



The Presidencies of Grover Cleveland (American Presidency Series)

Richard E. Jr. Welch

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Grover Cleveland, who served as both the twenty-second and the twenty-fourth president of the United States, dominated the American political scene from 1884 to 1896. Viewed at one time as a monument of presidential courage, Cleveland has over the past generation been dismissed by historians as a "Bourbon Democrat," the symbol of that wing of the Democratic party devoted to preserving the status quo and protecting the interests of the propertied. In this revisionist study, Richard Welch takes a fresh look at the Cleveland administrations and discovers a man whose assertive temperament was frequently at odds with his inherited political faith.

Although pledging public allegiance to a Whiggish version of the presidency, Cleveland's aggressive insistence on presidential independence led him to exercise increasing control of the executive branch and then to seek influence over Congress and national legislation. Quick to denounce governmental paternalism and the centralization of political power, Cleveland nevertheless expanded the authority of the national government as he revised federal land and Indian policies in the West and ordered the army to Chicago during the 1894 Pullman strike. For all his fears of constitutional innovation, he was neither a champion of big business nor unaware of the problems posed by the post-Civil War economic revolution. He signed the Interstate commerce Act, warned against the growing power of industrial combination, advocated voluntary federal arbitration of labor-management disputes, and fought the monopolization of western lands by railroad and timber corporations.

Welch places Cleveland's battles on behalf of tariff revision, civil service reform, and the gold standard within the context of the conundrum of a strong president who usually failed to gain the cooperation of Congress or the Democratic party. Cleveland reinvigorated the American presidency and reestablished an equilibrium between the executive and legislative branches of the federal government, but by his obdurate enmity to the silverites and the "agrarian radicals," he helped assure the division and defeat of his party in the election of 1896. Welch demonstrates that Cleveland's achievements and failures as a political leader were attributable to an authoritarian temperament that saw compromise as surrender.

Two chapters of the book are devoted to Cleveland's diplomacy, focusing especially on his response to Hawaiian and Cuban revolutions and the boundary dispute between Venezuela and Great Britain. Welch takes issue with the currently popular thesis that U.S. diplomacy in the last decade of the nineteenth century displayed a concerted governmental effort to solve domestic economic problems by expanding foreign markets in East Asia and Latin America.

In addition to providing insights into the character of one of our more interesting presidents, this reassessment of Grover Cleveland's historical legacy shows clearly that the Cleveland years served as the essential preface to the development of a modern presidency and to the identification for executive power.

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