Vaulting Ambition: FDR's Campaign to Pack the Supreme Court

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ship centering feminist research on women in sports, this book brings together sports journalism history and feminist research in a way that is comprehensive and would be beneficial to sports studies, journalism and mass media, and women and gender studies collections. The gender history perspective could be fruitful to expand perspectives of sports studies and journalism students. This book would find its place in academic libraries and public libraries alike for those looking for a comprehensive study of women in sport and the societal perspectives of female athletes over time.

Loren Mixon, Coastal Carolina University

Vaulting Ambition: FDR’s Campaign to Pack the Supreme Court

Is it possible to gain a mental picture of a president’s attempt to “pack” the Supreme Court through canvassing his closest advisors and enacting legislation to accomplish this goal? Throughout the pages of the book Vaulting Ambition: FDR’s Campaign to Pack the Supreme Court, author Michael Nelson accomplishes this feat effectively. At one point in the book, the author includes seven possible decisions to be made which would help FDR accomplish his goal of packing the Supreme Court. The inclusion of these decisions helps the reader get a better picture of what factors might have contributed to the president’s decision-making process. For instance, was the decision to pack the court based on prior success with getting New Deal legislation passed? Alternatively, was the president’s decision to pack the Supreme Court based on the feeling that overall public opinion would support his decision? One of the main ideas of the book is to show how FDR might have overestimated his ability to get legislation passed to influence the three branches of government during his tenure as president. In this case, FDR tried to remake the Supreme Court by increasing its number with justices who would support any legislation that was proposed or would make it less likely that any opposition would arise in the final analysis.

In this book, the author includes President Franklin Roosevelt’s notion to add a new justice to the Supreme Court every time a justice reaches 70 and does not retire. In the end, the motivation of FDR was to exert influence over the court by electing like-minded individuals to the court who would be more likely to approve his programs or legislation. Conversations between FDR and close advisors like Harold Ickes (secretary of the treasury) or Homer S. Cummings (attorney general) help illustrate President Roosevelt’s reliance on these trusted advisors to help him remake the Supreme Court into an institution that would support his legislation completely. At various times in the book, the author includes these conversations to help the reader understand the political climate happening in the United States during the late 1930s.

The addition of these actual accounts of FDR’s interactions with his advisory staff also contributes to our understanding of why he thought it might be possible to accomplish the court-packing plan during his presidency. Essentially, FDR felt that the initial success of his New Deal programs would make it easier to accomplish his ultimate court plan to increase the size of the Supreme Court with like-minded justices. This book really contributes to the subject of how presidents used their initial success or popularity to push through programs that might suit their political goals. Additionally, including this type of book in academic libraries would help support research into this area of history. The book is also part of a series called Landmark Presidential Decisions. For this reason, students majoring in political science at any university or college would benefit by having the book in their college library for relevant research assignments.

This book is intended as a historical overview of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s campaign through the Judicial Procedures Reform Bill of 1937 to try and “pack” the United States Supreme Court with additional justices who could rule favorably on the constitutionality of New Deal programs. In the end, FDR failed in his effort to increase the size of the Supreme Court. Specific pieces of conversation that President Roosevelt had with his closest advisors lend some added un-
derstanding to the book. Because of its specific scope, *Vaulting Ambition: FDR’s Campaign to Pack the Supreme Court* would be suitable for inclusion in any academic or local library with a focus on historical episodes. The book could also be a valuable addition to any special library with a Southern history or political history focus. Michael Nelson is the Fulmer Professor of Political Science at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, and senior fellow at the University of Virginia’s Miller Center. Prior to writing this book, his other publications include the following: *Resilient America: Electing Nixon in 1968, Channeling Dissent, and Dividing Government* (2017), *Clinton’s Elections: 1992, 1996, and the Birth of a New Era of Governance* (2020), and *43: Inside the George W. Bush Presidency* (2022).

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