

Book Review / Compte rendu

Trachtenberg, Stephen, Kauvar, Gerald, & Bogue, E. Grady (2013). *Presidencies Derailed: Why University Leaders Fail and How to Prevent It*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. Pages:184. Price: \$34.95USD (hardcover).

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In 1908 Charles Eliot wrote a book with the simple but direct title, *University Administration*. Eliot knew what he was talking about. He was then in his 39th year as president of Harvard University. Today, more than a century later, he is still Harvard's longest-serving president. That Eliot expected his book to become the first in what is now a genre of university presidential memoirs and DIY manuals is, of course, unlikely. The genre, however, has not changed much. Eliot addressed issues that are as contemporary now as they were then: merger of Harvard University and M.I.T. (which MIT faculty and students scuppered), pitfalls in accepting gifts from self-interested donors, reorganization of governance to involve politicians less and public trustees more, the recruitment of faculty, stewardship of endowments. There is even a section on how to preside over a faculty meeting. These are problems that were taken up later by other presidents: Warren Bennis in *Why Leaders Can't Lead* (1989), Peter Flavin in *A Primer for University Presidents* (1990), and E.K. Fretwell (with David Leslie) *Wise Moves in Hard Times* (1996).

This is the genre of which *Presidencies Derailed* is a part. It does not break new ground for the genre. In fact, it is quite typical. But it does do some things differently, and for that reason alone is worth reading. It is a DIY manual without being self-referential and self-reverential. The authors, wisely, seem to have adopted Eliot's maxim that presidential "success will be due more to powers of exposition and persuasion combined with persistent industry." In other words, don't condescend or glibly minimize the tough problems that face any president, derailed or not. To the authors' and maybe the publishers' credit, *Presidencies Derailed* names names. It contains an appendix that explicitly identifies and summarizes presidencies that, in the authors' judgement, failed. It reports without any evident editorial burnishing what the derailed presidents who were interviewed had to say about their experiences. The evidentiary side of the book relies on a series of case studies, fourteen in all.

Sadly, one might say that *Presidencies Derailed* is evidence that at least some university presidents in the last century either ignored Eliot's advice or never knew about it. The book describes this willful behaviour as a "disconnect between conviction and courage" that "abnegates the super ego." The ancient Greeks did not have universities, but they did understand hubris. Presidents make mistakes because they imagine that they cannot make mistakes or, if they do, because, according to the authors, they think they are "too smart to get caught."

Of the three authors of *Presidencies Derailed*, two – Trachtenberg and Bogue – were themselves university presidents, at George Washington University and the University of Hartford, and Louisiana State University and the University of Tennessee respectively. Their contribution – the larger portion of the book – is analysis and advice on how to avert derailment. The balance – which is about derailments *per se* – was written by experts in the field of higher education, none of whom served as presidents. Their section is sensibly organized by classification: liberal arts colleges, comprehensive universities, research universities, and community colleges, with three or four case studies in each category.

Some "derailed" presidents in the case studies were more forthright than others in acknowledging their own shortfalls and missteps. Others took what might be simply described as the "it wasn't only me" defense, with the board of governors as the other culpable party. According to the authors, that often was not an exculpation. If there is a theme, other than the value of common sense, that arises from the case studies it is, on the one hand, that presidential success depends on an open and frank relationship between the president and the board. The book defines this as "sharing information and establish[ing] mutual expectations." In many aspects, the audience for the book seems more to be boards than presidents. Some presidents seem to have made the mistake of taking indecision or fractiousness on the part of a board as license to ignore or go around the board. On the other hand, derailment seems to result when line between management and governance is poorly defined. Judging from some of the case studies, this is a line that boards sometimes either do not understand or, if they do, do not respect. This behavior seems to have been much more prevalent in the public colleges and universities that were included in the study than in those that were private.

In emphasizing the importance of presidential searches, and describing how some fail while others succeed, *Presidencies Derailed* makes an essential observation that is about neither success nor failure. It is about the difficulty and complexity of being a college or university president. Search committees and, sometimes, the executive search firms that they employ, fail to understand the job while concentrating on the candidates. The implication is that some derailments are in practical effect the organizational version of divorce. A particular example of an under-estimation of the travails of the college or university presidency that can be found in some of the cases that were studied is the almost daily challenge of balancing operational effectiveness and strategy. Other presidential DIY books are full of management bromides like total quality management, continual quality improvement, benchmarking, outsourcing, reengineering, change management, and incentive-based budgeting. Some of these are good ideas, but a number of the derailments that were studied reached the breaking point when boards became frustrated by their presidents' inability to translate strategy into operational effectiveness. In some cases, first-time presidents failed to understand that operational effectiveness was as much

part of their jobs as strategy. In other words, the job was misunderstood. Charles Eliot had something to say about this:

The President should be able to discern the practical essence of complicated and long-drawn discussions. He must often pick out that promising part of theory which ought to be tested by experiment, and must decide how many of things desirable are also attainable, and what one of many projects is ripest for execution (Eliot, 1908).

Reference

Eliot, Charles W. (1908). *University Administration*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, The Riverside Press.