

*The Era of Education: The Presidents and the Schools 1965-2001*. By Lawrence J. McAndrews. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006. 306 pp.

Since the early 1980s, education policy has risen on the national agenda in the United States. Despite increasing concerns over terrorism and national security, the quality of America's schools continues to animate discussions among policy makers, business leaders, education professionals, and ordinary citizens alike. In *The Era of Education*, Lawrence J. McAndrews examines how presidents from Lyndon Johnson through Bill Clinton have addressed K-12 education. The book's title comes from the author's claim that the first Elementary and Secondary Education Act helped to forge a "new national consensus" (p. 5) favoring more comprehensive federal involvement that, despite some apparent obstacles, "remained largely intact" (p. 5) over the seven presidential administrations that followed until George W. Bush was elected president in 2000.

The book's organizational structure enables readers to examine particular topics and individual presidents with relative ease. It contains six substantive chapters, in addition to brief introductory and concluding ones. Three topics animate the discussion: public school aid, school desegregation, and nonpublic school aid. Chapters 1 through 3 take these topics in order, covering the period from 1965 to 1981. Chapters 4 through 6 follow the same sequencing and address the years 1981-2001. Within each chapter, McAndrews discusses the particular debates and key proposals that each presidential administration, again in chronological order, considered.

Overall, the book's setup allows readers to dive into particular sections that suit their individual needs. Those most interested in presidents' perspectives on school desegregation, for example, could read Chapters 3 and 6. Similarly, readers interested in Richard Nixon's performance could read about how he addressed public school aid (pp. 15-30), school desegregation (pp. 61-72), and nonpublic school aid (pp. 93-103). Particularly useful within each chapter are the summary sections in which the author offers an overall assessment of each president's performance.

McAndrews is a historian, and *The Era of Education* relies heavily on analyses of documents in presidential and other archives. The strength of those primary sources helps bring to life the animated discussions and internal deliberations that led presidents to choose certain policy paths while eschewing others. Much of the author's analysis appears to be done with great care as, for example, when he neatly examines Jimmy Carter's handwritten notes on a bill to support educational innovation (pp. 44-45).

The reliance on primary-source documents aids the author in creating a rich narrative. But that overall strength can become a weakness at times. Dozens of individuals appear across the book's chapters, and it would have been useful to have a page or two that simply listed key advisors by presidential administration and position. Similarly, in emphasizing the details of particular administrations and their policy choices, the book sometimes makes it hard for readers to grasp the bigger picture. Descriptive tables or charts that mapped the trajectory of federal education spending across all presidents, and the sequencing of U.S. Supreme Court cases relevant to desegregation or nonpublic school aid, for example, would have been useful. Additions such as these would have been

especially helpful for readers who are relatively new to presidential policy making in education but who appreciate the in-depth coverage that the author's narrative provides.

Given McAndrews's overall attention to detail, it is somewhat surprising that he mischaracterizes the formation of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which authored the oft-cited 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*. A brief paragraph describes how Secretary of Education Terrel Bell formed the commission (pp. 123-24), but that discussion omits crucial coverage of the internal debate and resistance that Bell faced from President Ronald Reagan's coterie of conservative advisers. (Only a brief allusion on p. 129 suggests some internal tension existed; interested readers should see Bell's memoir, *The Thirteenth Man* [Free Press, 1988], for detailed coverage of these important matters.) Further, the author concludes *The Era of Education* by claiming that Reagan appointed the commission (p. 229), when actually Bell named its members when he failed to muster needed support from the White House. In fact, the president only really warmed to the commission after realizing it would be politically inept to ignore the group's findings, which eventually grabbed headlines across the country. Those details are important to keep straight, as many observers, and McAndrews himself, argue that the publication of *A Nation at Risk* had important impacts on the evolution of American education policy.

Despite its occasional weaknesses, *The Era of Education* usefully contributes to the literature on presidential policy making in education. The chapters on nonpublic school aid were especially helpful, given that most contemporary analysis of this topic tends to focus on school vouchers. McAndrews addresses vouchers, but he widens the discussion to include many forms of nonpublic school aid, including tax policy and private school aid that flows from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Overall, readers relatively well versed in the history of education policy will appreciate having such detailed coverage of these and other topics all in one book.

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