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Die Präsidenten der USA in Lebensbildern : von George Washington bis Bill Clinton / Peter Schäfer. Unter Mitarb. von Ulrike Skorsetz und Gabriele Winkel. - Graz [u.a.] : Verlag Styria, 1993. - 461 S. : Ill. ; 24 cm. - ISBN 3-222-12216-4 : ÖS 420.00

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Die amerikanischen Präsidenten : 41 historische Portraits von George Washington bis Bill Clinton / hrsg. von Jürgen Heideking. - 2., durchges. und aktualisierte Aufl. - München : Beck, 1997. - 468 S. : Ill. ; 23 cm. - ISBN 3-406-39804-9 : DM 68.00

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The U.S. presidency is a natural subject for a reference work. It has been, for most of the twentieth century, the most powerful political office in the world. ***Die Präsidenten der USA in Lebensbildern*** and ***Die amerikanischen Präsidenten*** are very similar in conception, structure and content. Both offer chapter-length biographies of all 41 U.S. presidents in chronological sequence. The major difference is that the former is the work of a single author, Peter Schäfer, (with some major "Mitarbeit" by Ulrike Skorsetz and Gabriele Winkel); while the latter is an edited (by Jürgen Heideking) volume with 20 authors (including Peter Schäfer and Ulrike Skorsetz).

The amount of space each of the two volumes allots to a President is presumably a judgment of his relative historical importance. Thus, for example, ***Die Präsidenten der USA*** devotes its longest entry (17 pages) to Abraham Lincoln; the longest entry in ***Die amerikanischen Präsidenten*** (12 pages) treats Franklin D. Roosevelt. Both choices are reasonable ones. There seems more agreement on the least important President: in both books Benjamin Harrison (in office 1889 - 1893) receives the shortest entry (less than 2 pages). In both volumes the chapters on Ulysses S. Grant were written by Ulrike Skorsetz, and a comparison reveals small but noticeable differences in treatment. Skorsetz's contribution to the Schäfer volume focuses a bit more on Grant's personal life, giving more details, for instance, about his world travels after leaving office. Her essay in the Heideking volume provides somewhat more detail about the political and economic issues he faced (for example, a fuller explanation of the "panic of 1873"). This essay also ends with a detailed paragraph of explicit historical evaluation: i.e., that Grant was one of "den schwächsten Präsidenten in der Geschichte der USA" (p. 212). The chapter in the Schäfer volume reaches no equivalent conclusion. Both books offer portraits and further bibliographical references for each President as well as a number of summary tables and a personal name index. In addition the Schäfer volume contains a useful 15-page "Begriffslexikon" to U.S. presidential history with explanations, for example of the "XYZ-Affair" and "Tammany Hall".

Curiously there is no real equivalent to these two works in current American reference book publishing. The standard single-volume American source, ***Facts about the presidents*** eschews the narrative approach to each man's life in favor of an easy-to-scan "fact sheet" format for each

President. This approach, of course, emphasizes discrete historical "facts" at the expense of more synthetic historical understanding. Either of the two German books offers useful narrative biographies of each President - the Heideking volume is marginally more academic in approach, the Schäfer volume is addressed to a somewhat more general readership.

Bob Walther

Zurück an den [Bildanfang](#)