

He's Only Fifth Worst

Advertisement

By Michael Lind

Sunday, December 3, 2006; B05

It's unfair to claim that George W. Bush is the worst president of all time. He's merely the fifth worst. In the White House Hall of Shame, Bush comes behind four other Oval Officers whose policies were even more disastrous: James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Richard M. Nixon and James Madison.

What makes a president horribly, immortally bad? Poor luck is not enough. Some of the greatest presidents, such as Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt, have inherited crises and risen to the occasion. The damage must be largely self-inflicted. And there's another test: The damage to the nation must be substantial. Minor blunders and petty crimes do not land a president in the rogues' gallery.

Doing nothing can be even worse than doing something wrong. Take the worst president of all time, Buchanan. In office when Lincoln's election in 1860 triggered the secession of one Southern state after another, Buchanan sat by as the country crumbled. In his December 1860 message to Congress, three months before Lincoln was inaugurated, he declared that the states had no right to secede, but that the federal government had no right to stop them. By the time he left office, seven states had left the Union, and the Confederates had looted the arsenals in the South. If Buchanan had exercised his powers as commander in chief, the rebels might have been stopped at far less than the eventual cost of the Civil War -- more than half a million American dead and the ruin of the South for generations. (After he left the White House, Buchanan explained that he did not stop secession for fear that hostile blacks would overrun the North.)

The Civil War era also gave us the second-worst president: Johnson, Lincoln's vice president and successor, a Tennessean who vetoed civil rights acts and blocked the 14th Amendment because he didn't like blacks, of whom he declared, "It is vain to deny that they are an inferior race -- very far inferior to the European variety." Johnson's policies led to his impeachment and forced the Republicans in Congress to create a quasi-parliamentary system marginalizing the president. While Lincoln had his own racial prejudices, he was a model of enlightenment next to Johnson and Buchanan.

The third-worst president is Nixon, a criminal in the White House who is still the only commander in chief ever to resign. Many presidents have abused their power, and the "imperial presidency" existed long before Nixon. But he was the only president to run a criminal gang out of the Oval Office engaging in spying and burglary while he sought to corrupt the Justice Department, the FBI and the CIA. (By contrast, Bush's misguided authorization of torture, secret CIA prisons and illegal eavesdropping were at least directed at suspected terrorists, not at his personal and political opponents.)

The damage Nixon inflicted might have endured had he established the principle that the president is above the law. As he told David Frost in a famous 1977 television interview, "Well, when the president does it, that means that it is not illegal." Because of the exposure of Nixon's criminality during Watergate, we still live in a constitutional republic rather than a banana republic with an elective dictatorship.

Refusing to enforce the law while the country disintegrates, trying to re-enslave emancipated blacks, and doubling as chief magistrate and gangster -- what could rival these presidential misdeeds? Well, how about unnecessary and catastrophic wars?

To qualify a president for the Worst of All Time list, a war must be catastrophic as well as unnecessary. Ronald Reagan's invasion of Grenada, George H.W. Bush's invasion of Panama and Bill Clinton's invasion of Haiti don't cut it -- they were unnecessary, but minor. And presidents can be forgiven costly wars that were necessary or hard to avoid, such as Harry S. Truman's stalemated war in Korea and Lyndon B. Johnson's failed war in Vietnam, each of which was a Cold War battle more than a separate

conflict. After 1950, U.S. strategy required Washington to go to war to prevent Soviet bloc proxies from taking over South Korea, Indochina and Taiwan -- the amazing thing is that the Cold War ended without a battle for Taiwan, too. Future historians are likely to be as kind to LBJ as they have been to Truman.

The two big, unjustified wars on my list are the War of 1812 and the current conflict in Iraq, and the first was far worse than the second. Madison, the "Father of the Constitution," was a great patriot, a brilliant intellectual -- and an absolutely abysmal president. In his defense, the world situation during the Napoleonic Wars was grim. The United States was a minor neutral nation that was frequently harassed by both of the warring empires, Britain and France. But cold geopolitics should have led Washington to prefer a British victory, which would have preserved a balance of power in Europe, to a French victory that would have left France an unchecked superpower. Instead, eager to conquer Spanish Florida and seize British Canada, Madison sided with the more dangerous power against the less dangerous. It is as though, after Pearl Harbor, FDR had joined the Axis and declared war on Britain, France and the Soviet Union.

It might have been worse. In 1812, Madison wrote Thomas Jefferson to ask what the former president thought of waging war simultaneously against Britain and France. Alarmed, Jefferson replied that this was "a solecism worthy of Don Quixote." Instead, the United States fought only the British, who torched Washington, D.C., while Madison and first lady Dolley fled to Virginia. Gen. Andrew Jackson's victory in the Battle of New Orleans (waged two weeks after the United States and Britain, unknown to Jackson, had signed a peace treaty) helped Americans pretend that the War of 1812 was something other than a total wipe-out.

By contrast, George W. Bush has inadvertently destroyed only Baghdad, not Washington, and the costs of the Iraq war in blood and treasure are far less than those of Korea and Vietnam. Yet he will be remembered for the Iraq conflict for generations, long after tax-cut-driven deficits, No Child Left Behind and comprehensive immigration reform are forgotten. The fact that Bush followed the invasion of Afghanistan, which had sheltered al-Qaeda, with the toppling of Saddam Hussein, will puzzle historians for centuries. It is as though, after Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor, FDR had asked Congress to declare war on Argentina.

Why did Bush do it? Did he really believe that Hussein had weapons of mass destruction? Was it about oil? Israel? Revenge for Hussein's alleged attempt on Bush's father's life? The war will join the sinking of the USS Maine and the grassy knoll among the topics to exercise conspiracy theorists for generations, and the photos of torture at Abu Ghraib will join images of the napalmed Vietnamese girl and executed Filipino rebels in the gallery of U.S. atrocities.

Like all presidents, George W. Bush wants to be remembered. He will get his wish -- as the fifth-worst president in U.S. history.

lind@newamerica.net

Michael Lind is the Whitehead senior fellow at the New America Foundation.

© 2006 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

Military Clearance Jobs

Find security clearance jobs. Defense industry jobs. Apply online
www.ClearanceJobs.com

Recruit Cleared Veterans

Veterans with active clearances Search by clearance and expiration
www.recruitmilitary.com

Military Transition

Getting out of the service? Make sure you're covered. Apply online.
www.asmba.com