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How low can he go?

By Gene Weingarten
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We in the media are sometimes accused of letting liberal bias subtly slip into our writing and reporting. That accusation is calumny. We are dispassionate observers and seekers of truth. All we do is ask questions.

Today's question: Is George W. Bush the worst president in American history?

An examination of this issue requires that we first consider possible alternatives. Historians pretty much agree on the three leading contenders, to date.

Franklin Pierce (1853-57)

Pro: Cinematically handsome.

Con: Bad hair.

Pro: High-spirited.

Con: Those spirits were mostly distilled alcohol, taken straight, in quantities that could incapacitate a hippo. When president, Pierce actually was arrested after running over an old woman with his carriage, most likely while soused. Died of cirrhosis.

Pro: Strong political convictions . . .

Con: . . . the strongest of which was about slavery. He thought it was swell. Pierce was elected because the Southern states thought he was the one Northerner they could trust, and he was. "Involuntary servitude is recognized by the Constitution," Pierce said, "and stands like any other admitted right."

Pro: Ambitiously, he wanted to annex Cuba . . .

Con: . . . because he wanted another slave state.

Greatest achievement: History books reveal that, during the Pierce presidency, "the first perforated postage stamp was used."

James Buchanan (1857-61)

Pro: Had an expressive, entertaining face.

Con: A vision problem forced him to cock his head at an odd angle, so, in most surviving photos, Buchanan seems to be saying, "You lookin' at me? You want a piece of me?"

Pro: He thought slavery was wrong.

Con: He was too weak-willed to oppose it.

Pro: He didn't think the Southern states should secede.

Con: He was too weak-willed to oppose them.

Greatest achievement: Was such a dismally inept nonentity, with such a shameful legacy of nonfeasance during a period of grave crisis, that his party -- the Democrats -- splintered in disarray. This led to the election of Republican Abraham Lincoln. So in a sense, Buchanan single-handedly saved the nation.

Warren G. Harding (1921-23)

Pro: Handsome. Women had just won the right to vote, after an arduous struggle to be recognized as equals. Harding was chosen by his party on the theory that the ignorant little ninnies would go for the better-looking man.

Con: He was a moron.

Pro: He knew he was a moron. He could not believe it when he was nominated, asking his handlers if they were sure there was no one more qualified: "I am a man of limited talents."

Con: He dishonored the White House by having furtive sex with his mistress in a closet near the Oval Office. This was Clinton, without the charm or brains or ability.

Pro: He was not personally corrupt.

Con: Nearly everyone he appointed was corrupt. His friends exploited his dimwitted good nature, taking everything they could grab. His own father once told him, "Warren, it's a good thing you weren't born a girl, because you can't say 'no.'"

Greatest achievement: Died in office.

SO WHAT ABOUT GEORGE W.? Can he take a rightful place among these dwarfs?

Consider some testimonials.

About the president acting unilaterally, without seeking advice or consent: "The incompetence of his administration [has not stopped] it from vigorously defending the president's sole authority to control the execution of the law."

About the president's response to crisis: "He acted with his usual strong determination, dogged stubbornness and confused insight."

About the president's mangling of the English language: "It reminds me of stale bean soup, of college yells, of dogs barking idiotically through endless nights. It is so bad that a sort of grandeur creeps into it . . . It is rumble and bumble. It is flap and doodle. It is balder and dash."

Okay, ready? The first two were by historians, about Pierce and Buchanan, respectively. The last was by H.L. Mencken, about Harding. If they sounded contemporary, you may have your answer.

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