

The 8 Best

Presidents,

The 8 Worst

Presidents

THE BEST

George Washington
Thomas Jefferson
Andrew Jackson
James K. Polk
Abraham Lincoln
Grover Cleveland
Woodrow Wilson
Franklin D. Roosevelt

THE WORST

Zachary Taylor
Franklin Pierce
James Buchanan
Ulysses S. Grant
Benjamin Harrison
Warren G. Harding
Calvin Coolidge
Dwight D. Eisenhower

And Why

B Y H A R R Y S.

T R U M A N

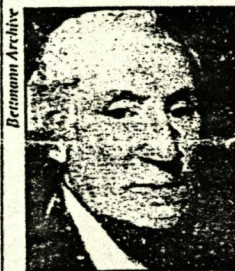
My father began work on this book, "More Plain Speaking," shortly after he left the White House in 1953. He dictated a lot of the basic material to his secretaries, wrote some of it on scraps of paper and dictated a lot to my mother and me. Eventually he ended up with what probably amounted to a couple of thousand pages, and from that material I've shaped the present book, which expresses in plain and simple language his viewpoint on the Presidency, various Presidents and the way the American government functions and operates.

—MARGARET TRUMAN

I'VE OFTEN SAID THAT there are a million men in this country who could have done the job I did as President, or who were qualified for the job. I think that's true, but they didn't have the chance. A great many men who are well qualified to be Chief Executive have been passed up and overlooked. It takes luck, conditions that prevail at the time and, when the right moment comes, ability to meet that situation.

I'll have a lot to say about some of the men who became Presidents and whose election was a good thing for the country, and about some of the men who were elected to the Presidency and shouldn't have been, and about Presidents and the Presidency and the government and the country in general. I guess as good a way as any to start is to write out a list of the men I think were our best Presidents, and a few who might possibly have been our worst.

THE EIGHT BEST



GEORGE WASHINGTON

There isn't any question about Washington's greatness. If his Administration had been a failure, there would have been no United States. He had all the background that caused him to know how to make it work, because he had worked under the Continental Congress. Some Presidents have limited their roles to being administrators of the laws without being leaders. But Washington was both a great administrator and a great leader.

I guess, in fact, that the only anti-Washington thing I can say is that he made a mistake when he established the precedent of the two-term limitation on the Presidency, and even there he had a good personal reason for wanting that, at least for himself. He was attacked viciously by the press of his day; he was called so many terrible things that he told friends even during his first term that he wasn't going to run again. But Thomas Jefferson and James Madison and Alexander Hamilton persuaded him to go ahead and serve a second term, and finally he did. After he'd gotten through his second term, though, he made up his mind that he just wouldn't take it anymore, and he quit. That established the precedent, though of course it wasn't actually law until it became necessary for Franklin Delano Roosevelt to stay on for four terms because of the World War, and—I won't mince words here—the Republican 80th Con-

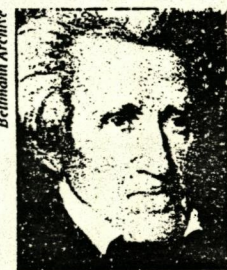
gress took a sort of revenge on Roosevelt's memory because he'd made a lot of those people look bad by comparison.

THOMAS JEFFERSON

Jefferson also had his share of press criticism and people who didn't like him, and I wonder how many people remember our history and realize how close Jefferson came to losing the election in 1800, and how close Aaron Burr came to being our third President, which would have been just as bad as electing Richard Nixon today.*

Jefferson was called a runaway President because he pushed through our purchase of Louisiana over a lot of opposition. I think Jefferson's purchase of Louisiana was one of the best decisions ever made because, if we hadn't taken over Louisiana, then either Britain, France or Spain would have owned it and our country would have ended at the Mississippi River, whereas the greatest part of our development has been by our ability to expand beyond the Mississippi. I don't like this talk about runaway Presidents, because the truth is that a President just does what he has to do.

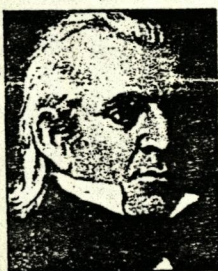
*My father wrote these lines sometime before Richard Nixon was, in fact, elected President. He decided, however, not to change the sentence. He said his comments on Mr. Nixon would be unprintable.



ANDREW JACKSON

Jackson was elected after a period of what they called in James Monroe's time "the era of good feeling." Well, when the era of good feeling got to feeling too good, meaning that the people and the government became too

complacent and too lazy, why, the country went to the dogs, as it has always done. You have got to have opposition if you're going to keep a republic going. Old Jackson remedied that, and he did it in a way that was perfectly satisfactory to all concerned. The economic royalists, the favored few, had control of the government by controlling the finances of the country. A man named Nicholas Biddle and his Bank of the United States had all the government's money, and Jackson took the money away from him and in effect put all the dollar bills back into the Treasury of the United States, where they ought to be, by spreading all the funds around into various state banks. And, of course, he was roundly abused for doing things of that sort.



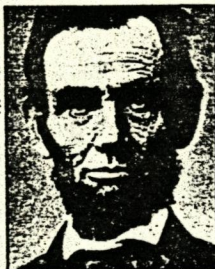
JAMES KNOX POLK

This choice may surprise some people. Polk isn't much thought about these days. First, he exercised his powers of the Presidency as I

think they should be exercised. He was President during the Mexican War, in an age when the terrible burden of making decisions in a war was entirely in the hands of the President. And when that came about, he decided that that was much more important than going to parties and shaking hands with people.

Second, he bought the Southwest part of the country for just about the same price that Jefferson paid for Louisiana; and third, he did something that most of the rest of us who were Presidents weren't able to do: He decided when he went in there that he would only serve one term, and that's what he did. He knew exactly what he wanted to do in a specified period of time and did it, and when he got through with it he went home. He said a moving thing on his retirement: "I now retire as a servant and regain my position as a sovereign." He was right, absolutely right. I've been through it, and I know.

AP/Wide World



ABRAHAM LINCOLN

He was a strong executive who saved the government, saved the United States. He was a President who understood people, and, when it came

time to make decisions, he was willing to take the responsibility and make those decisions, no matter how difficult they were. He knew how to treat people and how to make a decision stick, and that's why his is regarded as such a great Administration.

Carl Sandburg and a lot of others have tried to make something out of Lincoln that he wasn't. He was a decent man, a good politician, and a great President, and they've tried to build up things that he never even thought about. I'll bet a dollar and a half that if you read Sandburg's biography of Lincoln, you'll find things put into Lincoln's mouth and mind that never even occurred to him. He was a good man who was in the place where he ought to have been at the time important events were taking place, but when they write about him as though he belongs in the pantheon of the gods, that's not the man he really was. He was the best kind of ordinary man, and when I say that he was an ordinary man, I mean that as high praise, not deprecation. That's the highest praise you can give a man, that he's one of the people and becomes distinguished in the service that he gives other people. He was one of the people, and he wanted to stay that way. And he was that way until the day he died. One of the reasons he was assassinated was because he didn't feel important enough to have the proper guards around him at Ford's Theatre.

GROVER CLEVELAND

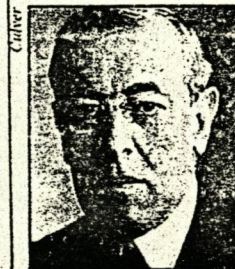
At least he was a great President in his first term; in his second term, he wasn't the same Grover Cleveland he was to begin with. Cleveland re-



H. Armstrong Roberts

established the Presidency by being not only a Chief Executive but also a leader. Cleveland spent most of his time in his first term working on bills that came from the Congress, and he vetoed a tremendous pile of bills that were passed strictly for the purpose of helping out people who had voted for the Republican ticket. He also saw to it that a lot of laws passed, if he felt those laws were needed for the good of the general public, even if the laws weren't popular with some members of the Congress.

For the most part, however, Cleveland was a considerably less impressive man in his second term. He had a terrible time with strikes, and he called out the soldiers, and they fired on the strikers. It was also during Cleveland's second term that a number of smaller companies got together and formed great big companies for the suppression of competition. That's why I say Cleveland was a great President only in his first term.



WOODROW WILSON

I've been asked which Presidents served as models for me when I was President myself, and the answer is that there were three of them. Two

were Jefferson and Jackson, and the third was Woodrow Wilson. In many ways

Wilson was the greatest of the greats. He established the Federal Reserve Board. He established the Federal Trade Commission. He didn't make a great publicity stunt of being a trustbuster, the way Teddy Roosevelt did, but the trust situation was never really met until Wilson became President. Wilson also established the League of Nations, which didn't succeed but which served as a blueprint for the United Nations, which might succeed yet, despite its problems.

All a good President tries to do is accomplish things for the good of the people, and if you want to call that liberal, then I'm with you. I guess the best way to describe Wilson, if I've got to use a label, is to say that he was a common-sense liberal. He wasn't one of these synthetic liberals who are always talking liberalism and who act some other way, and he wasn't one of these screaming liberals who aren't very liberal to people who think differently from the way they do. He was a genuine liberal who used his heart and his brain.

UPI/Bettmann



FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT

It goes without saying that I was highly impressed by him for a thousand reasons, but a main reason is that he inherited a situa-

tion that was almost as bad as the one Lincoln had, and he dealt with it. And he was always able to make decisions. Presidents have to make decisions if they're going to get anywhere, and those Presidents who couldn't make decisions are the ones who caused all the trouble.

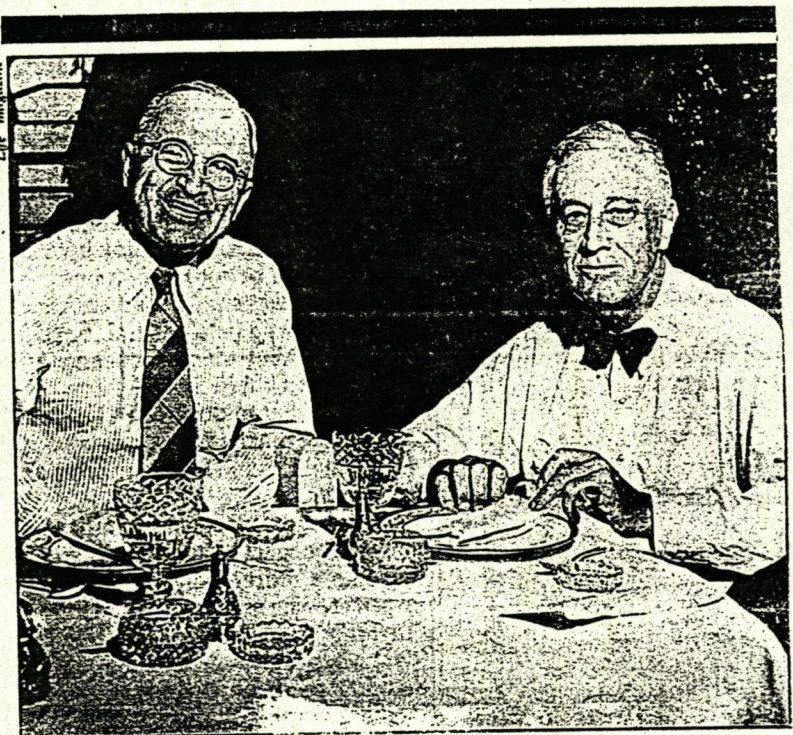
It took a President who understood the United States and the world, like Roosevelt, to come along and start to

get the country back on its feet again in the Depression, and also to make Americans remember that we're a world power and have to act like a world power.

We also, of course, got the United Nations as a result of Roosevelt's Administration and mine, which is exactly what the League of Nations was supposed to be in the first place. I'm not saying that the United Nations is a perfect organization, or ever will be. It's far from flawless, and it's weak in many ways. But at least it's a start.

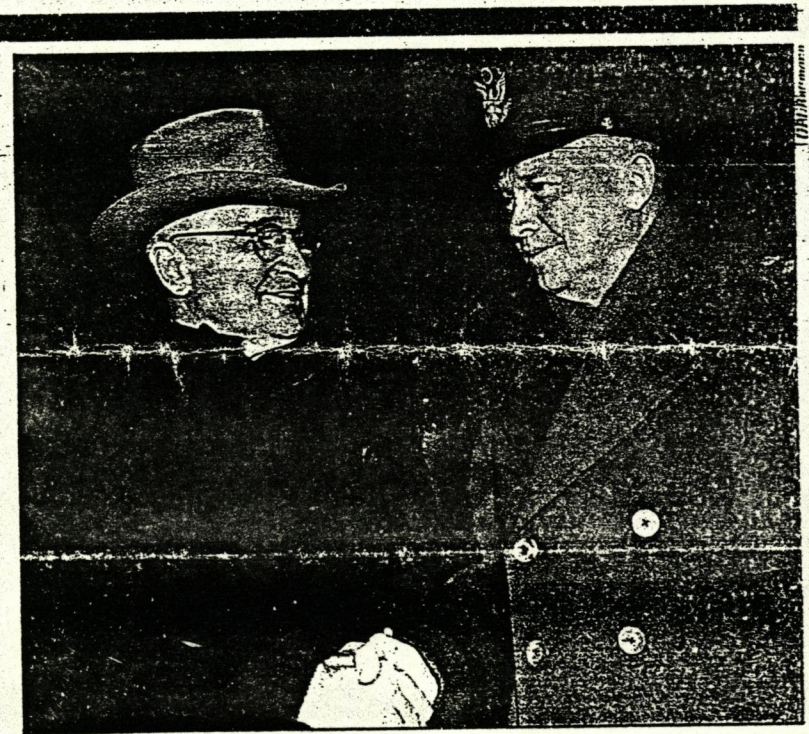
Whenever a President inaugurates a policy that's worthwhile, the chances are that it will carry through sooner or later for the simple reason that we're a two-party government and there are people in both parties with the intelligence to see both sides of a question. And whenever a President inaugurates a policy which is truly for the welfare and the benefit of the country, and his successor comes along and tries to overturn it, there isn't any likelihood that that successor President will succeed in burying it forever.

UPI/Bettmann



Truman and Roosevelt in 1944. "It took a President who understood the U.S. and the world to start to get the country on its feet in the Depression."

UPI/Bettmann



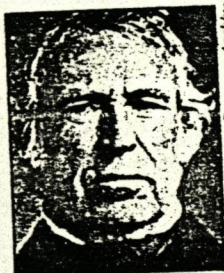
Truman greets Eisenhower in 1951. "I'm not one of his admirers. He acted as if I was his enemy instead of the fellow who'd had the job just before him."

THE EIGHT WORST

Now let me flip the coin and write about some Presidents of the opposite variety. I guess, if I were labeling these chapters, I'd call this one "Some Presidents We Could Have Done Without."

ZACHARY TAYLOR

He was the President immediately after Polk, and from the beginning of his Administration in 1849 until the end of James Buchanan's Ad-



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ministration in 1861, we had the same sort of situation, a period of stagnation. The four Presidents in that period were Taylor, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan. I think it was one of the worst periods the country ever went through.

Taylor was a field general, one of the great ones. But when he became President of the United States, I don't think he knew what to do. I can't be charitable and say that he failed to carry out his program; he didn't have any program to carry out.

He was just elected as a military figure, and he spent his time in office behaving like a retired general. He became expert at doing nothing. Millard Fillmore, Taylor's Vice President, became President when Taylor died in 1850. He was another of those Presidents who did nothing worth pointing out.

FRANKLIN PIERCE

A Democrat from New Hampshire, he had even features and curly hair and was one of the best-looking men ever in the White House. He was

also one of the most vain. But, though he looked the way people who make movies think a President should look, he didn't pay any more attention to business as President of the United States than the man in the moon, and he really made a mess of things. Though he was a Northerner, he believed in slavery, pretty much, and once said in a speech, "I believe that involuntary servitude, as it exists in different States of the Confederacy, is recognized by the Constitution."



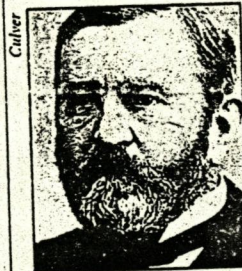
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JAMES BUCHANAN

He was one more do-nothing President. The worst thing about that is that he came just before the Civil War and had a lot to do with bringing

it on. He ended up throwing everything into Lincoln's lap.

He also wrote a message on the veto of the first land grants and the first land grant colleges that's a comic masterpiece. He was more or less for free land grants himself but didn't really have the guts to go against its opponents, so he simply vetoed the bill and put it off into the indefinite future. The thing that was comic was that he also had to veto land grant colleges, and he justified this by explaining that the country didn't require further education. In fact, the old fool went on to say educated people were too hard to handle, and he thought there were too many already!



Culver

ULYSSES SIMPSON GRANT

His period in office seems to prove the theory that we can coast along for eight years without a President. Well, of course, we also did it with Eisenhower.

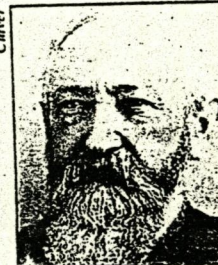
I think Grant did what he had to do all through the Civil War and did it well. He came to accept Lee's surrender with the mud still on his uniform, instead of acting like a God and a conqueror the way Douglas MacArthur sometimes did when I was Vice President and President.

His Administration was one of the most corrupt in our history, but he didn't even know all the crooked business was going on when he was President of the United States. It's hard even to imagine that, but it's true.*

Grant's period as President was one of the low points in our history. I don't think he knew very much about what the President's job was except that he was commander in chief of the armed forces. He was pretty naïve or ignorant about everything else.

*I wish my father were around today to give me his views, and to tell me what he believes or doesn't believe, about the Reagan Administration and Iran.

Culver



BENJAMIN HARRISON

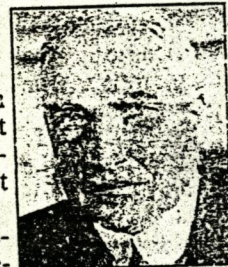
I tend to pair up Benjamin Harrison and Dwight Eisenhower, because they're the two Presidents I can think of who most preferred laziness to labor. They didn't work

at all. Harrison was a general in the Army of the United States and in the Civil War, and he just wanted to retire as a general, just as Eisenhower did. The only thing that's remembered about him today is that he had a billion-dollar Congress during his term in office.

WARREN GAMALIEL HARDING

His Administration was the most corrupt in our nation's history, and it was a lot worse than Grant's.

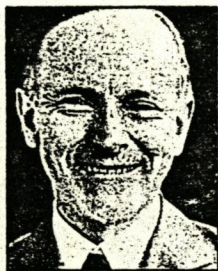
Harding didn't really understand the responsibilities with which he was faced. I don't enjoy making detrimental remarks about a man who had been President of the United States, but he never did know what the Presidency was all about. His previous work as a Senator and as a newspaper publisher just didn't seem to give him any insight into the job. I don't think there's any point in editorializing on the Teapot Dome scandal and the other scandals of the Harding Administration, either. They speak for themselves.



Culver

CALVIN COOLIDGE

As Vice President, he took over when Harding died in office. He was quite a character, and there are a lot of funny stories about him, but I guess pretty nearly the only thing I like about him



H. Armstrong Roberts

are those stories. He believed that the less a President did, the better it was for the country, and I don't agree with that at all. He sat with his feet in his desk drawer and did nothing. He just sat there and signed bills when they came up, and vetoed a few, and that's all there was to it. Coolidge didn't think the President ought to interfere in any way with the policies of the legislative branch, and yet the President is the man who makes policy, or should make policy, for the whole country.

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER

He's the final President in my no-enthusiasm category, and I've sprinkled enough comments throughout the pages before this one so that you know that I'm not one of



Frederic Lewis

Mr. Eisenhower's admirers. Even if I say so myself, I tried so hard to be pleasant and cooperative when I was turning the office over to Eisenhower, but he acted as if I was his enemy instead of the fellow who'd had the job just before him.

It's interesting that a single thing, that great smile of Eisenhower's, gave him the worldwide and lifelong reputation of being a sunny and amiable man, when those of us who knew him well were all too aware that he was essentially a surly, angry and disagreeable man, and I don't just mean to me, either.

None of that is important, of course; the important thing is that he didn't do a thing as President.

It just isn't the case that when, as I believe Eisenhower did, a President thinks that he's a kind of monarch or king who should be above everything that happens in the world and in the country, the Congress will do all the work. That's bad not only for the Presidency; it's bad for the country and the world. The Chief Executive has to transact the business of the country. He has to provide leadership, and he has to have a program and the guts and ability to put it over. And Eisenhower never made any effort to put forward the leadership to which he was entitled, and he didn't have any program.



What Makes Good Presidents Good

NOW, LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT THE things I believe a man has to have inside him, and the things he has to do or not do, in order to be a good President.

First and most important, a President must be strong, particularly where there's the temptation, as there so often is, to look the other way and do nothing because the matter at hand is unpopular or unpleasant or difficult to attempt or accomplish. It may well be true that the best government is the least government, but when it comes to the point where an emergency arises, or when something has to be done (and sometimes in a hell of a hurry), then you want somebody in charge who knows how to do the job.

You might think this is obvious, but it really isn't, because the odd fact here is that there are times when the general public seems to prefer weakness in a President.

I happen to be in a minority in my opinion of that man who came after Coolidge, Herbert Hoover. I know most people think he was a poor President and practically caused the Depression single-handed, but I think he was actually a President who tried hard and did the best he possibly could but was faced with difficulties he just wasn't able to overcome at the time. I think he and his Administration were blamed for things which were not their fault, things which were coming on ever since Wilson left office and Harding became President in 1921.

Equally important, a good President must have the ability to come up with new ideas and an understanding of how the

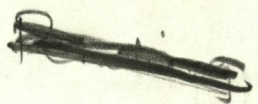
implementation of these ideas will affect not only the present but also the future. To put it a different way, a good President has got to have an understanding of history.

The next essential quality is the ability to convince the Congress to go along with his ideas, and, of course, also convince the general public that his ideas are good—particularly when, as often happens, a lot of legislators and a large segment of the general public don't think much of the ideas when they're first presented. And with this quality must go the ability to be able to determine and understand exactly the way the people are thinking.

A good President should also have the ability to continue and further the good programs of former Presidents and not try to abandon them simply because the previous President, or Presidents before that one, belonged to a different political party.

My definition of a leader in a free country is a man who can persuade people to do what they don't want to do, or do what they're too lazy to do, and like it. Of course, you've got to have a program that you yourself believe is the best you can get together.

And, to get his programs over, a good President must inform the people of exactly what he's trying to do and keep on informing them. The dictators of the world say that if you tell a lie often enough, people will believe it. Well, if you tell the truth often enough, they'll believe it and go along with you.



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