

Bad for Democracy: How the Presidency Undermines the Power of the People. By Dana D. Nelson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008; pp. 256. \$24.95 cloth.

At a moment in which a majority of Americans have found a renewed faith in the office of the president, Dana Nelson's *Bad for Democracy* is something of a downer. Don't get me wrong; the book is beautifully written, and the argument is crystal clear. It is not a downer because it is a bad book. It's a downer because Nelson exposes one central pillar of our democratic faith, which she calls *presidentialism*, to be a false idol killing our democracy, an idol that she believes must die.

Presidentialism is the logic by which the president of the United States justifies putting himself above the demos, above the other forms of government, and in the case of President George W. Bush, above the Constitution itself. Whereas democracy means rule by the people, and whereas the Constitution is clear that political power flows from the people to their representatives (including the president), presidentialism teaches that the president is the apotheosis of democracy and that "the president's power (i.e., his sovereignty) is what constitutes and defines our power as a nation" (70). In presidentialism, there is a deactivation of citizen agency and a depoliticization of democracy, for presidentialism teaches that the ultimate democratic act for citizens is voting for a president who will then take charge and make things right. What is troubling to Nelson is not merely that presidentialism exists but that it has become part of our "democratic common sense" (10). Our vision of the president as first among equals, as avenging superhero, as national father is part of the habitus in which Americans are raised. Thus we find ourselves at a critical juncture in U.S. history. Will we accept a model of the unitary, corporate executive who stands above, and is no longer accountable to, the people? Or will we reclaim the power that the Constitution guarantees us?

Nelson's argument will be interesting and provocative for rhetorical scholars who study presidential rhetoric or democratic culture more generally because she claims that the problem with our democracy is not who occupies the presidency, Democrat or Republican, but instead the fact that the office of the presidency has assumed such a prominent role in our democracy. Accordingly, the majority of *Bad for Democracy* focuses on narrating the history of presidential power. She argues that the need for presidential leadership has been carefully cultivated from the founding period forward, and to prove her point, she describes several key moments in the evolution of presidential power in four historically rich chapters—moving from the debates over whether there should even be a president at the Constitutional Convention, to Mason Locke Weems's famous biography of Washington, to Jackson's invention of the

presidential mandate, to Lincoln's definition of war powers during the Civil War, to FDR's expansion of the presidency during World War II, to Reagan's decision to return the courtesy salute to Marines, to Bush's corporate, and unitary, presidency. This eye-popping historical tour de force will be a source of interest, discussion, and perhaps outrage, for Nelson is not partisan in her anger. She takes aim at presidents beloved and disparaged. Every president is to blame because the office of the presidency itself is to blame.

Nelson employs several metaphors to capture the dynamics of presidentialism. Two metaphors—the president as the Great and Powerful Wizard behind the curtain in *The Wizard of Oz*, and the president as the monarch Americans fought a revolution against, returned—suffer from the same problem, for they conceptualize presidential power as unilateral, as though power could ever really flow downward from a president to the people (107, 70, 176). Although presidents wield tremendous amounts of political and symbolic capital to shape reality, their power is not without bound. Power is necessarily consensual, and thus the question is how presidents nurture consent. Here, a third metaphor Nelson deploys, the president as symbolic superhero father-figure, is best. Nelson notes, “We appeal to the future president with the same hopes that informed our childhood pleading with parents to intervene when our siblings were getting on our nerves,” and she argues that the logic of presidentialism is upheld by “childlike fantasies”—fantasies of authority figures who can make everything right, restoring calm and order to a messy world while bringing even the most bitterly divided siblings together (200, 221). Understanding the president as a father-figure, we can better understand presidential power as consensual. The president does not take anything away from citizens that, for one reason or another, we are unwilling to give up. Presidential authority, like charisma, is bestowed by an audience on the president. Authority hence exists in the symbolic space between presidents and citizens, in the everyday actions and habits of our democratic culture as they have been historically cultivated.

In turn, Nelson demonstrates that presidents have been particularly good at running with the needs and desires of citizens to strengthen the office of the president. Today, Nelson argues, we find ourselves at a crucial juncture from which there might be no turning back, as the Roberts Supreme Court is one justice away from gaining a majority that will support the vision of a unilateral, corporate president who stands above the other branches of government and can, during wartime, do anything he chooses. “Once we’re there,” she speculates, “it’s hard to see how we might take a more robust democracy—the kind of democracy where citizens have and can exercise self-governing power—back from the uncheckable presidency imagined by Mansfield, Cheney, Bush, and other hard-line unitary executive proponents” (180). This problem, Nelson concludes, “will not likely be remedied by any person we elect to the Oval

Office”—the answer will have to come from the people regaining their power and making demands that ultimately check the president and overthrow the logic of presidentialism (182).

In the book's conclusion, Nelson speculates about ways that citizens might reclaim democratic power for ourselves, from experimenting with new technologies and open systems to learning from the wisdom of crowds and leaderless organizations. Most of these solutions are not new; on the contrary, Nelson draws on a rich literature from diverse academic fields attempting to imagine alternative futures for our democracy. But Nelson's point is a provocative one—that far from enabling citizen agency or promoting democracy, presidentialism works to weaken “our capacity to imagine alternatives” (197). It is this capacity that we will need in the coming years if we are to return our democratic culture to health—if citizens can somehow find the will and the courage to unmask the wizard behind the curtain, to kill the king, and to question the father.

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Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words, 2nd ed. By Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008; pp. 384. \$63.00 cloth; \$25.00 paper.

It is unusual to review the second edition of a book, but *Deeds Done in Words* was no usual book, and this is no usual second edition. The original book, published in 1990, was an invaluable addition to the literature on presidential studies. In that book, Campbell and Jamieson defined and articulated the various genres of presidential speech. It was comprehensive in scope, simultaneously institutional and rhetorical in orientation, and deeply influential. For years, those of us who do research or teach in the area have been asking for a second edition.

In 2008 that new edition arrived. Like the original, this edition is sweeping in its treatment of the entirety of presidential history. Like the original, this version is primarily focused on the “genres that most clearly illustrate the tie between rhetorical action and the maintenance and development of the presidency” (6). But it is more than an updated version of the old edition. The book has been reorganized, material has been added, and some analyses have been reworked. The result is a revisioning of the original, with an eye toward how the practices of both rhetorical criticism and the executive institution have changed over the last two decades.

The original organization seemed to follow the rhythm of the presidential term: it began with inaugurals, then moved to State of the Union messages and war. Ensuing chapters dealt with more optional presidential communication: