The Anti-Intellectual Presidency: The Decline of Presidential Rhetoric from George Washington to George W. Bush by Elvin T. Lim

Very Informatve And Worth Your Time!

Why has it been so long since an American president has effectively and consistently presented well-crafted, intellectually substantive arguments to the American public? Why have presidential utterances fallen from the rousing speeches of Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, Wilson, and FDR to a series of robotic repetitions of talking points and sixty-second soundbites, largely designed to obfuscate rather than illuminate?

In The Anti-Intellectual Presidency, Elvin Lim draws on interviews with more than 40 presidential speechwriters to investigate this relentless qualitative decline, over the course of 200 years, in our presidents ability to communicate with the public. Lim argues that the ever-increasing pressure for presidents to manage public opinion and perception has created a pathology of vacuous rhetoric and imagery where gesture and appearance matter more than accomplishment and fact. Lim tracks the campaign to simplify presidential discourse through presidential and speechwriting decisions made from the Truman to the present administration, explaining how and why presidents have embraced anti-intellectualism and vague platitudes as a public relations strategy. Lim sees this anti-intellectual stance as a deliberate choice rather than a reflection of presidents intellectual limitations. Only the smart, he suggests, know how to dumb down. The result, he shows, is a dangerous debasement of our political discourse and a quality of rhetoric which has been described, charitably, as a linguistic struggle and, perhaps more accurately, as dogs barking idiotically through endless nights.

Sharply written and incisively argued, The Anti-Intellectual Presidency sheds new light on the murky depths of presidential oratory, illuminating both the causes and consequences of this substantive impoverishment.

My Personal Review: This book offers compelling proof that presidents have dumbed down their public speech in the last two centuries. It is one of the very few political books I've read that is not at all partisan - Lim places equal blame on Clinton as he does on Bush. Lim nevertheless makes it clear that because
presidents now tell us what we want to hear rather than what we need to hear, we are headed for trouble.

Lim offers a fascinating account of how the very people who write presidential speeches also call these speeches "rose garden garbage." I especially enjoyed the chapter on speechwriters, all of whom - Republican or Democratic - complain about the fact that, as Peggy Noonan says, America's only "unstimulated organ (is) the brain." If even speechwriters complain of dumbing down, then Houston, we got a problem.

Lim does a good job of defending his case against the accusation of elitism, reminding us that when presidents dumb down, they are the ones who are being cynical. The American people deserve, and can handle better, he argues. Lim offers a particularly poignant account of President Bush's speeches on Iraq in the early months of the war, and argues that the country would have been better served if the president had been pushed to specify and demonstrate the evidence that Saddam Hussein had indeed possessed weapons of mass destruction. Instead, we allowed the president to talk us into war with such rousing, but meaningless catch-phrases as the "axis of evil." Thinking back on those years, Lim's explanation for how we were persuaded to go to war rings more true than any account I have read.

A short book that packs a lot of punch, this is a no-holds barred book on the dangers of a White House perpetually concerned with public relations. While the statistical analysis can be dry at times, Lim's wry, engaging prose (which reminds me of Christopher Hitchen's style) more than makes up for it.

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