Stephen F. Knott’s *Rush to Judgment* seeks to reset the narrative regarding the presidency of George W. Bush. Specifically, the author points out that the ideologically driven determination to label the Bush presidency a failure, a charge presented by hundreds of historians, reflects those academics’ personal politics much more than it accurately portrays the Bush administration. Knott believes that the politicization of the historical profession (which has happened on previous occasions, in similar fashion) is a negative development for the profession. He reminds readers that the Bush presidency consisted of a strong executive who was confronted by the fundamental security dilemma of liberal democracies, namely, the balance between civil liberties and the need to protect the populace from external threats. The 9/11 attacks placed Bush in the precarious position of needing to increase the defense and security capabilities of the nation without trampling on the constitutional rights of American citizens. While Knott concedes that the administration made a number of missteps along the way, he argues that those mistakes were made in good faith, and that their importance was vastly overblown by a popular media and academic elite, both of which were more determined to damage the presidency than to provide an accurate or well-reasoned judgment of the administration.

Knott is absolutely correct to question the overblown narrative that contends that Bush was the worst president in American history. Historians, in particular, should be embarrassed by being linked to such a charge, if only due to the enormous number of contenders for the dubious title that have such a strong claim to it. Further, the historical profession as a whole, or at least the professional societies that claim to speak on its behalf, should tread very carefully when attempting an intervention into current affairs—such a realm is far more the purview of journalists, who are often accused of poaching into the historians’ territory when they release works of popular history that typically far outsell anything produced within academia.

Knott supplies a brief but effective overview of the security-driven presidency, beginning with the early Republic and working forward through the various crises that have confronted the nation. He suggests that each crisis has gradually strengthened the chief executive, at the detriment of the other branches of government, but falls short of arguing that such a strengthening is a positive development. Rather, he believes it is simply an inexorable process, a natural occurrence that has accelerated in the last few decades due to the globalization movement and revolutionary advances in communic-
tions and travel. Yet Knott also illustrates that there are still inherent limits upon the presidency, and that those limits serve to prevent an unbridled executive from simply ignoring the constitutional rights of the citizenry.

In the specific Bush case, Knott offers a bit of an apologia by pointing out that the Clinton administration largely ignored some of the burgeoning security threats at the end of the twentieth century. In particular, the rise of Al Qaeda was treated more as an irritant than a grave threat, and even the attack on the USS Cole provoked little, if any, direct response. The contested election of 2000 seriously undermined the public’s confidence in elections and the federal government as a whole, and probably triggered a massive rise in partisanship within the voting population. Opponents of Bush’s election resorted to a substantial amount of demagoguery and shallow slurs in the immediate aftermath, rather than confronting the new president on the merits of important issues. Unfortunately, these simple jabs tended to take the place of rational debate and were the norm at the time of the 9/11 attacks. However, Bush’s leadership in the aftermath of the attacks garnered a stratospheric public approval rating, one that no administration could hope to maintain for more than a short period. Knott believes that the more substantive critiques of the Bush presidency did not emerge until the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and that many of those critiques were based on partisan affiliation rather than a reasonable objection to the nation’s foreign policy.

Knott has a pro-Bush bias, or at least a pro-conservative outlook, that occasionally emerges throughout the narrative. Blaming one’s predecessor can only carry a president for a short time, and holding the Clinton administration responsible for the events of the Bush presidency has serious limits. The author excuses some of Bush’s legendary stubborn streak as a form of resoluteness, and his refusal to remove ineffective personnel from key positions is dismissed solely as excessive loyalty. Knott pushes his defense of the preemptive war policy of the Bush Doctrine to its logical limits, with very little consideration of whether such a policy should even be considered constitutional. He is correct to point out similar activities by earlier presidents, but suggesting that American policy has been to fight wars abroad whenever possible does not actually justify a policy of engaging in wars of aggression on the grounds of a possible future threat. He also does not seem to believe that Bush might have been partially responsible for the partisanship of the early twenty-first century with his penchant for overly aggressive rhetoric that separated various polities into two groups, those “with us” and those “against us.” Such simple declarations vastly oversimplify the chaotic world of international relations, and all too often, they crossed over into domestic characterizations of political positions.

Overall, this is a valuable work for anyone interested in the history of the presidency in wartime, the war on terror, or the responsible role of historians in public debate. If at times it offers an overcorrection, it can be forgiven, as Knott is one of the few historians within academia willing to publicly defend the Bush administration in the current political environment. As the expert willing to open the debate, his decision to stake out a fairly extreme position is a worthy means to start the debate over the legacy of the Bush presidency, now that at least a few years have intervened.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-war


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41699

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.