

Bad for democracy: How the presidency undermines the power of the people.

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 ***Bad for Democracy: How the Presidency Undermines the Power of the People (review)***

Jeremy Engels

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

Jeremy Engels

***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 [End Page 478] 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...

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