

Irwin L. Morris, *The American Presidency: an Analytical Approach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). 288pp.

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Given the relative newness of presidency studies as a subfield of political science, it is readily apparent why so many instructors have begun listing Irwin Morris' *The American Presidency* as required reading in syllabi for courses on American politics. Morris has put together a fine primer that is concise, innovative, and, most importantly, written and organized in a fashion that makes it a valuable resource for undergraduate students and established scholars alike.

Morris, a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for American Citizenship at the University of Maryland, sets out to establish a “scientific” model for answering questions about the influence of the president on campaigning, his sway over Congress and the Supreme Court, his control over the executive branch, his authority at home and abroad, his influence over the economy, and finally, “greatness”. His goal is to review new theoretical innovations in presidential study, synthesize them, and suggest new methodological approaches that “should inform our specific understanding of the relationship between Congress and the president, or the Supreme Court and the president, or the cabinet-level departments and the president—even presidents’ own relationships with their parties” (5-6).

The American Presidency is divided into eleven chapters, each of which opens with an “explicit theoretical focal point” (an innovative theory or theories on a compelling topic that has been advanced in recent years), followed by an “analytical launching pad” that tests

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these theories, a section on “logic of the scientific study of the presidency” that addresses methodological questions, before finishing with “guided research exercises” that demonstrate to students how they should collect and analyze data and draw conclusions from it (8-9).

In the second chapter, “Science and the Study of the Presidency”, Morris traces the evolution of the philosophy of science from Popper, Kuhn, Feyerabend, Lakatos, and others before establishing three aims for contemporary presidency scholars: 1. developing theories that generate testable hypotheses; 2. testing the hypotheses with data (most often, quantitative data); and 3) evaluating the results of the hypotheses tests and their implications for the *applicability* of the theory to the phenomena to be explained (36). His third chapter, “The Presidency: Background and Foundations”, offers a condensed history of the Articles of Confederation, the Constitutional Convention, the evolution of presidential powers, how presidents are selected, their relationship with Congress, the Supreme Court, along with foreign and economic policy making from the founding era to the present. The fourth chapter, “Theories of Presidential Power”, introduces classic literature on the source of presidential power from Richard Neudstadt’s seminal *Presidential Power* (1960) to more recent work from Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Samuel Kernell, and Stephen Skowronek. Readers are acquainted with their respective theories on the role of persuasion/bargaining, institutions, public opinion, and party fortunes with an eye on how aspects of each can be synthesized into testable hypotheses. After establishing scientific, historical, and theoretical frameworks, Morris’ final seven chapters delve into more specific aspects of the presidency.

Morris concludes with a weak attempt at tackling the intangibles of “presidential greatness”—more commonly the decidedly unscientific preserve of journalists or pollsters—in a short final chapter. Granted, presidential rankings are too popular a subject matter to be ignored, but setting measurable performance variables here is trickier than in any of the other areas Morris has explored. Morris advocates a “greatness” model advanced by Dean Keith

Simonton that includes “Intellectual Brilliance” as a key criterion. This reviewer, an historian of the Kennedy administration, raised an eyebrow at John F. Kennedy’s score of 1.8, higher than any other president save Thomas Jefferson. While Kennedy did indeed graduate from Harvard, biographer Thomas C. Reeves gives us good reason to believe that two of the faculty readers who awarded his famous senior thesis, *Why England Slept*, magna cum laude had been paid off by the future president’s father. *Why England Slept* later became a best-seller only after famed *New York Times* journalist Arthur Krock undertook heavy revisions[†]. Similarly, Kennedy’s speech writer Ted Sorenson finally admitted in his 2008 memoirs what many had long suspected, that he had ghost written *Profiles in Courage* for Senator Kennedy in the mid-1950s[‡]. Where then is the foundation for Intellectual Brilliance? There are further weaknesses in the Simonton model, which credits Kennedy with 0 “Years at War” despite having deployed 16,000 “non-combat advisers” to prop up a deeply unpopular client regime in South Vietnam and provoking the Cuban Missile Crisis by waging a covert war against Fidel Castro.

Some may quibble that Morris has been selective in his discussion of key literature, but any attempt to address all major presidential studies works over the past twenty-five years would have forced him to expand this work to a length that would have made it no longer appropriate as a political science textbook. Given the approach he has taken, one suspects that the author views his own work as a stage in the development of his discipline rather than a definitive work.

[†] Thomas C. Reeves, *A Question of Character: a Life of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1991), 49.

[‡] Ted Sorenson, *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 146-147.