

Zelizer, Julian E., ed. *The Presidency of Donald J. Trump: A First Historical Assessment*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. xv + 470. Hardcover, \$99.95.

This book is one of the best postmortems of a presidential administration I have seen, especially so soon after the end of the administration. Often, we must wait to see what happens and the jury is still out on some things related to the Trump Administration.

However, the former president was pretty clear on what he intended to do, and his long-term effect is mostly style over substance. He wanted to bend the presidency to his own personal ambition. Time and again, without compunction, he developed policies, pursued vendettas, and used the capabilities of the office to contribute to his own brand. That makes an analysis of his presidency relatively easy and straight forward. In essay after essay in this book, we can follow this common theme. Ironically, then, the nature of the Trump presidency makes this book much more thematic than the usual collection of essays.

So far, the Biden Administration has been able to reverse many Trump administration policies especially those that were based on executive action. However, legislative policies such as the tax cut are another matter. As Trump was largely uninterested in passing laws, his legislative record was rather thin.

However, policy changes, as the authors repeatedly point out, were not what the Trump Administration was all about. Trump was in many ways a regime-building president. I am referring here to Stephen Skowronek's theory of presidential regimes.¹ In that respect, Trump inhabits the pantheon of some of the greatest presidents in American history, Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Reagan.

Nonetheless, not all regime building is progressive; Reagan's regime was in service of retrenchment and Trump's regime (if it survives) is downright authoritarian. Trump meets the three criteria of regime building. He reshaped the party system, for now he has transformed the

Republican Party, and in the future likely the Democratic Party as well. He transformed the nature of the office, to the benefit of friends and family and in service of his personal ambitions. He also reshaped the policy environment. Conservatism has been reimagined by Trump. I suspect this will be the new reality for some time to come.

One interesting backstory to this book is that when the Former President heard about the development of this project, he requested and was granted a virtual meeting with the authors. Clearly, he was trying to convince the contributors to treat him “fairly.” I think he was treated fairly in this work, although Trump may disagree. President Trump often gets criticized in these chapters, but he also gets credit when he deserves it.

If I have one reservation about this book, it is that the authors are almost all historians. I would have liked to have seen input from some of the other social sciences. The historical approach is biased towards the descriptive. We get a lot of “whats” but not a lot of “whys.” I suppose that reflects my preferences as a political scientist. That being said, the chapters in this book are collectively excellent in both scope and detail. This is a worthy Trump retrospective.

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¹ Skowronek, Stephen. 1993. *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to George Bush*. Belknap Press.
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