

Tevi Troy, *Intellectuals and the American Presidency: Philosophers, Jesters, or Technicians?* Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002. 254 pp.

While numerous memoirs and biographies address the relationship between various American presidents and the intellectuals who surrounded them, surprisingly few books have been written about the subject as a whole and from a long-term point of view. *Intellectuals and the American Presidency* does just that, providing interesting sketches of the relationship between American presidents of the past half-century and the intellectuals who played key roles in their presidencies.

Troy's analysis can only be called a series of sketches as each administration is covered in only one chapter and such a short space can obviously not be intended to plumb the depths of each relationship. The reader is instead given the highlights – and, at times, lowlights – of the role intellectuals played in the various presidential administrations.

*Intellectuals* does not examine at the relationship between presidents and intellectuals in its broadest sense. It instead focuses on those who might be called the “intellectual(s)-in-chief” of each administration, the one or two academics who were recruited to serve as members of the cabinet in various capacities.

Although he mentions Franklin Roosevelt's “brain trust” and some other early noteworthies, Troy picks up his narrative with John F. Kennedy and his key intellectual, historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. Troy credits Schlesinger with helping to shift the balance of the 1960 Democratic primary in Kennedy's favour and away from opponents Adlai Stevenson and Hubert H. Humphrey. Recognising the advantage his opponents had with the academic community and the way they made use of their wide-ranging influence, Kennedy approached Schlesinger, who was “perhaps the country's best-known intellectual” (18), to assist his candidacy. In time Schlesinger's role developed into a two-fold aim: to be a vehicle for translating fresh ideas from the academic community into the White House, and to maintain positive relationships with the intellectual community at large.

Kennedy worked hard to be known as a “cutting edge” president, and Schlesinger played a key role in enhancing Kennedy's reputation in that regard. However, things did not always go smoothly. Although he was considered important for the image of the White House, Schlesinger was nonetheless an outsider to party politics and his fellow staffers were reluctant to make much use of him. Consequently, his exact authority and duties were often undefined, according to Troy, and his ideas marginalized. In fact, the book's subtitle comes from an incident in which Kennedy assistant Theodore White asked Schlesinger what was his exact role in the administration: philosopher, jester, or technician? Despite any difficulties, however, Kennedy's Schlesinger experiment was enough of a success that a tradition was begun as subsequent presidents recognised the usefulness of recruiting from the intellectual community.

Few presidents needed to improve their intellectual image more than Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson. He had earned a reputation for using muscle more than brains as his political tool of choice and had been publicly derisive of intellectuals from time to time, scornfully referring to them as “the Harvards”. Troy writes that

although Johnson admired intellectuals in a certain sense, he “often felt inferior to those educated at America’s elite universities” (48). His relationship with his chosen intellectual, historian Eric Goldman, did not work out nearly as well as that of Kennedy and Schlesinger. Goldman was given few official duties and functioned more as an intellectual-in-residence than an actual member of Johnson’s staff. His office was with the First Lady’s staff and he was, in fact, more involved with Lady Bird’s activities than the president’s.

Although Richard Nixon had an outward disdain for the academic community, Troy writes, he had an inward hunger for intellectual study, as evidenced by the incredible quantity of books he read even during his time in the White House. Immediately after his election, Nixon sought out an intellectual aide, and perhaps no president’s choice was as surprising. Daniel Patrick Moynihan was a life-long Democrat and liberal, but to Nixon’s liking, he was also suspicious of academia and the press because of how some of his own publications had been received. Although Moynihan’s official role was nothing more than scholar-in-residence, he gained Nixon’s confidence and advised him regularly on a very wide range of domestic affairs.

*Intellectuals* continues its narrative with the relationship between Gerald Ford and Bob Goldwin, then describes Jimmy Carter’s lack of relationship with the academic community as a president “dancing to his own tune” (129). While he could be considered an intellectual himself, Carter might have been a more effective president if he had made better use of the intellectual community. Despite the fact that “Carter was extremely smart,” Troy writes, he “was his own man. He lacked political and intellectual debts, but he also lacked the experiences and unifying insights such debts would have purchased” (129). Troy quotes Carter biographers as saying “little in his mostly technical education or his practical background as a naval officer and agri-businessman equipped him to grasp the synthesis of abstract ideas that is the hallmark of social and cultural interpretation” (130); further, although Carter was “highly intelligent, introspective, and thoughtful,” he was “not ideological, philosophical, or conceptual” (130). Perceptions like these – especially as they were adopted by the public – clearly helped taint perception of Carter’s effectiveness as president.

Although *Intellectuals* notes Ronald Reagan’s widespread use of (especially conservative) intellectuals, he was, Troy writes, “his own barometer”: “Ronald Reagan wore his vision on his sleeve. Many disagreed with him, but everybody knew what he believed” (141). Reagan’s chief intellectual, Martin Anderson, was a “one-man think tank” (146), but Troy also notes the more widespread rise of think tanks and their role in setting the agenda for the Reagan presidency. Troy then contrasts the strong ideological image of Reagan’s presidency with the perceived absence of ideology in the George H.W. Bush’s administration.

Again contrasting two presidents, Troy depicts how Bill Clinton’s famous charm (in addition to his own academic pedigree) was applied to the intellectual community during his presidency, and then describes the 2000 election and the early years of President George W. Bush, who, along with Al Gore, notoriously lacked charm in the perception of the intellectual elite. Perhaps seeking to improve on his father’s intellectual reputation by hearkening back to Reagan in some respects, the younger Bush’s presidency has been characterised by its think tank-inspired ideological

fervour. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of *Intellectuals* is its description of the rise of neo-conservatism, starting with Nixon and Moynihan in the 1970s.

*Intellectuals* is at times more biographical – that is, simply telling the stories of certain individuals who each played a particular role in American politics. At other times it is more a history of an emerging political institution associated with the American presidency. But beyond the book's historical function, the reader can detect a possible further design: as Tevi Troy is himself an intellectual in the employ of an American president, is *Intellectuals* itself perhaps an attempt to demonstrate the need for an “intellectual-in-chief” – perhaps even a particular kind of “intellectual-in-chief”? Troy's presentation of his material indicates that this might be one of his intentions for the book, including the way in which he portrays each intellectual-presidential relationship in terms of success or failure, and the book's appendix, which is a list of advice to presidents on how they should relate to their intellectuals.

Regardless of any possibly super-historical agenda Troy might have in writing, however, this book is a fascinating account of a relationship that has not yet been studied enough, especially considering its potential for shaping American society.

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