



Reflections on Not-so-great Presidents

"Dubya" had been out of office barely a year-and-a-half when Siena Research Institute announced in July, 2010 that a poll of 238 "presidential scholars" had ranked our semi-beloved "decider guy" fourth or fifth from the bottom, depending on how you count dead Presidents. Bush was ranked 39th out of 43 former chief executives — actually 42, since Grover Cleveland, who served non-consecutive terms, gets counted twice — as both our 22nd and 24th President. Bush managed to finish ahead of such perennial non-favorites as Andrew Johnson (the only President before Bill Clinton to be impeached), James Buchanan, Warren G. Harding, and Franklin Pierce.



As a New Hampshire resident, I feel I should have something to say in defense of Franklin Pierce, New Hampshire's only President, but I can't think of anything offhand. Pierce was President from 1853 to 1857, when James Buchanan took over just a few years before the Civil War began. So perhaps I could say Pierce kept us out of the Civil War for the whole time he was in office. When Dwight Eisenhower was asked in 1960 what foreign policy contributions Vice President Richard Nixon had made during Ike's eight years in the White House, the old general maladroitly replied that if the questioner would give him a week to think about it, he could probably come up with one. I feel the same way about Franklin Pierce's accomplishments. There probably were some, but I can't think of any. As young people say today with a careless shrug, it was "before my time."

Many of us like to rely on our own limited memories in choosing a President for the dishonor of being worst. For my maternal grandmother, whose memories of the Great Depression still burned darkly in her psyche, it was a no-brainer: Herbert Hoover in a landslide. It hardly seemed to matter that Hoover had been in office barely six months when the stock market crashed or that he tried as much as Roosevelt to revive the sinking economy. Hoover came into the White House preaching Republican prosperity and it was on his watch that the Depression began. "He who takes credit for the sunshine must take blame for the rain," according to the political wisdom of the day. Only the blame seems to have a longer shelf life than the credit. For years, even decades thereafter, my grandmother even cursed her own vacuum cleaner for bearing the hated name, Hoover.

In recent times, I have known many a Republican eager to nominate Jimmy Carter for the dishonor of being the worst President within memory, if not of all time. While I certainly don't rate Carter among the best, I fail to see how he was as horrible as Republicans make him out to be. He started no wars. His budget deficits were modest compared to Reagan's, minuscule compared to the second Bush's and, of course, microscopic compared to Obama's. True, he gave us two new cabinet-level departments (Education and Energy), compared to one (Veterans Affairs) for Reagan, but three Republican Presidents and a 12-year Republican majority in both houses of Congress did nothing to diminish, much less dissolve, either department. Carter didn't exactly invite the Arab oil embargo that give us soaring



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prices and long lines at the gas pumps. And what would Reagan have done when Iranians captured out embassy and held Americans hostage? But for some bad weather in the desert, Carter's rescue mission might have worked and he would have been a hero instead of a chump. But that's the way it goes. "He who takes credit for the sunshine must take blame for the rain."

Someone who is relying on more than his own memory has put James Buchanan in a virtual tie with George W. Bush for the dubious distinction being Worst of All Presidents. Glenn LaFantasie, a professor of Civil War History at Western Kentucky University, believes it's a close call, but in an article appearing Monday on [Salon.com](#). He gave a slight edge to Bush, claiming that Buchanan tried to destroy the Union and Bush "worked assiduously to dismantle the federal government while trying to fit his presidency into his vacation schedule. Buchanan failed to reach his goal; Bush succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. Both presidents handed a broken country on to their successors. But Bush broke the nation's back on purpose, so he wins points for what we might call a competent incompetency."

Whoa! Without wishing to dispute the competence of Bush's incompetency, I am amazed to learn he managed to "dismantle the federal government." When did that happen? The President who led us into two wars, gave us the Department of Homeland Security, the USA Patriot Act, the No Child Left Behind Act, and the prescription drug benefit as an expansion of Medicare was "working assiduously" at dismantling the federal government and succeeded? Wow! How big would the government, with all its departments, bureaus and programs, be if Bush had "worked assiduously" to expand it?

Buchanan, who served one inglorious term immediately preceding Lincoln's accession to the White House, refused to take the South's threats of secession seriously, LaFantasie maintains. Instead, he asked Congress in December of 1860 for an appropriation with which to purchase Cuba, though Spain had made it clear it had no intention of selling its Caribbean colony. Like Bush, Buchanan was keen on invading other countries, though he was not inclined to go halfway around the world to do it. He wanted to send a military expedition into Mexico "to establish an American protectorate in Chihuahua and Sonora to ward off Indian attacks and bandit raids into Texas and New Mexico," LaFantasie wrote. But Congress, which must have had some vestige of spine it has since shed, said "no" to that idea.

On the question of secession, Buchanan, in Nixonian fashion, came down on both sides of the issue. He maintained that states had no right to secede and the federal government had no right to stop them if they did.

"Secession is neither more nor less than revolution," he declared. "It may or may not be a justifiable revolution; but still it is revolution." On the other hand, "The power to make war against a State," he said, "is at variance with the whole spirit and intent of the Constitution.... Our Union rests upon public opinion, and can never be cemented by the blood of its citizens shed in civil war."

That statement, coming just 17 days before South Carolina became the first state to announce its exit from the Union, may have encouraged the secession that led to that Civil War, LaFantasie said. Buchanan did nothing as the Confederates seized federal government and military installations, leaving Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor one of the few federal properties in the South still in Union hands. Buchanan's four years were characterized by a paralysis of indecision as the nation slid toward war. In that regard he was the opposite of Bush, who was quite decisive, especially when he was dead wrong about, say, "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq.

But Bush's crusading zeal to bring American-style democracy to nations in the Middle East reflects Buchanan's understanding of "Manifest Destiny," the professor contends. America's destiny lay in



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following the spirit of expansion and intervention or, as Buchanan put it, "Let us go on whithersoever our destiny may lead us." With Bush, destiny led to the "withersoever" of two seemingly endless Middle East wars in quest of "a democratic peace."

Bush has sought to improve the reputation of his presidency with a book and a book tour. Buchanan also wrote a book after leaving the White House, a memoir in which he referred to himself in the third person, "as if he were a figure he had never met in person," LaFantasie wrote. His death in 1868 came as something of a surprise, the professor said. "Most Americans had assumed he was already dead."

That's funny. I thought the same about Jerry Ford.



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