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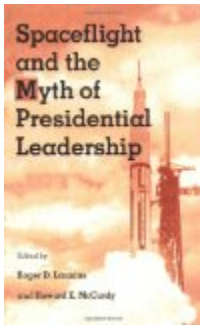
**Roger D. Launius, Howard E. McCurdy, eds.** *Spaceflight and the Myth of Presidential Leadership.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997. 262 pp. $22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06632-0; $42.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02336-1.

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Edited books are always difficult to review, as they rarely maintain uniform quality and/or relevance to the common theme. This book is an exception to this general rule, perhaps because of its origins as a symposium at American University. The editors have drawn together ten distinguished scholars, from different backgrounds, with different areas of expertise, and who approach their topics from different perspectives. The final product is a book that is greater than the sum of its considerable parts, a book that enlightens the reader about the space program, presidential policy making, and the possibilities for and constraints upon political leadership in the American system.

The chapters are organized chronologically and follow the space program from its inception under Eisenhower through the Reagan and Bush administrations. There are also introductory and concluding chapters that place both the presidency and the space program in historical and theoretical context.

In their introductory chapter, the editors begin by challenging one of the dominant normative assumptions among observers of the presidency: that while some uses of presidential power are "good," power is also dangerous, and those dangers are displayed most clearly in what Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. dubbed, "the imperial presidency." For Launius and McCurdy, the imperial presidency offered a necessary locus of power for those who needed a long-term commitment to the space program. The implication is that only a strong presidency can make and support long-term commitments to developing policy areas, and thus provide an important impetus for American policy making. This is an interesting idea, and is one that certainly demands further discussion and examination than it receives here.

Certainly, this idea has more potential than the editors' assertion that presidential power has been in decline since the days of Ford and Carter, an assertion that few presidential scholars are likely to find credible. While no one believes that presidential power equals the expectations for the office, a point that Launius and McCurdy do make, this is a long way from concluding that the office is without substantial power "to overcome the obstacles created by constitutional checks and balances" (p. 2). But the editors' main point, that policy making is a complicated business involving a multitude of players who operate from a plethora of institutional positions, is well taken, if somewhat obvious.

Equally important is their observation that overreliance on the presidency, however encouraged by presidents themselves, is a poor basis for long-term policy making success. In this, the editors set the stage for the analyses that follow, each of which presents a multilayered and complex understanding of the federal system, with the space program as the unifying example.

David Callahan and Fred Greenstein present an analysis of Eisenhower that is, unsurprisingly, consistent with the latter's other work on the president. That is, they provide evidence that Eisenhower worked privately and incrementally to achieve goals that no one at the time seemed to believe him capable of advocating. While reluctant to invoke formal presidential powers without what he considered adequate justification, Eisenhower nonetheless used his office to advance the space program and to preserve the American technological edge over the USSR.

The Cold War clearly dominated presidential thinking on the space program, even as it contributed to an increase in presidential prerogative powers. This influence is clear in the national reaction to *Sputnik* and in JFK's emphasis on the "Space Race." Where Callahan and Greenstein describe an Eisenhower determined to choose his battles with the Soviet Union, Michael Bechloss gives us a Kennedy who is determined to win on every front, and whose faith in science led to an expansion of both presidential power and America's commitment to space exploration. According to Bechloss, Kennedy over-reached in both areas, and his eventual success was due, in no small measure, to a combination of his Vice President Johnson's legislative acumen and his own ability to "capture the American imagination" (p. 63).

Robert Dalleck, in his turn, takes on the difficult task of analyzing Lyndon Johnson dispassionately. Typically, Johnson advocated the space program largely because it "was good politics for himself and his party" (p. 69). Thus, by the mid-1960s, the space program occupied a crucial niche between foreign and domestic politics, and, for a time, would therefore prosper, at least until other demands on his time and budget weakened LBJ's enthusiasm and the fire aboard Apollo I dampened that of the nation.

Still, domestic political considerations were only part of the picture, and in the context of the Cold War, the space program was assured of at least some presidential support, as Joan Hoff amply illustrates in her chapter on Richard Nixon. Yet Nixon, determined the cold warrior that he was, did manage, according to Hoff, to turn the space program into a vehicle for international prestige, rather than "merely" one for military dominance (p. 93). Under Nixon, the emphasis was on science, not on military might.

Ronald Reagan, who militarized space through his "Star Wars" program, appeared likely to reverse the trend of declining support for the space program begun under Johnson and continued under Nixon. Yet according to Lyn Ragsdale, the support given by both Reagan and Bush was more symbolic than actual, and neither administration had anything that could be called a national space policy (p. 134). NASA had become thoroughly bureaucratized, with all of the attendant problems occasioned by growth, decentralization, and internally competing agendas. In addition, Congress had become an equally powerful player in the making of space policy, and presidents were forced to make compromises that foreclosed the possibility of the sort of long-term, visionary leadership that advocates of the space program had found in the presidency.

Having been brought into the present with the Ragsdale chapter (which includes brief discussion of Bill Clinton's decision to cut funding for the planned space station), readers are then treated to two chapters that analyze the historical events from slightly broader perspectives. Robert H. Ferrell provides an analysis of the effects of international relations on the space program, and John M. Logsdon puts the program into the context of national leadership and presidential power.

For Ferrell, the space program is a key locus of unilateral presidential power in foreign affairs. This power is evident in three major projects: the race to the moon, the construction of the space shuttle, and the projected space station. As these projects have moved from the intensely competitive moon race through the largely independent shuttle project to the markedly cooperative international effort behind the space station, the changing imperatives of the international scene become illuminated.

As Logsdon's chapter indicates, however, presidential domestic goals were also served via the space program. Chief among these goals was the opportunity it afforded American presidents to articulate their positions as "leaders" through the assertion of American dominance in space. This dimension of the space program, according to the editors in their Epilogue, helped establish the "mythical qualities within the space policy subsystem" (p. 221). Yet those qualities do not explain the processes of policy making, and the editors find that explanation among the usual suspects: partisanship, ideology, and pork barrel politics. Space policy, in other words, is subject to the same influences as other policy domains.

What, then, do we learn about presidential policy making? That it has limits; that it is constrained by international factors, the mass public, the other institutions of the federal government, by budgetary considerations, and by technological limitations. We learn that presidents may or may not dream large dreams, but their capacity to fulfill any dream depends upon a system that lies largely outside of their control. While scholars of the presidency know these things, they are rarely demonstrated with such clarity, depth of analysis, or historical breadth as this volume provides.

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