



Five 20th Century College Presidents: From Butler to Bok (Plus Summers)

Jeffrey O'Connell, Thomas E. O'connell

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This book is composed of five chapters on long serving American college presidents whose overlapping tenures largely spanned the 20th century (plus a coda). It is written for all those, specialists and generalists alike, interested in the leadership of American higher education, especially elite institutions. Each president (except in the coda) is discussed extensively on his comparative roles as Leader, Manager, Energizer, Envoy, and Intellectual.

Nicholas Murphy Butler of Columbia (1900-45) admittedly did much to make modern Columbia but in such a high handed self-aggrandizing manner as to make moderns flinch. Robert Hutchins of Yale (1930-51) was a boy wonder, dean of the Yale Law school at 27, and president of the University of Chicago three years later. Handsome, brilliant, dashing, he embodied the charismatic leader of a quintessentially cerebral institution. James Bryant Conant of Harvard (1933-55) did much to remake Harvard into a post-Brahmin worldly institution, redolent of a meritocratic German university, but also tolerated prejudices in the selection of students and faculty, undermining his meritocratic aims. John Sloan Dickey of Dartmouth (1946-71) strove to adapt his highly prestigious but mainly undergraduate college to its Ivy League research university counterparts. At the same time, he strove to retain a unique undergraduate ethos. Ultimately, he was undone by the uprisings of the 1960s. By way of contrast, Derek Bok of Harvard (1971-1991, 2006) not only thrived in the tumult of the 60s but proceeded to turn back the clock to a long presidential tenure in a time of much shorter ones. Although Bok had some problems and disappointments during his 20 years in office, his success was confirmed when welcomed back as an interim president after the sudden resignation of a successor. Which leads to a coda: It was that successor, Lawrence Summers (2003-06), with his replication of the self-centered, uncivil lack of collegiality of Nicholas Murray Butler, that led to Summers's downfall after only three years in office—which likely tells us much about college presidencies in the 21st century.

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