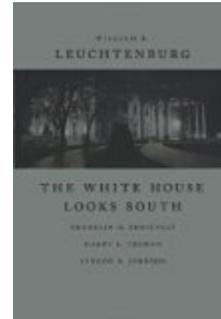


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William E. Leuchtenburg. *The White House Looks South: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Lyndon B. Johnson*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. xi + 668 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3079-7.

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## The Southernization of the President

Political historians have spent the last couple of decades analyzing the late-twentieth-century southernization of American politics from the standpoint of southern demographics and national cultural trends.[1] William Leuchtenburg's *The White House Looks South* looks at the phenomenon from a different perspective: that of the presidents' own regional backgrounds in the three decades before Nixon took office. Leuchtenburg examines the administrations of three presidents who he says had "one foot below the Mason-Dixon line, one foot above" (p. 2)—Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, and Lyndon B. Johnson—and argues that the South had more influence on these presidents' policies than most scholars, himself included, have previously assumed.

To investigate this phenomenon, Leuchtenburg relies not on the number-crunching of the new political history or the cultural and social analysis of the even newer political history, but rather on the tried-and-true method of presidential biography: archival research in presidential libraries. One might wonder whether Leuchtenburg, a giant in the field of presidential history, could give us still another fresh perspective on Franklin Roosevelt after writing the definitive work on the New Deal forty years ago.[2] But in his latest work, he proves that even old historians can learn new tricks. While Leuchtenburg's earlier works focused on presidential policies and leadership style, this book offers a combination of geography and biography as it explores the thesis that southern mores played a role in shaping the views of the mid-twentieth-century presidents who sojourned in the South.

Franklin Roosevelt, Leuchtenburg argues, became an "adopted son" of the South after he purchased a house in Warm Springs, Georgia in 1924, which is why southerners gave him the support that he needed to win the Democratic presidential nomination in 1932. Roosevelt felt a special affinity for the South, but he also wanted to see it transformed into a liberal, economically prosperous region. In order to foster a nascent southern liberalism, he took the unprecedented step of endorsing candidates in southern Democratic primaries, a strategy that backfired when voters ignored his wishes and insisted on electing conservative candidates.

Roosevelt's interest in southern liberalism did not extend to civil rights, and the candidates whom he supported were often as racist as their opponents. Leuchtenburg weighs in on a decades-old debate on Roosevelt's views on race by arguing that FDR was a patrician who remained blithely insensitive to the discrimination that African Americans faced.[3] Yet on the other hand, Leuchtenburg makes the traditional argument—one that FDR himself made—that attributes Roosevelt's failure to do more to help African Americans partly to the difficulty that any politician would have had in challenging southern congressmen.

Roosevelt tried to duck the race question, but Harry Truman could not avoid it. Truman appears in Leuchtenburg's book as a man thoroughly shaped by his upbringing in a small town in a border state. He grew up in an environment of racist jokes and southern partisan-

ship, and as a result, he never quite abandoned his nostalgic sympathy for the old Confederacy nor his belief that interracial fraternization was a bad idea. Yet at the same time, Truman's early experiences gave him a sense of fairness and a belief in equality that he never abandoned. Raised in the nation's heartland, he was above all a nationalist who put the interest of the country above sectional loyalties. When he began to realize the full extent of the discrimination that African Americans experienced, he decided, based on his firm faith in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, that he needed to make civil rights a central platform of his Fair Deal, even though it cost him the support of the Deep South in his re-election campaign of 1948. The tenacity and national vision of a man from a border state achieved a civil rights program that his southern-conscious Yankee predecessor had not dared to risk.

If Truman's Missouri was a national crossroads caught between two regions, Lyndon Johnson's Texas was likewise a "no man's land" straddling the South and the West. As the consummate politician, Johnson knew how to play to his strengths in both regions. When he was a young congressman, he voted with the southern Democratic bloc, but after he began eyeing the presidency in the late 1950s, he transformed himself into a Westerner who stood for economic growth, technological progress, and at least a limited civil rights program. After agreeing to take second place on the Kennedy presidential ticket in 1960, Johnson transformed himself into a southerner once again in order to keep the Solid South from abandoning the Democratic party.

But Johnson's southern heritage was a two-edged sword. After he staked his political fortunes on the Civil Rights Act of 1964, many southern whites viewed him as a traitor to their region. Johnson's keen political intuitions and southern roots allowed him to understand the consequences of his actions on behalf of African Americans in a way that few other politicians could. Leuchtenburg portrays Johnson as a deeply sensitive man who embarked on a campaign for social justice with the belief that it could cost him not only southern support, but even his bid for re-election in 1964. The attention that Leuchtenburg gives to Johnson's fears about losing the presidency in 1964 may surprise some scholars who find it difficult to take Johnson's forebodings seriously, in view of the campaign blunders of his Republican rival, Senator Barry Goldwater. But readers will probably appreciate the attention that Leuchtenburg gives to Johnson's deep sympathy for both black and white southerners, a theme that is easy for historians to neglect in their analysis of

presidents' political calculations.

Leuchtenburg's book is lengthy, but much of its length is devoted to meticulous documentation of his arguments, rather than a comprehensive treatment of his subject. The book concludes with 115 pages of endnotes, followed by a 100-page bibliography that lists not only the manuscript collections in the 240 archives that Leuchtenburg visited, but also nearly every important work in the field of modern American political history.

Despite the thoroughness of Leuchtenburg's research, his book is not a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the executive branch and the South in the mid-twentieth century. His analysis of Roosevelt focuses only on the New Deal years and avoids any discussion of World War II, just as his study of Johnson does not explore southern reactions to the Vietnam War. Leuchtenburg also mentions the Tennessee Valley Authority only in passing, a surprising omission in view of the TVA's importance as a southern policy in the New Deal. The absence of any detailed discussion of Roosevelt's Court-packing plan of 1937 is equally surprising, especially since Leuchtenburg has emphasized this subject in his previous works.<sup>[4]</sup> The book does not offer a connecting chronological narrative between the Truman and Johnson administrations, so readers miss the opportunity to discover how relations between the White House and the South changed during Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy's terms in office, both of which were crucial turning points in the relationship between the executive branch and black and white southerners. Leuchtenburg's selective treatment of his subject probably reflects the fact that this work began as a series of three lectures, rather than as a unified narrative.

While this is not a narrative history in the traditional sense, it is more than a series of biographical vignettes or discrete essays. It is, instead, a perceptive study of the way in which cultural geography has influenced the presidency. Leuchtenburg shows the possibilities that emerge when historians combine insights from two fields—southern history and presidential studies—to gain a new understanding of the influences that affect public policy. Perhaps it is time for historians who have examined southernization from the perspective of grassroots politics or cultural studies to look at the South from the viewpoint of our nation's chief executives. Leuchtenburg's book would be an ideal place to begin that new study.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Alexander P. Lamis, *The Two-Party South*, 2nd ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Thomas Byrne Edsall with Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1991); Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001); and Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[2]. William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

[3]. For a classic study of the effect of Roosevelt's policies on African Americans, see Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). For a recent reassessment that emphasizes the role of Roosevelt's judicial appointments in furthering the cause of civil rights, see Kevin J. McMahon, *Reconsidering Roosevelt on Race: How the Presidency Paved the Road to Brown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[4]. See, for example, Leuchtenburg, *The Supreme Court Reborn: The Constitutional Revolution in the Age of Roosevelt* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

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