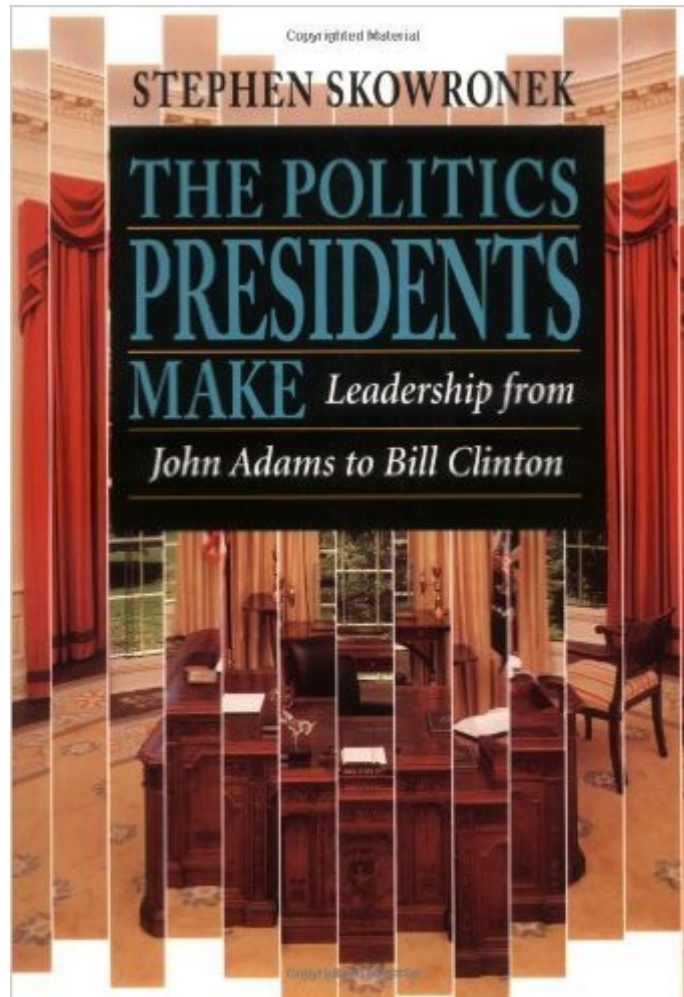


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The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership From John Adams To Bill Clinton, Revised Edition



Synopsis

Stephen Skowronek's wholly innovative study demonstrates that presidents are persistent agents of change, continually disrupting and transforming the political landscape. In an afterword to this new edition, the author examines "third way" leadership as it has been practiced by Bill Clinton and others. These leaders are neither great repudiators nor orthodox innovators. They challenge received political categories, mix seemingly antithetical doctrines, and often take their opponents' issues as their own. As the 1996 election confirmed, third way leadership has great electoral appeal. The question is whether Clinton in his second term will escape the convulsive end so often associated with the type.

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Customer Reviews

In "The Politics Presidents Make," Stephen Skowronek presents a sweeping indictment of the Neustadtian view on presidential leadership made famous in Richard Neustadt's classic text, "Presidential Power." Skowronek challenges Neustadt's assertion that presidents after FDR represent a distinct group of incumbents, who, because of the constant challenges of modernity, cannot make due with the formal powers of the president--which is a mere "clerkship"-- and must instead utilize informal authority to "get things done," something "pre-modern" presidents did not have to do consistently. Skowronek views such a notion as a conceit of modern times, and he incorporates "pre-modern" presidents into his analytical framework, which gives the reader a better understanding of the presidency as it is weighed against the emergent structures of power and in

relation to the recurrent structures of authority. Skowronek also disputes the idea that each president is at liberty to "be as big as he can be." The differences in "great" presidents and "incompetent" presidents arises not out of differences in skills-- i.e. bargaining ability-- but instead out of differing political identities vis-a-vis the current political order. Because the presidency is, in constitutional terms, an order shattering, order-affirming, and order-creating political institution, successful presidents are those-- like Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, FDR, and Reagan-- who are able to reconcile the order-shattering and order-affirming impulses by creating new standards for constitutional governance.

Stephen Skowronek wants to change how we judge the success of our Presidents. His major contribution to that understanding is to turn our attention away from the individual holding the office. Instead he wants us to focus on a combination of political, social and institutional factors. Perhaps the best way to introduce his theory is to start off with his observation that in general, "power has been less of a problem for presidents than authority" (p.17). In other words, it is easier to get things done than to sustain the justification of the action taken. In fact, Skowronek (hereafter called S.) feels that it is the ability of a president to "control the political definition of their actions" that will determine "the terms in which their places in history are understood" (ibid.) Furthermore, S. sees that the power and authority have changed over the span of American history according to different arcs of development. S. sees the power of the presidency as being in the resources available to the office at any one moment and distinguishes that history of change (toward more resources and toward more independent use of those resources) as occurring in secular time. Authority refers to the way a president is expected by his contemporaries to use the resources of his office. The historical arc of change of authority structures, S. sees as taking place in political time (p.30). The final key to understanding S.'s theory is his insistence on the inherently disruptive and creative nature of the office of the presidency. This is something that he insists on time and time again throughout the book (the first instance is on p.xii). Every president imposes themselves on the office in such a way as to change (disrupt) the current political order.

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