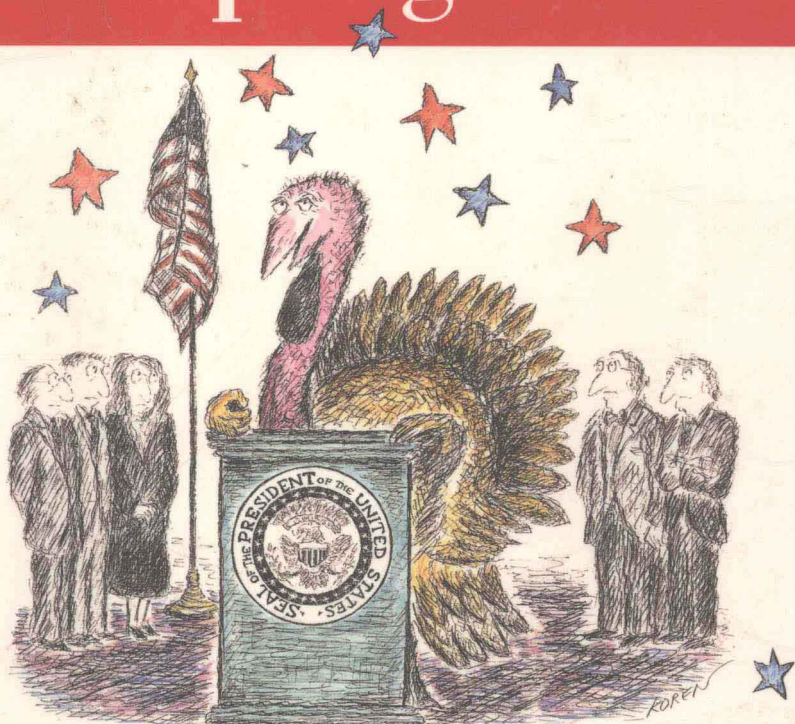


An amusing and instructive book . . . what stands out are his anecdotes, most of them humorous or just plain bizarre." —John Dorfman, *The Washington Post Book World*

Star-Spangled Men



AMERICA'S
TEN WORST PRESIDENTS



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STAR-SPANGLED MEN

AMERICA'S TEN WORST PRESIDENTS

★

NATHAN MILLER

A TOUCHSTONE BOOK
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*To Henry L. Mencken
Would that you were living today*

*To please your ghost, I have forgiven a sinner
and winked at a homely girl.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First of all, I would like to express my appreciation to my wife, Jeanette, for suggesting the basic idea for this book and for her encouragement and support throughout the writing of it. Once again, for the fifth time—which must be something of a record in modern publishing—Lisa Drew has been the most able and sympathetic of editors. Her assistants, Blythe Grossberg and Marysue Rucci, made every effort to make my task easier. David Black, my agent, deserves recognition for his efforts on my behalf in this and other projects. I owe a special debt of gratitude to the distinguished Civil War historian Ernest B. Furgurson, and to Dr. Kenneth J. Hagan, professor of history and museum director emeritus at the U.S. Naval Academy, for reading the manuscript and suggesting numerous changes that improved it. The staff of the Nimitz Library at the Naval Academy also deserve my thanks for their assistance.

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The day of greatness in the Presidential chair is over. . . .
Greatness in the Presidential chair is largely an illusion.

—Harry M. Daugherty,
attorney general under Warren G. Harding

There are a lot of mediocre judges and people and lawyers.
They are entitled to a little representation, aren't they?

—Senator Roman Hruska of Nebraska

PROLOGUE

Picking America's best presidents is easy. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt usually top any list. Theodore Roosevelt, Harry S Truman, and Woodrow Wilson belong among the near greats. But choosing the nation's *worst* chief executives requires much more thought. Warren G. Harding and Ulysses S. Grant are easy choices. But what about Richard M. Nixon? Except for Watergate and its concomitant crudities, he was not a bad president. Nevertheless, he was the only one forced out of office—and for no less than trying to make off with the Constitution. Does Herbert Hoover belong on such a list? How about Jimmy Carter? Ronald Reagan? Or William Jefferson Clinton? The possibilities are almost endless.

Ranking presidents is a popular sport among Americans. Perhaps the first such list appeared back in 1948, when Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger of Harvard asked fifty-five leading historians for their ratings of the nation's chief executives. Nearly a half century later, his son, Arthur Jr., put the same question to thirty-two experts. A startling result of all the polls in between is that those named the best and the worst presidents remained pretty much the same over the years despite the adding of new presidents. The major reshufflings have been in the near-great and average categories.

My selection of the worst presidents is purely subjective. It is not the result of a scientific sampling of historians or leading Americans. I have made my choices based upon a lifetime of reading American history, graduate study, a career in political journalism on the local, state,

and national levels, and as a Capitol Hill staffer, as well as having written two presidential biographies and other books with a political slant. If the reader suspects me of partisan bias, let me state that in the last thirteen presidential elections, I voted Democratic seven times, Republican four times, and twice for minor-party candidates. Two of the candidates for whom I voted are on my list of worst presidents.

Pragmatism, strong character, vision, political skill, a basic integrity, and the ability to communicate with the American people are generally listed as the qualities for a great or a good president. If so, then the qualities for a poor president are a mirror image of them: bad character, the inability to compromise, a lack of vision, poor political skills, dishonesty, and an inability to communicate. To these, I have added my own basic criterion—*How badly did they damage the nation they were supposed to serve?*

As a result, my list is different from the conventional wisdom. The ground rules under which I made selections are as follows: From the start, I ruled out William Henry Harrison, Zachary Taylor, and James A. Garfield because they were in office too brief a time to have had any great effect. Bill Clinton, as the incumbent when this was written, gets a bye—at least this time around. The reader will also note that I have not included two presidents who have been rated near the bottom in every ranking since 1948: John Tyler and Millard Fillmore. They are yoked together with Zachary Taylor in a pantheon of drab, almost forgotten presidents whose dusty portraits are tucked away in the back corridors of Washington. My guess is that their low ratings are based less upon what they did—or didn't do—in the White House than upon the fact that they were ranked low on the first Schlesinger list and remain there because hardly anyone knows anything about them.

In point of fact, they are not as bad as they are usually portrayed. Both were vice presidents unexpectedly elevated to the White House by the death of their predecessor. Tyler, a diffident Virginia aristocrat who became president after the death of William Henry Harrison, fought off numerous challenges to his authority as the first "accidental president." He refused to allow Congress to brush him aside and take control of the government. By clever management, he brought about the annexation of Texas and presided over the resolution of a major bound-

ary dispute between Canada and the United States—all of which should place him above such nonentities as Benjamin Harrison.

“Honest, commonplace Fillmore,” as he was called by historian Allan Nevins, also deserves more respect than he gets. Following the death of Zachary Taylor, he played an important role in the adoption of the Compromise of 1850, which staved off the Civil War by a decade, and dispatched Commodore Matthew C. Perry to open Japan to American trade. My guess is that Fillmore’s low reputation is not based upon his presidency but is colored by his decision to run unsuccessfully for president in 1856 on the anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant Know-Nothing ticket. Besides, the name Millard Fillmore seems to generate laughter on its own.

While this book was under way, I was repeatedly asked if I were going to include any contemporary presidents, particularly Reagan or George Bush. Reagan is not included because he came to Washington with two goals—to reduce the influence of “gov’mnt” and to destroy the “Evil Empire”—and he accomplished both. Whether one approves of the means he used is open to debate. The key to Reagan’s success was knowing where he wanted to take the American people and the ability to convince them to follow him. My guess is that his historical reputation, while not high today, will grow in future years in the same manner as that of Dwight D. Eisenhower, who now stands far higher in the ratings than he did only a few years ago.

As for Bush, he barely misses making the worst list. The creation and management of the alliance that won the Gulf War of 1991 saves him, but lacking vision, he was unable to capitalize on this victory to ensure his reelection. Hoover, although the scapegoat for the Great Depression, does not make it either. In reality, he was the victim of the criminal neglect of previous administrations. The last classical liberal to serve in the White House, Hoover was incapable of dealing with the chilling realities of the economic collapse, but so was everyone else—except for Franklin Roosevelt. I expect the inclusion of Jimmy Carter among the worst presidents will bring howls of protest based upon his postpresidential career. But there is no hiding that he was a poor president.

One thing that emerges from this book is the truly undistinguished

STAR-SPANGLED MEN

nature of most presidential candidates—winners and losers alike. America can survive, and make progress, even with bad presidents. But the country needs—and should have—good presidents. The American people must find and elect men and women of high moral character, as well as intelligence and experience. Character and conduct are clearly linked, and the personal weaknesses of a president can often turn out to be public liabilities. Teapot Dome, Watergate, and Whitewater all have their roots in the character flaws of Warren Harding, Richard Nixon, and Bill Clinton.

For the most part this book has been excavated from standard sources, but I have put my own spin on what I have found. I expect brickbats and dead cats as a result of some of my selections. But as the English historian J. A. Froude said, "Historical facts are like a child's box of letters. You have only to pick out such letters as you want, to spell any word you want." If you disagree with my choices, get your own box of letters.

FOREWORD TO THE TOUCHSTONE EDITION

In the earlier edition of this book, I gave Bill Clinton a bye as the incumbent. Besides, most of his second term remained to be served. Recent events, however, caused me to reconsider whether or not he should be placed on my list of worst presidents and I have given it considerable thought.

Having all but been caught with his pants down, Clinton has been forced to admit—albeit kicking and screaming—that he had a tawdry sexual affair with a pathetically star-struck young White House intern half his age and then lied about it. Like a character in an old-fashioned bedroom farce, he skulked about the presidential mansion with his sex toy, hiding from the all-seeing-eye of the Secret Service. You could all but hear the garters popping and the doors slamming. No previous chief executive—not even Warren Gamaliel Harding who purportedly had sexual liaisons with his mistress in a closet off the Oval Office—has brought such disgrace upon the presidency.

But this was merely the tip of the iceberg that threatened to sink the Clinton administration. Allegations of campaign finance irregularities, subornation of perjury, improper use of the FBI, and attempts at obstructing justice continue to haunt the White House. These charges should come as no surprise, however. Throughout his career, Clinton has exhibited a disturbing pattern of insensitivity to the ethical rules

by which most Americans live their lives. Drug-use, draft-dodging, skirt-chasing and money-grubbing are his stock in trade. When found out, his reaction has become ritualized through repetition. Wrapping himself in the role of victim, he projects sincerity from the television screen—a look mastered through long practice—and with blue eyes locked on the viewer expresses contrition, complete with tears and trembling lip. His remorse increases in regular increments the more he is caught. If Richard Nixon was a political pitchman, Bill Clinton is a confidence man.

Even worse than the shoddiness and mendacity of l’Affair Lewinsky is Clinton’s recklessness in indulging in such conduct in the White House, especially by a man so concerned about his historical legacy. Rather than upholding a high vision of his office and the men who occupy it, he radically lowered our expectations. It’s a far cry from Franklin Roosevelt’s description of the presidency as “pre-eminently a place of moral leadership.”

Nevertheless, as this book went to press the jury was still out on Clinton—both literally and figuratively. Although he admitted lying to his family, his aides, his cabinet and the American people, it still remained to be decided whether or not he committed an impeachable offense. So, for now he continues to enjoy his bye, although he certainly is still a candidate for the list of ten worst presidents in future editions. Even if he is not impeached, he will be remembered as a slick, cynical and self-indulgent man who abused this office entrusted to him and showed an utter contempt for the law. Moreover, he bumbled away a remarkable opportunity to establish a fresh beginning for America and its people at the start of a new century.

Time and again, however, Clinton has escaped political disaster with nothing lost save honor. He is the Rasputin of the American presidency. Frustrated enemies have all but poisoned him, shot him, wrapped him in chains and dropped him into the frozen Potomac, only to see him quickly bob to the surface with a roguish twinkle in his eye. Perhaps he will do so again. Such an outcome would probably be celebrated in the Clinton White House as a victory over its foes.

Yet with his reputation in tatters, whatever ambitions Clinton has to