



Civil Rights Rhetoric and the American Presidency (Presidential Rhetoric and Political Communication)

Enrique D. Rigsby

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For a century and a half the words of presidents have framed, expressed, and sometimes challenged the civil rights policies of America. As James Aune notes in his introduction to this important volume, “Perhaps more than in any other policy arena, presidential discourse on civil rights and justice toward African Americans illustrates both the highest level of eloquence and the lowest level of rhetorical selfdeception possible in a representative democracy.”

The authors of this book examine the ways in which American presidents and their administrations have defined the meaning of civil rights from Rutherford B. Hayes to William Jefferson Clinton.

Using a variety of methodologies, the book’s contributors examine:

- the depressing tale of how the Southern Redeemer presidents from Hayes to McKinley abandoned the promise of civil rights and reestablished the racial class system;
- the eugenics of Calvin Coolidge’s race rhetoric;
- the creative rhetorical invention of Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry Truman that laid the foundation for a positive reconstitution of the American community;
- the much-debated civil rights legacy of John F. Kennedy’s administration; and
- the efforts by conservative presidents to redefine the civil rights legacy in their own terms.

The book’s insightful closing chapter analyzes President Clinton’s 1997–98 Race Initiative and its failure, drawing conclusions about the role of presidential rhetoric in the near future of civil rights.

The original and challenging analyses and perspectives of this well-written, tightly focused volume shed light on both the history of civil rights and the practice of presidential rhetoric. Whether for individual enlightenment or for course use, readers will find the book addresses many previously unanswered questions and opens new paths for exploring the central American dilemma.

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