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Who Belongs in America?: Presidents, Rhetoric, and Immigration

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“How can the immigrant of yesterday be lionized as the very foundation of the nation’s character, while the immigrant of today is often demonized as a threat to the nation’s safety and stability?” ask volume editor Vanessa B. Beasley in her introduction to this timely book.

As the nation’s ceremonial as well as political leader, presidents through their rhetoric help to create the frame for the American public’s understanding of immigration. In an overarching essay and ten case studies, Who Belongs in America? Explores select moments in U.S. immigration history, focusing on the presidential discourse that preceded, address, or otherwise corresponded to events.

These chapters, which originated as presentations at the Texas A&M University Conference on Presidential Rhetoric, share a common interest in how, when and under what circumstances U.S. presidents or their administrations have negotiated the tension that lies at the heart of the immigration issue in the United States. The various authors look at the dual views of immigrants as either scapegoats for cultural fears, especially during trying times. U.S. presidents have had to navigate between these two motifs, and they have chosen different ways to do so. Indeed, as these studies show, their words have sometimes been at odds with their deeds and policies.

Since 9/11, few issues have more public significance than how America views immigrants. The contributors to this volume provide context that will help inform the public debate, as well as the scholarship, for years to come.

Vanessa B. Beasley, an associate professor of communication at the University of Georgia, is the author of You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric, also published by Texas A&M University Press. Her Ph.D. is from the University of Texas at Austin.

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