

underside of the American experience, repudiated his “consensus history” and disdained as grandiose apologetics the sort of gracefully written synoptic narratives he composed. Buffeted from both extremes of the political spectrum, and appalled by radical assaults on universities, Hofstadter clung to his faith in America’s liberal values but anguished over the rising generation’s apparent disdain for them.

In this splendid account, David S. Brown, a historian at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania, shows that Hofstadter’s own past shaped his understanding of the American past. An eastern urbanite, he was leery of agrarian parochialism. The son of a Jewish father and a Protestant mother, he felt himself both outsider and insider. As a student during the Great Depression, he was drawn to Marxism and even joined the Columbia unit of the Communist Party in 1939, leaving it after only four months, disillusioned by Stalin’s purge trials. He came to believe that the best features of the American experience were its liberalism, pluralism, and inclusiveness; the worst, its anti-intellectualism, penchant for vigilante violence, and confusion of patriotism with conformism—in the phrase he coined, its “paranoid style.”

Though Brown shows admirable insight and sure-footedness in linking Hofstadter’s personality and values to his work, he does less than full justice to his subject’s central ideas. He would have done well to take more seriously the contention of Hofstadter and the influential political scientist Louis Hartz (who is neglected here) that, from the outset, American political discourse has been framed by a mythic and sometimes stultifying belief in what Hofstadter called *laissez-faire individualism* and Hartz termed “irrational Lockianism.” That thesis goes a long way toward explaining why socialism made scarcely a dent on the national consensus and why today the United States has the highest degree of income inequality among the world’s richest nations.

Clearly, there is much in Hofstadter’s understanding of this country still worth pondering.

Consider this observation in his half-century-old *The Age of Reform*: “War has always been the Nemesis of the liberal tradition in America. From our earliest history as a nation there has been a curiously persistent association between democratic politics and nationalism, jingoism, or war.”

—Sanford Lakoff

Commission the Truth

PRESIDENTS FREQUENTLY resort to blue-ribbon commissions to help them find a way through, or at least temporary shelter from, political storms. High-level commissions took on the Pearl Harbor and 9/11 surprise attacks, President

John F. Kennedy’s assassination, and any number of lesser crises, such as the Iran-contra scandal during President Ronald Reagan’s second term. Their reputation is decidedly mixed. More than four decades after JFK’s murder, for example, the Warren Commission’s report remains the object of widespread ridicule. Yet such panels continue to appeal to presidents. Kenneth Kitts, an associate provost and political science professor at South Carolina’s Francis Marion University, sets out to explain why.

He focuses on five panels, all concerned with

PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSIONS & NATIONAL SECURITY:
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The Roberts Commission on Pearl Harbor was cited as a precedent by many who pushed for creation of a 9/11 commission. They overlooked the fact that the earlier investigation, headed by Supreme Court Justice Owen J. Roberts (in dark suit), was seen as flawed.

national security: the Roberts Commission on Pearl Harbor (1941–42); the Rockefeller Commission on the CIA's domestic activities (1975); the Scowcroft Commission on MX missile deployment (1983); the Tower Commission on Iran-contra (1986–87); and the 9/11 Commission (2002–04). Four of the five (the exception being the Scowcroft Commission) came into being in response to catastrophes or apparent scandals, and were ostensibly established to uncover what happened, who was to blame, and how recurrences might be avoided.

Kitts makes a solid attempt to draw back the curtain of mystery behind which these commissions typically operate.

In appointing commissions, presidents tend to be concerned more with protecting their own interests than with ferreting out the facts.

He rightly emphasizes the paramount importance of who is selected to serve on them, and provides many insights into the political intrigue behind the scenes. His sketches of the members of the

Roberts Commission investigating Pearl Harbor—four military men and a Supreme Court justice—demonstrate that the panel was congenitally flawed. Major General Frank McCoy, for example, was compromised by his friendship with Secretary of War Henry Stimson; and the panel's chairman, Justice Owen Roberts, was notable for an almost childlike naiveté.

Some of Kitts's omissions are curious, though. For example, he notes that the Tower Commission on Iran-contra portrayed President Reagan as confused and out of the loop, a president who had allowed National Security Council aides to run amok and cross-wire two covert operations (arms to Tehran in exchange for American hostages and cash, with the cash then diverted to the Nicaraguan contras). By contrast, two separate investigations, one by a joint congressional committee and another by independent counsel Lawrence Walsh, found that Reagan, in Kitts's words, "had actively presided over an illegal and politically unsound policy." Kitts seems inclined

toward the latter explanation, though he brings no new information to bear either way. Could President Reagan's Alzheimer's disease, unrecognized at the time, help account for the disparate accounts? Kitts doesn't even mention the possibility.

The outlier here is the Scowcroft Commission, which came into being because President Reagan wanted blue-ribbon sanction for his plan to deploy a new land-based missile. Though commissions are frequently convened to legitimize precooked decisions, Kitts would have been wise to dispense with this one and devote more of his relatively short book to mining the history of the other, more controversial panels.

Kitts concludes that in appointing these commissions, presidents tend to be concerned more with protecting their own interests than with ferreting out the facts. At the very least, commissions buy time until their reports come out and establish one axis for debate. That's true enough, though congressional investigations—which Kitts generally takes at face value—are no less tainted by self-interest and political agendas. Still, and despite its limitations, *Presidential Commissions & National Security* succeeds in turning a spotlight on a phenomenon that deserves scrutiny: the efforts of temporary panels, their life spans measured in months, to investigate the permanent government and its failings.

—Max Holland

Soldiers Who Made France

THE REMARKABLE FEATURE of French history in the last 30 years is that it has ceased to hinge upon soldiers. French politics in the first two-thirds of the 20th

century were very largely defined by Captain Alfred Dreyfus, Marshal Henri Pétain, and General Charles de Gaulle, and the intense loyalties and hostility they variously inspired. The importance of these three soldiers reflected the extraor-

FRANCE AND THE FRENCH:
A Modern History.

By Rod Kedward.
Overlook. 741 pp. \$35