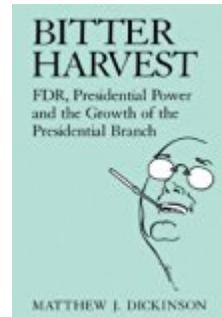


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Matthew J. Dickinson. *Bitter Harvest: FDR Presidential Power and the Growth of the Presidential Branch*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. x + 267 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-48193-9.

Reviewed by John H. Schroeder (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee)  
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In recent years, historians, political scientists and commentators of the American presidency have viewed the growth of the presidential branch and staff as a steady development which began with Franklin D. Roosevelt and has continued largely unabated until the present day.

Political scientist Matthew J. Dickinson challenges that assumption in *Bitter Harvest: FDR, Presidential Power and the Growth of the Presidential Branch*. In fact, Dickinson argues, modern presidents have largely ignored and overturned FDR's presidential staffing practices and tenets. In contrast, FDR's successors have created a large White House-centered presidential staff bureaucracy, its members functionally specialized and hierarchically organized (p. 2). The result, according to Dickinson, has been a "bitter harvest" which helped produce Vietnam, Watergate and the Iran-Contra scandal. "On balance," the author concludes, "the political harvest from increasing White House staff size, hierarchy and functional specialization has proved harmful to presidents and the body politic" (p. 2).

Using the framework created by his teacher and mentor Richard E. Newstadt as a point of departure, Dickinson assumes that all presidents seek power by maximizing their influence on policies, elections and other activities. They exercise power and influence primarily through bargaining, a process in which the staff and advisors of the president are extremely important. Not surprisingly, Dickinson views Roosevelt as an extremely effective president whose staffing and advisory system played a key role in his success.

In examining FDR's presidential staffing, *Bitter Harvest* uses extensive archival, primary and secondary sources. It examines the collapse of cabinet government

during the First New Deal, FDR's search for an administrative alternative through the Brownlow Committee, his management of economic mobilization for World War II and wartime war production, as well as his effectiveness in controlling the national security bureaucracy as commander-in-chief.

Dickinson concludes that FDR developed an effective advisory and staff system of "competitive adhoc-racy." While Roosevelt increased and bolstered presidential staff support, he resisted delegating presidential power and presidential prerogatives by not nurturing the growth of the formal presidential branch. Instead, FDR limited his personal staff to a handful of general purpose aides, not policy specialists. And he violated "traditional administrative canons by assigning overlapping staff duties, utilizing duplicative communication channels, and mixing the lines of authority connecting him with his advisors." Nor did he politicize the non-White House office staff. Its size and influence grew, but most of the growth of the presidential branch occurred in the career civil service, not the president's political staff.

As a political scientist, Dickinson is intent on creating a conceptual analytical framework for analyzing modern presidential-staff relations. He argues that FDR's staffing practices and tenets, if properly understood, offer an attractive alternative to the large, functionally specialized White House staffing system used by recent presidents. Moreover, he believes that the use of Roosevelt's staffing tenets might have avoided mistakes such as Iran Contra and could be well utilized to correct the most glaring staffing problems of the contemporary presidency.

*Bitter Harvest* is a substantive and meaty book. It is well researched, clearly written, well-reasoned and

closely argued. For historians, it will provide a more detailed understanding of Roosevelt's management style and effectiveness as well as a better frame of reference for understanding the staffing practices of his successors. For political scientists, this well-conceived study has established a new analytical framework which will

undoubtedly stimulate discussion, disagreement and a ready agenda for future research.

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