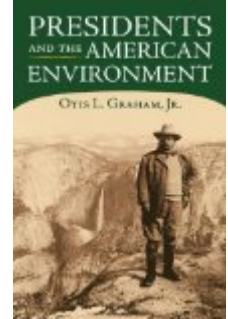


**Otis L. Graham Jr.** *Presidents and the American Environment*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015. 411 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-2098-2.



**Reviewed by** Christine Keiner

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**Commissioned by** David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

*Presidents and the American Environment* evaluates the environmental priorities, or lack thereof, of twenty-two presidents from Benjamin Harrison to Barack Obama's first term. Otis L. Graham Jr.'s synthesis makes strong use of classic works of environmental history and of presidential memoirs, papers, and biographies, ultimately assessing twelve of the commanders in chief as "frequent or at least occasional leaders in the conservation cause," and eleven as "uninterested in nature protection, indifferent, or negative," with one person appearing on both lists (p. 359). Can you guess who? "Eleven plus twelve does not quite add up to twenty-two, but when you are dealing with Nixon you can expect some funny math" (p. 360). And when you are dealing with Graham, a prolific historian of modern America, former editor of *The Public Historian*, and a founder of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, you can expect an engaging, question-laden narrative with more than a few defiant odes to population and immigration stabilization,

issues long since dropped by the mainstream environmental movement.

The book transcends the genre of collective biography to provide an insightful overview of the evolution of US environmental politics and policymaking: from the nineteenth-century era of limited government and chaotic land disposal, to utilitarian conservationism, to modern environmentalism with its emphases on pollution control, quality of life, population growth (initially), and climate change (eventually). For each president, Graham discusses the man's childhood experiences with nature; favorite books; managerial experience; campaign and legislative priorities; and, most intriguingly, relationships with what he calls conservation or green lieutenants, consultants, and critics who promoted particular natural resource, nature preservation, or anti-pollution initiatives. As Graham reminds us, "politicians tend to go where and when they are pushed" and "achievements in politics are collective" (pp. 196, 212). Appropriately, the book focuses heavily on the two Roosevelts, reflecting the trailblazing poli-

cies and longstanding influence of Theodore Roosevelt and his forestry advisor Gifford Pinchot, and of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his lieutenants, including Interior Secretary Harold Ickes and cartoonist J. N. “Ding” Darling.

Graham peppers his narrative with interesting personal insights and strong opinions. Some of these are funny, as when he promises to summarize the “numbing complexities” of Progressive Era policies for mineral leasing and water reclamation “without the numbing” (p. 68); when he recounts a conversation between Herbert Hoover and a Biological Survey civil servant about Charles Elton’s pioneering 1927 book *Animal Ecology* and then writes “actually, I made up this encounter” (p. 112); and when he eviscerates Richard Nixon’s 1991 assertion that he was an environmentalist: “No he wasn’t and never had been” (p. 243). At other times, Graham’s passions lead to protracted floggings of the presidents who let him down, especially Bill Clinton and his Council on Sustainable Development for “its fumbling of the core question of population growth” (p. 326), and Obama for not expressing adequate appreciation of the Hawaiian environment and threats thereto. The author concludes, “Mahalo Obama,” a Hawaiian riff on the sarcastic meme “Thanks Obama.” Actually, I made up this last part to convey Graham’s irreverence for some conventions of academic writing and his dry disdain for presidents of both parties who squandered opportunities to advance environmental quality.

Graham does an impressive job citing the secondary literature, with only a few glaring exceptions. While recognizing that it would have been impossible to address every relevant historian, I would have liked to see the influential works of Nancy Langston, Karen R. Merrill, Thomas Robertson, and Richard White referenced. In addition, Adam Rome’s concept of the “environmental-management state,” proposed in a 2002 review essay in the journal *Environmental History* and since advanced by other scholars, could have pro-

vided a powerful framing device for a synthesis such as this.[1]

Of much greater concern is the skimpy index, which omits many significant people and policies addressed in the book, a surprising oversight given the author’s frequent mentions of looking up entries like “public lands,” “natural resources,” “conservation,” “wildlife,” “national forests,” “national parks,” “pollution,” and “environment” in the indices of presidential papers and biographies (see, e.g., pp. 5, 33, 51-52, 165, 174-175, 181, 244, and 298). Perhaps the press’s production team assumed they could save money on the grounds that everyone now reads keyword-searchable digital books, but even if that were true, a detailed index remains a valuable tool for readers and researchers, and a handy sketch of the author’s priorities.

*Presidents and the American Environment* will make for lively discussions in graduate seminars in US environmental history and US politics and federal policymaking more generally. Kudos to Graham for integrating an overwhelming mass of important material into an unconventional, thought-provoking narrative.

#### Note

[1]. Adam Rome, “What Really Matters in History? Environmental Perspectives on Modern America,” *Environmental History* 7 (2002): 303-318.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

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