

Two Decades of Presidential Mediocrity

Chief executives since Reagan have uniformly lacked leadership.

by Conrad Black



As the unprecedented effort of the elders of the Democratic Party to use the Justice Department and intelligence services to manipulate and then undo a presidential election collapses, their response is a study in the corruption of unchallenged incumbency. The reason the country is in its present impasse is inadequate post-Reagan presidential leadership. Franklin D. Roosevelt and his chosen successor, Harry Truman, got the country out of the Great Depression and salvaged 95 percent of the economic system that had collapsed, did the necessary to assist the democracies to stay in the war against Hitler, and then conducted the American war effort with great skill and put in place the structure of future peace and the institutions that won the Cold War, relatively bloodlessly.

When the time came for change, after five Democratic terms, it was gentle change, to Dwight Eisenhower, and almost no discernible policy change. There followed almost a decade of peace and prosperity, as Ike extracted the country successfully from the Korean War and kept it out of Vietnam.

The country reached for bold and vigorous change in moving a whole generation to John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson's New Frontier and Great Society. Civil rights was a triumph for LBJ, but he left Nixon a terrible crisis in Vietnam. Nixon successfully triangulated Great Power relations and withdrew from Vietnam while retaining a non-Communist government in Saigon, but the Democrats, exploiting Nixon's mismanagement of the trivial Watergate affair, brought his administration down and abandoned Indochina. The country was not ready for Jimmy Carter's forlorn lamentations of a national malady as he urged Americans to wear cardigans and turn down their thermostats during an oil crisis. Ronald Reagan was a more activist and charismatic Eisenhower, though a film star did not have the prestige of a successful World War theater commander. Reagan restored confidence and prosperity and won the Cold War, bloodlessly, by escalating the arms race into defensive anti-missile weapons. He left America content and alone at the summit of the world.

Except for Carter, all the presidents from Roosevelt to the first term of Clinton were somewhere between adequate and outstanding. But it had all started to come apart with George H. W. Bush. He was competent and managed the Gulf War very well, removing Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, but he had no program and was an ambiguous leader, and he allowed his party to split badly – the first president to do so since William

Howard Taft in 1912. The unbalanced billionaire and political charlatan Ross Perot captured 20 million mainly Republican votes and the Clintons made the giant leap from Little Rock to the White House. Bill Clinton was also a competent manager and an astute political strategist, but he underreacted to the

early terrorist incidents, the bombings of the Khobar Towers, the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and the attack on the U.S.S. Cole at Aden (1996 to 1998), which killed a total of 260 people and injured about 4,500 (most of them not Americans). He also decreed and legislated the commercially unviable mortgage – the political free lunch of raising home ownership and boosting the building trades at no cost to the taxpayer. Eventually, the greatest economic crisis in the world since the Great Depression was the result.

George W. Bush had committed the country to an almost endless war in and around Iraq that has effectively handed much influence in that country to the Iranian enemy we were supposedly confounding, and generated an immense humanitarian disaster. Barack Obama didn't get a real economic recovery despite a 233 percent increase in the previously accumulated national debt, and produced an unsatisfactory health-care plan, a misguided attempt to appease Iran with a green light to nuclear weapons in another five years, and

a self-punitive and inadequately researched commitment to radical environmental goals. Because of his suavity and the earned national satisfaction of having broken the color bar on the country's highest office, Obama has had a charmed public-relations life. But the brutal fact is that the George W. Bush and Obama administrations were failures, and so was the second Clinton term.

From Reagan to Obama, annual per capita GDP growth declined from 4.5 percent to 1 percent and the post-Reagan Republican presidential candidates were indistinct – the Bushes, Robert Dole, John McCain, Mitt Romney; none of them had the prestige of Eisenhower, the political cunning and government experience of Nixon, the panache and eloquence of Reagan. They were essentially also-rans. Bush Senior won what was as close as could be found to a third term for Reagan, and George W. won very narrowly against unprepossessing Democrats – Al Gore and John Kerry. Trump was elected to clean up after the 20 most

unsuccessful years of presidential government in American history, worse than the decade before the Civil War and the three terms between Wilson and FDR, both periods that ended in calamities.

Trump was elected because the political class was completely cut off from any grasp of what the average American thought of the “flatlined new normal” of no growth in income for the middle and working classes, and a great deal of useless human and financial sacrifice in the Middle East. George W. Bush responded to the economic disaster on his watch with “this sucker could go down,” and millions resented the condescension of Obama’s disparagement of the working-class and agrarian-class Americans who relied on guns and the Bible, and his belief that the country could be pacified with just moderate unemployment and cheap gasoline.

Since Trump attacked the entire system, both parties, and the national political media, they have attacked him with unprecedented ferocity – an overwhelming barrage of media hostility, and since the Republican congressional leaders, such as speaker Paul Ryan, were not behind their presidential candidate, the Democrats, confident of victory, went where none has dared to tread in American history before: They used the intelligence services to feed to the press defamatory fiction about Trump collected from unreliable sources in Russia but almost unquestioned because it was the fruit of a spurious counterintelligence investigation that conducted espionage on the Trump campaign and transition team. Once Trump was elected, they tried to sandbag him with a fraudulent special-counsel investigation into the Russian-collusion allegations, which they knew to be unfounded, for the purpose of covering up their own crimes. Obama and Biden were present at the January 5, 2017, meeting where these matters were aired, and they do not have clean hands. Serious crimes were committed by high officeholders. This was as close as America has come to an attempted coup d’état and it is all about to

blow up, finally.

In these circumstances, it must remain a howling mystery what President Obama was thinking over the weekend when he ruefully announced his uneasiness when a man "charged with perjury gets off scot-free" and described Trump's management of the public-health crisis as "chaos." General Flynn wasn't charged with perjury, he wasn't guilty of anything, but he was ruined and threatened with imprisonment because of his dissent from Obama's and Hillary Clinton's mismanagement of the terrorist threat. As for Trump's "chaos," Obama is the president who left no emergency medical resources at all, who gave us dissolving "red lines" in Syria, midwived ISIS by his petulant withdrawal from Iraq, and modestly described his half-measures of response as "American leadership at its best." Obama was an unsuccessful president who is "totally invested" in defeating Trump because he is now under investigation for having attempted to stop Trump's election illegally. That is what is shocking, and when it is objectively confirmed and legally established, it will demonstrate the danger of running weak candidates against inadequate presidents, and of electing an assortment of unsuccessful presidents to four consecutive terms. George W. Bush and Obama were the first unsuccessful presidents to be reelected; Hoover and Carter were defeated, and succeeded by great presidents, and Franklin Pierce was defeated and succeeded by James Buchanan, who had the decency not to seek a second term as the Union was disintegrating.

Whatever one may think of the foibles of the incumbent, he is cleaning up after much misgovernment, and is persevering despite an illegal assault on his office of a magnitude that no previous American president has faced. It will now fail, but the country and its political class must learn the lesson of it. This is no time for a shower of Pulitzer Prizes, as in the Watergate nonsense. Venal and inept government in both parties and all branches of government came dangerously close to entrenching itself.

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