

# A Day for Rating the Presidents

For twenty years, during most of which I was at least a part-time resident of the U.S. and a newspaper owner in many American states, I proposed moving Presidents' Day a week forward, to facilitate designating it as celebrating the birthdays of all four of the presidents that I think qualify as great holders of that office: Franklin D. Roosevelt (born January 30, 1882) and Ronald Reagan, (born February 6, 1911), as well as Abraham Lincoln (February 12, 1809), and George Washington (February 22, 1732). My campaign was no more successful than its parallel agitations to add FDR and Reagan to Mount Rushmore and to name a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier after Martin Luther King. (Since then the honorees of carrier-namings have included John Stennis, George H. W. Bush, and Gerald Ford.)

No sane person would challenge Washington and Lincoln's status as great presidents of the U.S.; if the founder of the country and the savior of the Union and emancipator of the slaves don't make it, the whole American project has been a trumpery. There remain a few choristers of the anti-FDR theories that he is responsible for all the evils of the present welfare system, and even of the worm-eaten chestnut that he gave Eastern Europe away to Stalin. And of course there remain Reagan's detractors, who continue to regard him as "an amiable dunce" (Clark Clifford's words, a jaded Washington fixer surpassed only by his immediate predecessor, Robert McNamara, as the most catastrophic Secretary of National Defense in the history of that office, since the War and Navy Departments were amalgamated in 1948).

When FDR was inaugurated in 1933, unemployment was between 25 and 33 percent with no direct federal aid for them and the banking system and stock and commodity exchanges had been

closed and the entire economic system was on the verge of collapse. The New Deal had its shortcomings, but, as Alan Greenspan once said, "As economics, it gets about a 67 percent grade, but as catastrophe-avoidance it was a 99 percent success." He salvaged 95 percent of an economic system that had, in fact, failed, and the many millions of people in his workfare programs (which accomplished miracles at low cost for conservation and what would today be called infrastructure) were just as much employed people, doing more useful work, as those conscripted into European and Japanese armed forces and defense-production industries in the thirties, who were considered employed, while the participants in the New Deal projects were not, and that has made Roosevelt's economic recovery record seem uncompetitive.

The Declarations on Poland and Liberated Europe in the Yalta agreement in 1945 guaranteed free elections and independence, and as historian Ted Morgan wrote, "If it had been a bad deal for the West, Stalin would not have violated every clause of it." The West ended up with Germany, France, Italy, and Japan, the big strategic prizes of the war, although the USSR took, as between the Big Three (U.S.A., British Commonwealth, and Soviet Union), over 90 percent of the casualties and over 90 percent of the physical damage in subduing the Third Reich. Roosevelt intended to use the U.S. atomic monopoly, the threat to rearm Germany, and the carrot of economic aid, to induce Stalin's compliance with Yalta, once it was clear the USSR would not be needed to assist in the invasion of Japan. He kept the British and Canadians in the war, devised and implemented the strategy that won the war, ended isolationism, and secured the basis for the triumph of democracy and the free market in the post-war world.

Ronald Reagan took the country entirely out of the depressive periods of Watergate and the gloomy and defeatist Carter era, won the Cold War, the greatest and most bloodless victory in the history of the nation-state; created 18 million new jobs

and produced the greatest non-inflationary economic boom, based on astounding productivity increases, and tax cuts and reform, of the twentieth century.

The second category of presidents, those of unusually high ability, I believe, is comprised (in order of taking office), of Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Richard Nixon. Jefferson was less accomplished as president than in other roles, and was lucky that Napoleon offered him the Louisiana Territory (doubling the size of the country – a million square miles). He was responsible for the disastrous demobilization of Washington and Adams's army, the threat of which to occupy Canada would have prevented the British outrages on the high seas that led to the War of 1812, and his economic boycott of Great Britain was a fiasco. But he did send Lewis and Clark to the Pacific, shrunk government, founded West Point and a non-political officer corps, and suppressed the Barbary pirates. Andrew Jackson was an enthusiast of slavery, and his destruction of the Bank of the United States brought on a bone-cracking economic depression, but he suppressed any thought of secession for nearly 30 years (and threatened to hang his vice president, John C. Calhoun), and this enabled the North to achieve such a demographic and economic preeminence over the South that it was able, by a narrow margin, to defeat the insurrection in the 1860s. James K. Polk ended the Oregon boundary dispute with Britain satisfactorily, reduced tariffs, set up an independent Treasury, and added another million square miles to the Union with the Mexican War, which he cleverly sold as a flag-waving act of Manifest Destiny in the North and as a commendable expansion of slavery in the South (including in Texas where the Mexicans had abolished slavery).

Theodore Roosevelt is generally conceded to be an unusually good president, for building the Panama Canal, attacking monopolies, high emphasis on conservation, and statutes

improving the quality of food and drugs, and ethics in labeling and advertising. Woodrow Wilson is more contested, but he founded the Federal Reserve and the Federal Trade Commission, passed the Clayton Anti-trust Act, reduced tariffs, was a very capable war leader, and was one of history's great prophets: the first man to inspire the masses of the world with a vision of enduring peace and at least a glimpse of a more cooperative, federal world. He bungled the tactics of promoting his League of Nations and his health broke down and it ended pitifully, but he was a great intellect and electrifying figure, who provided the margin of Allied victory in World War I.

Harry Truman put in place the policies and institutions that won the Cold War: the defense of Greece, Turkey, West Berlin, and South Korea; NATO and the Marshall Plan. Ike got the end of the Korean War, brought West Germany into NATO, rejected the hot-headed nuclear hip-shooting proposed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces, steered almost clear of Vietnam, produced the interstate-highway program – the greatest public works scheme in American history – and the St. Lawrence Seaway, and started the de-escalation of the Cold War with his Atoms for Peace and Open Skies proposals, and did well with his intervention in Lebanon (not one casualty), and with the Quemoy-Matsu showdown with China. He was a little sluggish in the last half of his presidency, including his responses to the Suez and Hungarian crises and the U-2 espionage fiasco, and the competition to launch satellites in space, but it was peace, prosperity, and fiscal restraint.

Richard Nixon will be much disputed. Though there is not any serious evidence that he committed crimes, the Watergate affair was so mishandled that he effectively cooperated with his enemies, and it was a tawdry episode. But he ended the Vietnam War while retaining a non-Communist government in Saigon, signed the greatest arms-control agreement in history with the USSR and radically deescalated the Cold War, opened

relations with China, ended the draft, founded the Environmental Protection Agency (which only became an Orwellian nightmare under his successors), ended school segregation while sparing the country the judicially ordered insanity of busing the children all around America to promote racial "balance" in schools, reduced the crime rate and inflation, and made important progress in the pursuit of peace in the Middle East.

Reasonable self-discipline in length requires that I just enumerate the other categories, again in chronological order: Above average presidents were: John Adams, James Monroe, John F. Kennedy, and George H. W. Bush. Kennedy talked a good game and was popular in the world and showed considerable aptitude for crisis management in the Cuban missile crisis, and at least kicked off in the right direction in civil rights and tax reductions. He also accepted what Nixon called "Communism on the installment plan" when he made the Laos neutrality agreement that turned that country into the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

I think the average presidents were James Madison, John Quincy Adams, Andrew Johnson (a doughty little man who tried), U. S. Grant, (restored the currency and was quite conciliatory and better than generally reckoned, though the campaign of some Democrats, such as Sean Wilentz, to keep him on the \$50 bill is really an effort to keep Reagan off it). Then came Rutherford Hayes, Chester A. Arthur, Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, William Howard Taft, Lyndon Johnson (Vietnam and Civil Rights even out at an average presidency), Gerald Ford, and Bill Clinton. Clinton had his moments but he carries the can for starting the housing bubble and letting the current account deficit get out of control. The scandals were a sideshow and a farce, slightly demeaning but almost irrelevant.

Below average or unsuccessful presidents were Martin Van Buren, John Tyler, Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Benjamin Harrison, Warren G. Harding,

Calvin Coolidge (the efforts to inflate him are piffle – he was an isolationist, Prohibitionist, anti-immigration president who in his lassitude is largely responsible for the equity bubble that blew up in 1929), Herbert Hoover, Jimmie Carter, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. Not rated because of too short a time in office are William H. Harrison and James A. Garfield.

This century to date is the only time in the history of the U.S. that there have been four straight terms of mediocre presidents, and the only times that below-average presidents have been reelected. The United States and the world desperately need someone in one of the first two categories to be chosen next year.

First published in