

Nixon's Business: Authority and Power in Presidential Politics. *By Nigel Bowles*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005. x + 305 pp. Appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$50.00. ISBN: 1-585-44454-5.

Reviewed by Dean J. Kotlowski

Over the past decade, several studies covering aspects of Richard Nixon's presidency, and legacy, have appeared from academic and trade presses. Straightforwardly written, argued, and titled—bearing, quite often, a possessive (*Nixon's Vietnam War*, *Nixon's Economy*, *Nixon's Civil Rights*, and *Nixon's Shadow*)—they have enhanced understanding of what Nixon thought about pressing problems and of the ways in which he strove to solve them. Nigel Bowles's *Nixon's Business: Authority and Power in Presidential Politics* joins this shelf of books.

As much as the other studies, *Nixon's Business* has earned its apostrophe. Here, after all, is a study of economic policymaking from the perspective of the Oval Office—"a study of a president at work," Bowles asserts (p. 35). There remains, however, one caveat. A political scientist by training, the author views Nixon's decision-making and policy implementation through the prism of one of his discipline's intellectual giants, Richard Neustadt. Employing ideas developed by Neustadt over forty years ago, Bowles sees the presidency as a "weak" institution, deficient in "authority" whether constitutional or statutory (pp. 6–8). Accordingly, presidents have drawn upon their human qualities, such as their "sense of purpose" and "feel for power," as well as their "experience" and "temperament," among other things, to extend their "power," which Bowles defines as "the influence that a president exercises over other politicians or institutions" (p. 4). As his example, he chooses to illustrate Nixon's management of the economy.

The book's organization is relentlessly topical. At its heart are five chapters: one on Nixon's campaign to extend Lyndon B. Johnson's tax surcharge; a pair on Nixon's adoption and then enforcement of wage-and-price controls; another on his disavowal of the international payments system established at Bretton Woods; and a final one on the ongoing conflict between Nixon and the Federal Reserve chair Arthur F. Burns over the

need to lower interest rates. Each chapter applies, in identical order, the concepts introduced by Neustadt (e.g., “the president’s authority,” “professional reputation,” “popular prestige”) to Nixon’s handling of the economic issue under discussion. Such a framework plays down argument and drains almost all drama from this story, making for a repetitive narrative and tedious reading. Bowles himself concedes that such an approach will not excite universal appeal: “This book is explicitly interdisciplinary—on the dangerous border territory between history and political science where reviewers from each of the two disciplines can criticize a book for not being faithful to their own discipline’s criteria of purity” (p. 35). On this point, the author is absolutely correct.

Bowles is also correct on a much larger and more important point, for, although this study is not argumentative, a thesis emerges from its chapters. The author persuasively portrays Nixon, on economic matters, as an unorthodox Republican, making up in guile and guts for what he lacked in scruples and consistency. This president had no intention of seeking reelection with an economy beset by unemployment. Accordingly, unlike his Republican predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and most conservative members of the Grand Old Party, Nixon never devoted himself to balancing the federal budget. Instead, he sought economic expansion via low interest rates while trying to arrest inflation through wage-and-price controls. Ever resourceful, Nixon employed a range of means to achieve his ends: persuasion (to get conservative Republicans to extend LBJ’s tax surcharge to finance the Vietnam War); boldness (mandating wage-and-price controls under authority ceded by a Congress under Democratic control); and televised addresses (to convince Americans that abandoning fixed exchange rates was in their economic self-interest). Put simply, he made the most of his authority while enhancing his power. In so doing, however, this master of political maneuver forsook the long term for the short term, placing the nation’s economic health behind his electoral objectives. Nixon won reelection at the price of policies that, by 1974, had saddled the economy with higher rates of inflation and unemployment than those that he had inherited in 1969.

The difficulty with Bowles’s argument is that it is not as fresh as he suggests. Although Bowles asserts that his study “complicates or disputes conventional views of Nixon,” he neither explains what those conventional views are nor describes their origins

(p. 235). Most historians, in truth, have seen Nixon as a dexterous politician, especially with respect to the economy. Stephen E. Ambrose makes this point, on wage-and-price controls, in the second volume of his three-part biography. In *Nixon Reconsidered*, Joan Hoff, like Bowles, stresses the vital role of Treasury Secretary John Connally in convincing the president to accept wage-and-price controls. Most important, Bowles's argument, about Nixon's subordination of economics to politics with disastrous results, is the abiding theme of Allen Matusow's *Nixon's Economy*.

Partly to distinguish his work, Bowles employs Neustadt's rubric. "My purpose . . . differs from Matusow's: it is to illuminate Nixon's own varying use of power and authority over time, case by case, and the importance of power and authority to the institution of the presidency itself" (p. 35). There are, however, pitfalls in relying so closely on the ideas of one scholar, however renowned. Other political scientists have developed frameworks that, at times, seem better to explain Nixon's actions. A. James Reichley's examination of Nixon's "floating coalitions" approach to congressional liaison, seeking either conservative or liberal votes depending on the issue, clarifies his triumph on the tax surcharge. And Stephen Skowronek's emphasis on the "politics of preemption," under which presidents steal the issues of the opposition, might easily have been applied to Nixon's decision to adopt wage-and-price controls. Bowles, however, ignores Reichley and mentions Skowronek only in passing. He would have done well to contend more forcefully—and more succinctly—why Neustadt's theories are the best means to understand presidential power in general and, in this instance, Nixon's handling of economy policy in particular.

Nixon's Business remains a puzzling work. The book is more persuasive in its somewhat implicit argument than in its overly cumbersome framework. The response of political scientists to *Nixon's Business* no doubt will reflect their thoughts on the enduring value of Neustadt's model concerning presidential authority and power. Historians will, and should, applaud Bowles's prodigious searching in an array of manuscript sources, including minutes of the "Fed," Nixon's presidential papers, and the collections of a variety of congressional leaders. However, irrespective of their discipline, scholars will find this book most useful as a supplement to, not a substitute for, Matusow's *Nixon's Economy*.

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