

# He's The Worst Ever

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By Eric Foner

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Ever since 1948, when Harvard professor Arthur Schlesinger Sr. asked 55 historians to rank U.S. presidents on a scale from "great" to "failure," such polls have been a favorite pastime for those of us who study the American past.

Changes in presidential rankings reflect shifts in how we view history. When the first poll was taken, the Reconstruction era that followed the Civil War was regarded as a time of corruption and misgovernment caused by granting black men the right to vote. As a result, President Andrew Johnson, a fervent white supremacist who opposed efforts to extend basic rights to former slaves, was rated "near great." Today, by contrast, scholars consider Reconstruction a flawed but noble attempt to build an interracial democracy from the ashes of slavery -- and Johnson a flat failure.

More often, however, the rankings display a remarkable year-to-year uniformity. Abraham Lincoln, George Washington and Franklin D. Roosevelt always figure in the "great" category. Most presidents are ranked "average" or, to put it less charitably, mediocre. Johnson, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge and Richard M. Nixon occupy the bottom rung, and now President Bush is a leading contender to join them. A look at history, as well as Bush's policies, explains why.

At a time of national crisis, Pierce and Buchanan, who served in the eight years preceding the Civil War, and Johnson, who followed it, were simply not up to the job. Stubborn, narrow-minded, unwilling to listen to criticism or to consider alternatives to disastrous mistakes, they surrounded themselves with sycophants and shaped their policies to appeal to retrogressive political forces (in that era, pro-slavery and racist ideologues). Even after being repudiated in the midterm elections of 1854, 1858 and 1866, respectively, they ignored major currents of public opinion and clung to flawed policies. Bush's presidency certainly brings theirs to mind.

Harding and Coolidge are best remembered for the corruption of their years in office (1921-23 and 1923-29, respectively) and for channeling money and favors to big business. They slashed income and corporate taxes and supported employers' campaigns to eliminate unions. Members of their administrations received kickbacks and bribes from lobbyists and businessmen. "Never before, here or anywhere else," declared the Wall Street Journal, "has a government been so completely fused with business." The Journal could hardly have anticipated the even worse cronyism, corruption and pro-business bias of the Bush administration.

Despite some notable accomplishments in domestic and foreign policy, Nixon is mostly associated today with disdain for the Constitution and abuse of presidential power. Obsessed with secrecy and media leaks, he viewed every critic as a threat to national security and illegally spied on U.S. citizens. Nixon considered himself above the law.

Bush has taken this disdain for law even further. He has sought to strip people accused of crimes of rights that date as far back as the Magna Carta in Anglo-American jurisprudence: trial by impartial jury, access to lawyers and knowledge of evidence against them. In dozens of statements when signing legislation, he has asserted the right to ignore the parts of laws with which he disagrees. His administration has adopted policies regarding the treatment of prisoners of war that have disgraced the nation and alienated virtually the entire world. Usually, during wartime, the Supreme Court has refrained from passing judgment on presidential actions related to national defense. The court's unprecedented rebukes of Bush's policies on detainees indicate how far the administration has strayed from the rule of law.

One other president bears comparison to Bush: James K. Polk. Some historians admire him, in part because he made their job easier by keeping a detailed diary during his administration, which spanned the years of the Mexican-American War. But Polk should be remembered primarily for launching that unprovoked attack on Mexico and seizing one-third of its territory for the United States.

Lincoln, then a member of Congress from Illinois, condemned Polk for misleading Congress and the public about the cause of the war -- an alleged Mexican incursion into the United States. Accepting the president's right to attack another country "whenever he shall deem it necessary," Lincoln observed, would make it impossible to "fix any limit" to his power to make war. Today, one wishes that the country had heeded Lincoln's warning.

Historians are loath to predict the future. It is impossible to say with certainty how Bush will be ranked in, say, 2050. But somehow, in his first six years in office he has managed to combine the lapses of leadership, misguided policies and abuse of power of his failed predecessors. I think there is no alternative but to rank him as the worst president in U.S. history.

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