. Kennedy's closest advisors, seeks to answer, without complete success, the question "How does a President make up his mind?"

Two other insider books by former aides to Lyndon Baines Johnson deserve

mention. George E. Reedy's **The Twilight of the Presidency** (World, 1970, cloth; New American Library, 1971, paper) is a considered attack on the once-revered concept of the "strong presidency," which took FDR as its model and, as Reedy sees it, led LBJ into serious excesses. He observes that during both the Johnson and early Nixon years, the President was "treated with all of the reverence due a monarch"; somehow, he argues, the office must be brought back to human scale.

Joseph A. Califano, Jr.'s study of the office, **A Presidential Nation** (Norton, 1975), is another revisionist interpretation with little of the memoir about it. Califano faults other parts of the federal system for having "lost the will and institutional capability to provide checks and balances to the exercise of presidential power."

The Nixon period dramatically brought home the importance of the President's psychological make-up. Toward the end of Richard Nixon's first term, political scientist James David Barber published **The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House** (Prentice-Hall, 1972, cloth & paper), in which he develops an elaborate personality typology for 20th-century Presidents, beginning with William Howard Taft. His analysis of Nixon (Active-Negative), whose "emotional energy is taken up with resisting the 'temptation' to lash out at his enemies," was written long before Watergate.

A growing literature on special aspects of the presidency, dating back several decades, includes Richard F. Fenno, Jr.'s **The President's Cabinet: An Analysis of the Period from Wilson to Eisenhower** (Harvard, cloth, 1959; Vintage, paper, 1967). This gloomy study of how the bureaucracy weakens the cabinet system suggests why the President's own staff later grew in size and responsibility.

The electoral process dominates Edward Stanwood's **A History of the Presidency**, first published in 1898 and later in several revisions carrying the original narrative to 1928 (Houghton Mifflin, 1898; Kelley, 1975, reprint). Stanwood traces, administration by administration, the rise of parties, the transformation of the electoral college, the emergence of party conventions, and party realignments. An up-to-date supplement is **Presidential Elections: Strategies of American Electoral Politics** by Nelson W. Polsby and Aaron Wildavsky (Scribner's, 1976, 4th ed., cloth & paper). This sophisticated text examines the difficult process of restructuring the presidential nominating system since 1968.

Broader studies of the Chief Executive began to be read in earnest with the appearance of Harold J. Laski's **The American Presidency: An Interpretation** (Harper, 1940; Greenwood, 1972, reprint). Laski, who taught for years at Harvard, saw the presidency through an Englishman's eyes, noting that the British system "makes responsibility for action clear and direct and intelligible," whereas, between the U.S. Congress and the White House, ultimate responsibility often remains ambiguous.

In the wake of Watergate and Vietnam, much recent scholarship calls for limitations on the Office of the President. Erwin C. Hargrove, in **The Power of the Modern Presidency** (Temple Univ., 1974, cloth; Knopf, 1974, paper), examines what he terms "the crisis of the contemporary presidency" in the areas of foreign policy, domestic policy, and the President's relations with the bureaucracy. One check on power that Hargrove urges is "for Congress to open up the White House" by requiring top presidential staffers to seek Senate confirmation and to testify before congressional committees.

Newly issued last year is an update of

AS PRESIDENTS SEE THEMSELVES

Thirteen Presidents have left memoirs of one sort or another, exclusive of diaries and collected letters. According to **The Presidents of the United States 1789-1962**, a bibliography compiled for the Library of Congress by Donald H. Mudge: "John Adams did not get beyond the Revolution, nor Jefferson beyond his return to the United States from France in 1790. Van Buren's is considerably longer and more diffuse, but it was left incomplete before it reached the Presidency. Fillmore's is only a brief sketch of his youth. Lincoln prepared only some brief sketches for the press. Grant's **Personal Memoirs** [Webster, 1885-86; Peter Smith, 1969, reprint] deserve their fame, but death broke in as he struggled toward Appomattox. Theodore Roosevelt's **Autobiography** [Macmillan, 1913; Octagon, 1973, reprint] includes his retrospect of his administration and is an outstanding achievement. Coolidge's of 1929 is bare of political or administrative detail. The full-dress **Memoirs** of Hoover [Macmillan, 1951-52, 3 vols.] and of Truman [Doubleday, 1955-56, 2 vols.] represent a new departure in Presidential writing and must always remain a primary source of the first importance." Eisenhower covered his wartime experiences (1942-45) in **Crusade in Europe** (Doubleday, 1948) and his White House years in **Mandate for Change, 1953-1956** and **Waging Peace, 1956-1961** (Doubleday, 1963-65). Lyndon Johnson's **Vantage Point: Perspective of the Presidency, 1963-1969** (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971, cloth; Popular Library, 1972, paper), written in Texas after he retired from public life, largely constitutes a defense of his administration. Nixon's memoirs are now in preparation at San Clemente.

Richard E. Neustadt's **Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership with Reflections on Johnson and Nixon** (Wiley, 1976, cloth & paper). This classic, first published in 1960 and reportedly studied as a text by John F. Kennedy, puts it all together: the roots of presidential power, factors of personality and style; constitutional powers and limits, political opportunities and constraints.

Finally, we turn back to Edward S. Corwin's rigorous constitutional history of the presidency. The fourth edition of **The President, Office and Powers, 1787-**

1957 (New York Univ., 1957, cloth & paper) has now been supplemented by a collection of 12 essays by the late Princeton historian Corwin, **Presidential Power and the Constitution** (Cornell, 1976) edited by Richard Loss. These heavily footnoted essays may be hard going for the general reader. But those who stay the course will gain a deeper appreciation of the problems that today complicate the workings of America's greatest political invention: the democratically elected one-man executive who is at once monarch and commoner, premier and head of state.

—Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr.

EDITOR'S NOTE. Mr. Cornwell, professor of political science at Brown University, is the author of **Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion** (Indiana Univ., 1965).