

Execute the Office: Essays with Presidents

Colin Rafferty

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In the striking essays of *Execute the Office*, Colin Rafferty reconciles the office of the presidency with the men who've held it.

Framed by a trip to the National Museum of American History, the entries meander through an exhibit devoted to the burdens of the presidency. Each essay is headed by its focal president's name, numerical placement, and term, as well as by a countdown to and from three major turning points in presidential history: the adoption of the Constitution, the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and President Richard Nixon's resignation.

Though presidents are often regarded as great individuals, Rafferty shows that "this job murders men," covering presidents who died in office from sickness or assassination; even presidents who passed away after their terms are used to show that the office takes a toll on those who assume it. The book includes presidents' personal struggles with depression, alcoholism, and PTSD, too, and addresses national trials around racism and prejudice, as codified in the Indian Removal Act, Jim Crow laws, Chinese exclusion, and Japanese internment, all of which are linked to a president's actions or inaction.

Rafferty's experimental style matches each president with a form that best suits them. The entirety of "Reiteration," focused on John Adams, is a footnote. "Diagnosis," a look at the fractured pain of Franklin Pierce, is written as patient notes and a treatment plan. Ronald Reagan, the Hollywood president, is the subject of the script "Dissolve To." Hurricane categories progress as "Evacuation Route" maps the presidency of George W. Bush, plagued at both ends by human-made and natural disasters. A forty-sixth presidential essay, "Enfranchisement," imagines the inauguration press release with a fill-in-the-blank format.

Execute the Office illuminates the human beings who've occupied the Oval Office, showing the reach of each of their decisions.

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (January / February 2021)

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