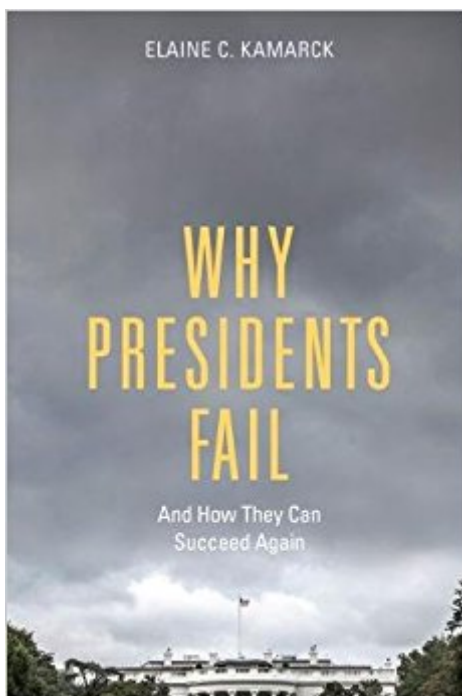


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Why Presidents Fail And How They Can Succeed Again



Synopsis

At the beginning of the century, the majority of Americans were satisfied with the way things were going in the United States. And then a slow decline began, seemingly uninterrupted by changes in party or achievements by the White House. As the campaigning for the next president begins, the question we ask ourselves now is who will be the most competent leader? In *Why Presidents Fail and How They Can Succeed Again*, Elaine Kamarck asks another important question: When did Americans lose faith in their leaders? And how can they get it back? Kamarck argues that presidents today spent too much time talking, and not enough time governing. After decades of "imperial" and "rhetorical" presidencies, we are in need of a "managerial" president. In her fully readable and accessible book, she explains the difficulties of governing in our modern political landscape, and offers examples and recommendations of how our next president can not only recreate faith in leadership, but also run a competent, successful administration.

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Customer Reviews

It's amazing how much we talk about politicians and how little we talk about what politicians actually do. Politicians govern. Elaine Kamarck has rectified that brilliantly in *Why Presidents Fail*, showing that an inability to govern effectively is at the heart of recent presidential failures. This is crucial information, compellingly told. — Joe Klein, columnist, *Time Magazine* Elaine Kamarck's book is a must-read for all presidential candidates, correspondents, students of

government, and citizens who hunger for Washington to function well again. There's a stick of dynamite in every chapter.

Donna Brazile, commentator, CNN
White House failures have occurred so often
Desert Storm, 9/11, Katrina, Iraq, the VA, the Health Care Rollout
that many think them inevitable. Not so argues Elaine Kamarck, widely respected as both academic and practitioner. Presidents should talk less and manage more; stop the perpetual campaign and start governing. This book should go to the top of the required reading list for our next chief executive.

David Gergen, professor of public service and co-director, Center for Public Leadership, Harvard Kennedy School
Why have so many modern presidencies begun in hope and ended in disappointment? In this concise and trenchant book, Elaine Kamarck offers a convincing answer: Too many presidents have neglected a vital part of their job, managing the federal government. Kamarck's compelling case studies of political disasters are page-turners; a label few books on public administration ever get. Every American should read this book before voting. Would-be White House aides should read it more than once.

Doyle McManus, Washington columnist, Los Angeles Times
In this magnificent and timely book, Elaine Kamarck unlocks vital truths about why modern presidents so often fail; and what they must do to succeed. Writing as both a superb scholar and a seasoned White House adviser, her case-based analyses of several recent presidencies leave none of conventional academic wisdom unchallenged. This wise book will be read by scholars and students for generations to come; and it ought to be read by the president, top White House aides, and cabinet leaders right now!

John J. Dilulio Jr., Frederic Fox Leadership Professor, University of Pennsylvania

From the botched attempt to rescue the U.S. diplomats held hostage by Iran in 1980 under President Jimmy Carter and the missed intelligence on Al Qaeda before 9/11 under George W. Bush to, most recently, the computer meltdown that marked the arrival of health care reform under Barack Obama, the American presidency has often been a profile in failure. In *Why Presidents Fail and How They Can Succeed Again*, Elaine Kamarck surveys presidential failures to understand why Americans have lost faith in their leaders; and how they can get it back. Kamarck, a White House insider and Harvard academic, argues that presidents today spend too much time talking and not enough time governing. They have not balanced three components of leadership that must be exercised to bring about good results: policy, communication, and implementation. Instead, presidents have allowed themselves to become more and more distant from the federal bureaucracy that is supposed to implement policy. After decades of "imperial" and "rhetorical:

presidencies, we are in need of a "managerial" president. Kamarck explains the difficulties of governing in our modern political landscape, and offers examples and recommendations of how our next presidents can not only recreate faith in leadership but also run a competent, successful administration.

Brookings scholar and former Clinton White House staffer Kamarck's short and well-written book argues that presidential leadership is most successful when the president is able to combine three sets of skills: policy, communication, and implementation. Kamarck argues recent presidential failures are due to a focus on "selling" policies, with inadequate attention to actually implementing them. She specifically cites lack of presidential understanding of US Government capabilities, operating procedures, and priorities as the critical failure in the Carter era Desert One fiasco (a failed attempt to rescue the Iranian hostages); the Bush Administration's inability to prevent the September 11 attacks, respond appropriately to Hurricane Katrina, and invasion of Iraq; as well as the Obama Administration's fumbling of the roll-out of the Affordable Care/Obamacare and handling of the VA system. Kamarck argues that modern presidents have been elected for their ability to communicate and that the circle of supporters they bring with them to the White House are far more experienced with running political campaigns than managing governmental. The result is a White House--under either political party--prone to underestimating the complexity of issues and ignorant of the capabilities (or shortcomings) of the military or bureaucratic agencies entrusted with managing policy outcomes. The problems with inter-branch military cooperation were known long before the Desert One fiasco, as were the problems with information-sharing between the FBI and CIA before the September 11 attacks. Experts warned the health care bureaucracy was inadequate to handling the Obamacare roll-out years before the 2013 attempt to "go live" prompted widespread server failure. Systemic VA problems were known long before the scandal went public. In all these cases, the information that might have prevented very public and embarrassing policy failures either never reached the president or was dismissed as irrelevant to the policy agenda. Kamarck is far stronger at describing the problem than prescribing a fix, one factor in my (narrow) decision to give four rather than five stars. Her suggestion that political parties make greater use of super delegates to screen presidents for ability to lead the massive Federal bureaucracy appears politically untenable in these days of populist revolt on both the right and left. The proposal to create a position within the White House staff to essentially warn of impending problems coming from left field is in theory good, but the reality of White House politics

makes it unlikely such a person would actually be heard. (We have the example of Richard Clarke in the Bush White House who pressed unsuccessfully for months for a review of the al-Qaeda threat. There is no reason to expect a Democratic Administration would respond differently to an outsider pressing issues outside the president's policy agenda.) Kamarck's final point, that voters should push candidates for greater detail on how they intend to implement their campaign promises also is excellent, but neither new nor likely in this current election cycle. In short, this brief but well-written volume provides an excellent survey of the reasons why presidents of both parties have been plagued by repeated policy failure. Kamarck's inability to prescribe a viable solution is no surprise, given the magnitude of the problem. I highly recommend this book, particularly as voters prepare for the November 2016 election. Whichever candidate wins, he or she will face precisely the challenges Kamarck outlines so lucidly.

I have to start by saying that I have read all of Professor Kamarck's books and find her to be one of the most lucid, compelling, and creative thinkers relative to public policy. This book is no exception. The insights are simply presented, but profound in their insight and impact. The articulation of the differences between being a President and being a business CEO is something every voter who believes that we simply need a great business person to run the government should read and understand. Even though her book is about Presidents of the United States, its principles are applicable to all leaders, especially the recognition that Presidents must get implementation right to be effective. She even quotes one of my favorite business books from one of the great business leaders of the last quarter of the 20th century, Larry Bossidy, when she cites the importance of execution. This is a book that anyone who wants to understand why we continue to be dissatisfied with government, whether Democrats or Republicans are leading us.

I think this is a well-written book in many ways. The author has had experience in the Federal government. She makes a good point that modern Presidents are overburdened with constant communicating with the public and this leaves little time or energy for implementation. She omits, I believe, to mention a situation the Obama administration faced: a strategy of relentless opposition by the opposing party. The administration was constantly forced to defend itself. This may very well have taken resources away from implementation. Two of the biggest implementation failures she cites were Carter's attempt to rescue the hostages in Iran and the rollout of Obamacare. I take those points. In the case of Obamacare I think the President could have relied less on contractors and

more on his own team, people who had a direct interest in his success. Traditionally a President is considered the leader of his party. Obama has disappointed me in that regard. I wish he had left the Democratic Party to someone else. He lost Congress after the first biennium to a revived and increasingly militant GOP. He did not build up a reservoir of Democratic voters committed to voting in every election they get no matter what. Government cannot even arrange a two-car funeral? I would not go that far. My own background: I joined Young Republicans in 1961 as a skeptic of government. By 1967 I decided I was in the wrong party, mainly over civil liberties and especially glbt rights. I am still somewhat of a skeptic of government. I do not believe in the War on Drugs. On the other hand I do see value in an economic safety net. I think this author has astutely seen some real problems with contemporary presidencies, but I do not see solutions. She likes the way nominees were chosen prior to 1968, but that day is passed and it would not get my vote. I agree Presidential nominations are quite messy, but what process would one put in replacement? If I am bringing up matters I wish she had covered it is why I am giving this book just 4 stars.

My thoughts, post-Election Day, 2016: Buy this book. It may become the told-you-so title of the year.

A lot of good stuff on skills necessary to do the job well. Wished there were more about implementation.

This is a compelling, succinct treatise on the importance of management acumen to the performance of US Presidents. The author uses excellent examples from both Republican and Democratic presidents, to illustrate her arguments, and all presidential candidates would be well-served by reviewing this book.

Thanks

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