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BOOK REVIEW

Backlash Presidents: From Transformative to Reactionary Leaders in American History

by Julia R. Azari, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025. 288 pp. $30 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-0-69-124695-6.

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Julia Azari's latest book begins with several compelling observations: (1) Racially transformative presidents—namely Abraham Lincoln, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Barack Obama—were succeeded by backlash presidents, specifically Andrew Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Donald Trump; (2) All three backlash presidents trafficked in racially coded populist appeals, were willing to break laws and norms to achieve their goals, and refused "to accept the typical give and take of the election process" (197); (3) In all three cases, the backlash successors eventually faced impeachment; and (4) decades of stasis in the racial order are punctuated by periodic episodes of racial upheaval. Most presidents seek neither racial backlash nor transformation, but quiescence. Despite the persistent issue of racial inequality throughout American history, presidents rarely use the formidable powers of the office to fundamentally alter the racial status quo. These observations motivate the book's core questions.

Azari poses three distinct, but related questions based on the observed patterns. The first one is profound: Why are racially transformative presidents so rare and disruptive to the political system? For too long, existing scholarship on the presidency has relegated racial politics to the margins. In *Backlash Presidents: From Transformative to Reactionary Leaders in American History*, the relationship between racial politics and the presidency takes center stage. Azari also inquires about the relationship between backlash politics and impeachment. The aim is to move toward an explanation for the coincidence. Finally, Azari asks what this all means for American Democracy more broadly. These are important questions. Her answers are original, engaging, and insightful.

Most of the book is dedicated to explicating these patterns through a series of in-depth case studies. Essentially, the subject of each chapter is either the durée of a racial order or the backlash president who signals its demise. For example, Chapter 2 spans from Washington to Lincoln, and Chapter 3 focuses on the forensic details of Andrew Johnson's impeachment. The rest of the book proceeds likewise, tracing long periods of racial stasis from the vantage point of the presidency and examining in detail the political contexts of backlash presidents and their impeachment proceedings.

Backlash Presidents is a major contribution to a variety of scholarly fields, including interbranch relations, race and politics, and American political development. Its primary contributions are theoretical. This book clarifies the relationship between impeachment, populism, and racial retrenchment. It also accentuates the often-overlooked role that race and norms play in presidential politics. A monograph of this quality dedicated to the exploration of such untrodden terrain is both timely and necessary.

The book is clearly inspired by Stephen Skowronek's concept of political time. However, *Backlash Presidents* is not simply a recapitulation of the idea for a new era. Rather, Azari extends and refashions Skowronek's political time framework to explain how racially transformative presidents disrupt the political equilibrium and create new political environments their successors must inhabit. Like political time, the patterns of racial transformation and backlash in presidential politics are recurrent and structurally consequential, shaping the incentives under which presidents act.

In Azari's conceptualization, transformation and backlash presidencies are rare. Most fall between these moments of extremity, preferring to avoid race-based controversy rather than courting it. This pattern is more distinct before the Democratic

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Party's emergence as the more decidedly racially progressive of the two major parties in the 1960s. Azari rightfully questions Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton's enthusiasm for addressing racial injustice. However, I'm not convinced that the policies and impacts of the two parties at the presidential level during this period can be so easily conflated, given that roughly 9 in 10 Black voters supported Democratic presidential candidates throughout this era.

Speaking of Clinton, what are we to make of his experience? Clearly, his impeachment fits uneasily alongside the others. I flag this moment not to challenge the book's conclusions, but as a fruitful site for future inquiry. As noted in Chapter 6, Clinton's impeachment was probably the product of "shifting norms and informal institutions" on Capitol Hill, spurred by the confrontational politics ushered in by the Gingrich Revolution (156). This deviation from the typical pattern might thus shed light on the acrimony endemic to political life today.

The questions and considerations this book sparks are a testament to its quality. *Backlash Presidents* observes overlooked patterns, draws novel connections, and focuses on phenomena and issues that previous research has neglected. Moreover, it is an impressive, well-researched, and thought-provoking book. This combination makes it a superb addition to the field; it is likely to be read productively for years to come.

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