

4. Franklin Pierce



Special Report

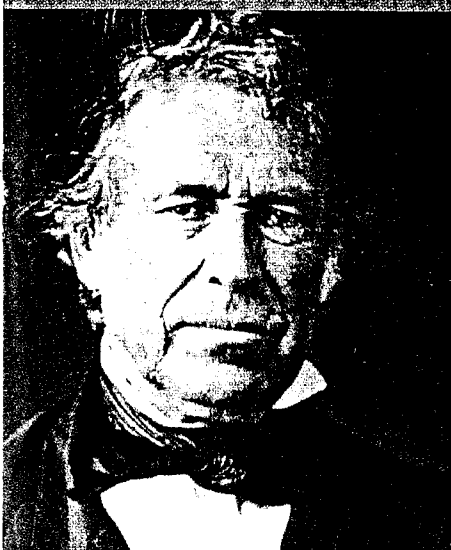
By Jay Tolson

Is George W. Bush's presidency shaping up to be one of the worst in U.S. history? You hear the question being asked more and more these days. And more and more, you hear the same answer. With Iraq a shambles and trust in the administration declining, it is probably not surprising that 54 percent of respondents in a recent *USA Today*/Gallup survey said that history would judge Bush a below-average or poor president, more than twice the number who gave such a rating to any of the five preceding occupants of the White House, including Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter.

10 THE 10 Worst PRESIDENTS

It's too soon to judge the current one, but for past leaders, the verdict is in

10. Zachary Taylor



Public opinion is a notoriously fickle beast, of course, which is why historians and other custodians of the long view prefer to reserve judgment until they can speak of their subjects in the past tense. But clearly something about Bush II has inspired many historians to abandon their usual caution. Meena Bose, a Hofstra University political scientist who has written about presidential ratings, says that the scholars' rush to rank the current president comes out of an acute awareness of the long-term consequences of his policies. "Since it's hard to see how Iraq will work out for the better," Bose says, "it's hard not to pass judgments."

At left, the list of the least effective Presidents Richard Nixon and Herbert Hoover are in a tie for ninth place.

(TOP) CORBIS (2); MATHEW BRADY—CORBIS; LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; MIDDLE: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART; ART RESOURCE; CORBIS; ART ARCHIVE / CULVER PICTURES; (BOTTOM) GRANGER COLLECTION; CORBIS; BETTMANN; WARREN LEFFLER FOR USMHW; GRANGER COLLECTION

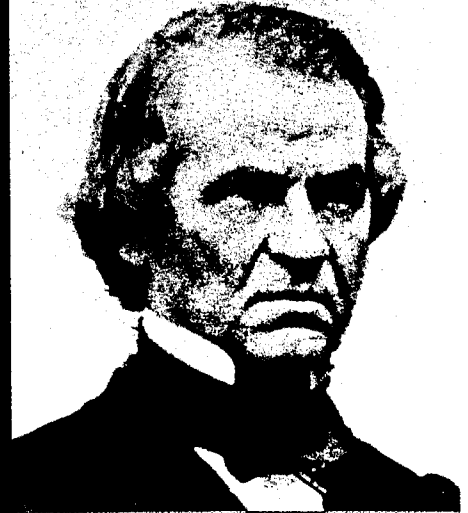
1. James Buchanan



2. Warren G. Harding



3. Andrew Johnson



5. Millard Fillmore



6. John Tyler



7. Ulysses S. Grant



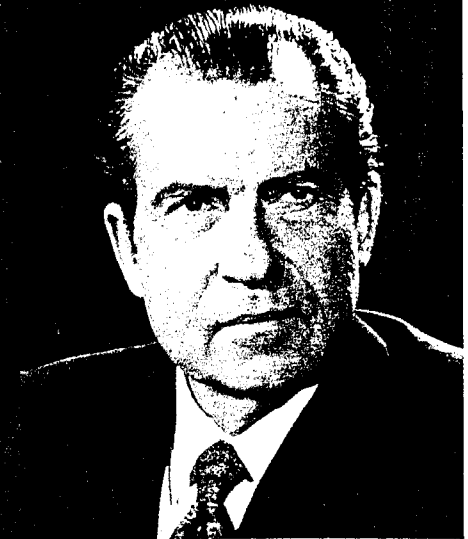
8. William Harrison

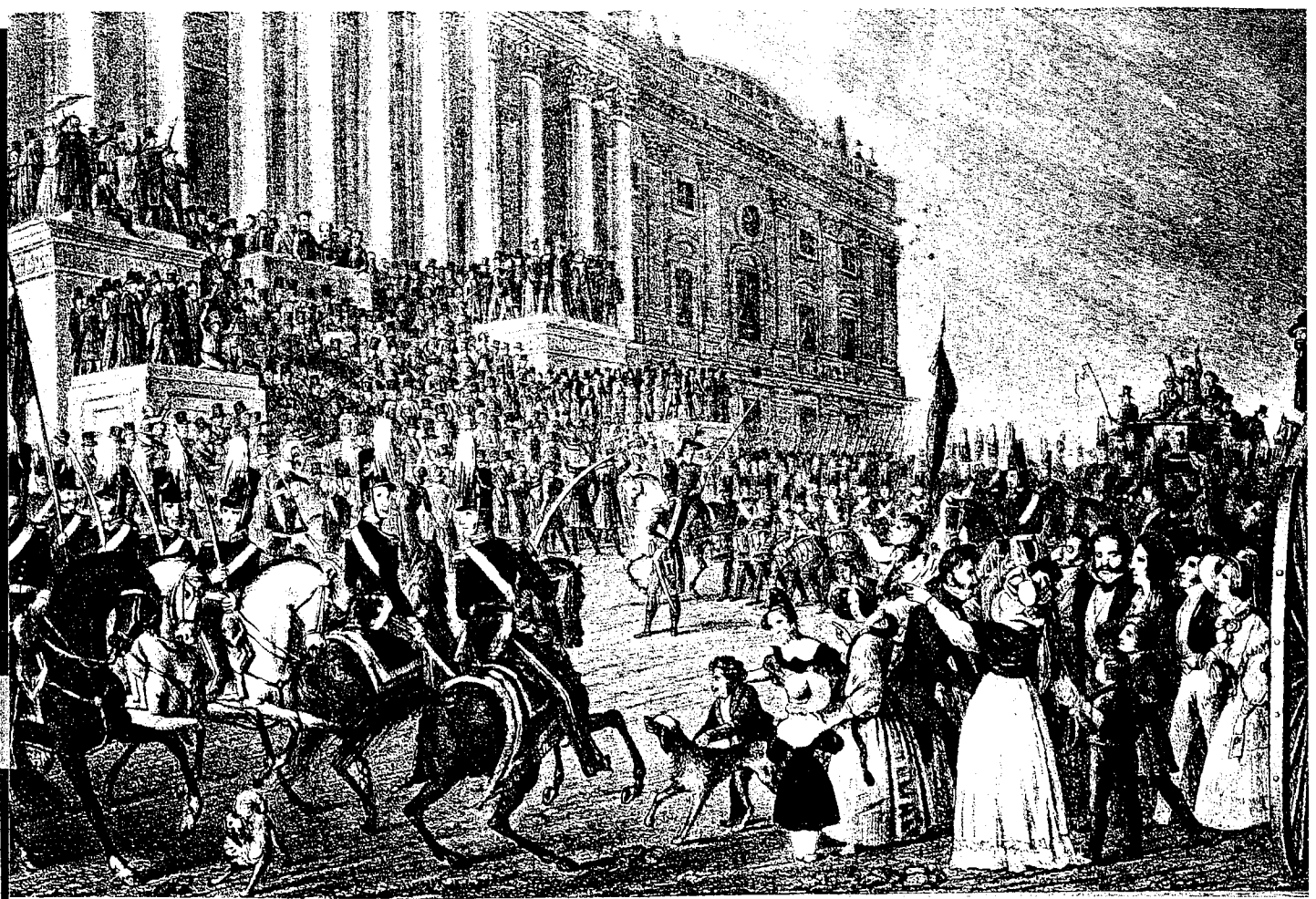


9. Herbert Hoover



9. Richard Nixon





Whatever his reasons, Princeton University historian Sean Wilentz created a minor sensation last year when he published a resounding verdict in *Rolling Stone* magazine: "Barring a cataclysmic event on the order of the terrorist attacks of September 11, after which the public might rally around the White House once again, there seems to be little the administration can do to avoid being

SHORT-TERMER. William Harrison caught pneumonia after giving the longest inauguration speech ever. He died just a month afterward.

whose reputation rose sharply as scholars began to appreciate his role in laying the foundations for America's success in the Cold War. And if Iraq turns out to be a beacon of democracy in the Middle East 10 years from now, there will be a lot of scholars eating crow.

Attempts to rate the Bush presiden-

Greenstein, "divert attention from the full range of presidential experience"? Credit, or blame, for the first scholarly ranking of the presidents usually goes to Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr., who conducted a poll for *Life* magazine in 1948. He asked 55 specialists in American history to rate the presidents as great, near great, average, below average, or failure. Claiming the cellar of that list were Warren G. Harding and, in ascending order, Ulysses S. Grant, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, Calvin Coolidge, John Tyler, Benjamin Harrison, and Herbert Hoover.

If there is a common theme in presidential assessments, it is a bias toward activism, unless it is seen as misplaced.

ranked on the lowest tier of U.S. presidents." Bush partisans had a ready explanation for that assessment: liberal bias. But while Wilentz makes no secret of his liberalism, he referred to an informal survey of 415 historians in 2004 in which 81 percent of the respondents stated that the Bush administration would go down as a failure.

Bush's own view of how history will treat him comes across in his frequent allusions to Harry Truman, another famously unpopular sitting president

cy are at best premature, but they do raise valuable questions. Is there, to begin with, a scholarly consensus on who America's worst chief executives are? If there were a negative Mount Rushmore, which presidents would have their faces carved into it? What qualities seem to distinguish poor presidencies? And finally, do rankings really help us understand presidential leadership and individual presidencies, or do they, in the words of Princeton University political scientist Fred

Interpreting the results, Schlesinger concluded that what weighed most heavily in determining the best presidents was whether they "took the side of progressivism and reform, as understood in their day." Though Schlesinger did not say so, the quality that characterized most of the failed presidencies, reflected in the choice of so many ineffectual pre-Civil War presidents and Hoover, was passivity or inaction in the face of great historical challenges (or, in the cases of Grant and Harding, in the face of cor-



BANDWAGON. Harding celebrates his nomination. He later said he never should have been elected.

slavery to spread into the western territories. In his inaugural address, the 15th president tacitly encouraged the Supreme Court's forthcoming *Dred Scott* decision, which ruled that Congress had no power to keep slavery out of the territories. More damaging to his name, though, was his weak acquiescence before the secessionist tide—an unwillingness to challenge those states that declared their intention to withdraw from the Union after Lincoln's election. Sitting on his hands as the situation spiraled out of control, Buchanan believed that the Constitution gave him

no power to act against would-be seceders. To his dying day, he felt that history would treat him favorably for having performed his constitutional duty. He was wrong.

ruption inside their own administrations). The value placed on executive energy could be said to reflect a liberal bias, but it also reveals the influence of a less strictly partisan ideal of the presidency as a strong, activist branch of government. "If there is a common denominator in presidential assessments," argues Princeton's Greenstein, "it is a bias toward activism, unless the activism is viewed as misplaced, as in the instances of Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam and Nixon and Watergate."

To test whether that or any other generalizations about presidential performances, particularly failed performances, hold up, *U.S. News* averaged the results of five major and relatively recent presidential polls to make its own gallery of the 10 worst presidents—actually 11, because of a tie at ninth place. Here is the *U.S. News* list of the least successful presidencies:

1. James Buchanan

A Pennsylvania-born Democrat, deeply devout in his faith and the only bachelor elected to the presidency, Buchanan rejected slavery as an indefensible evil but, like the majority of his party, refused to challenge the constitutionally established order. Even before he became president, he supported the various compromises that made it possible for

no power to act against would-be seceders. To his dying day, he felt that history would treat him favorably for having performed his constitutional duty. He was wrong.

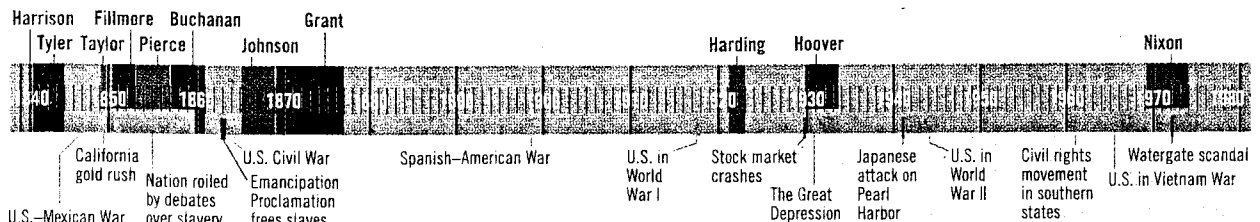
2. Warren G. Harding

Warren G. Harding's claim to infamy rests on spectacular ineptitude captured in his own pathetic words: "I am not fit for this office and should never have been here." A former publisher who won a string of offices in his native Ohio, he was an unrestrained womanizer noted for his affability, good looks, and implacable desire to please. It was good, his father once told him, that he hadn't been

OVAL OFFICE MISFITS?

The worst presidents according to five major presidential polls, listed in blue and red

- | | | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. George Washington 1789–1797 | 12. Zachary Taylor 1849–1850 | 23. Benjamin Harrison 1889–1893 | 34. Dwight Eisenhower 1953–1961 |
| 2. John Adams 1797–1801 | 13. Millard Fillmore 1850–1853 | 24. Grover Cleveland 1893–1897 | 35. John F. Kennedy 1961–1963 |
| 3. Thomas Jefferson 1801–1809 | 14. Franklin Pierce 1853–1857 | 25. William McKinley 1897–1901 | 36. Lyndon Johnson 1963–1969 |
| 4. James Madison 1809–1817 | 15. James Buchanan 1857–1861 | 26. Theodore Roosevelt 1901–1909 | 37. Richard Nixon 1969–1974 |
| 5. James Monroe 1817–1825 | 16. Abraham Lincoln 1861–1865 | 27. William H. Taft 1909–1913 | 38. Gerald Ford 1974–1977 |
| 6. John Quincy Adams 1825–1829 | 17. Andrew Johnson 1865–1869 | 28. Woodrow Wilson 1913–1921 | 39. Jimmy Carter 1977–1981 |
| 7. Andrew Jackson 1829–1837 | 18. Ulysses S. Grant 1869–1877 | 29. Warren Harding 1921–1923 | 40. Ronald Reagan 1981–1989 |
| 8. Martin Van Buren 1837–1841 | 19. Rutherford B. Hayes 1877–1881 | 30. Calvin Coolidge 1923–1929 | 41. George H.W. Bush 1989–1993 |
| 9. William Harrison 1841 | 20. James Garfield 1881 | 31. Herbert Hoover 1929–1933 | 42. William J. Clinton 1993–2001 |
| 10. John Tyler 1841–1845 | 21. Chester Arthur 1881–1885 | 32. Franklin D. Roosevelt 1933–1945 | 43. George W. Bush 2001–present |
| 11. James Polk 1845–1849 | 22. Grover Cleveland 1885–1889 | 33. Harry Truman 1945–1953 | |



Sources: *Timelines of World History*, Whitehouse.gov

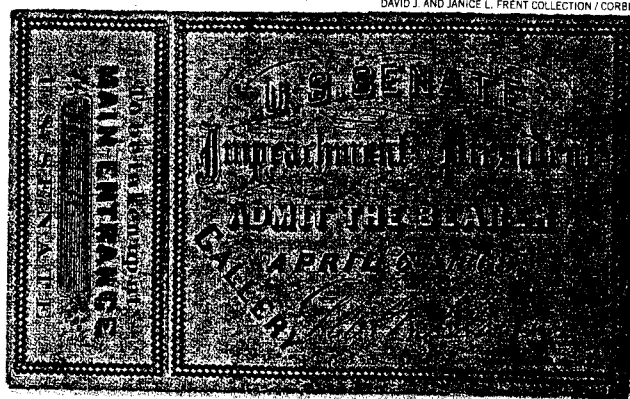
born a girl, "because you'd be in the family way all the time. You can't say no."

Harding should have said no when Republican Party bosses in the proverbial smoke-filled room (a phrase that originated with this instance) made him their 11th-hour pick for the highest office. He was so vague in his campaign declarations that he was understood to support both the foes and the backers of U.S. entry into the League of Nations. Once in the White House, the 29th president busied himself with golf, poker, and his mistress, while appointees and cronies plundered the U.S. government in a variety of ways. (His secretary of the interior allowed oilmen, for a modest under-the-table sum, to tap into government oil reserves, including one in Teapot Dome, Wyo.) "I have no trouble with my enemies," Harding once said, adding that it was his friends who "keep me walking the floor nights." Stress no doubt contributed to his death in office, probably from a stroke. Almost a decade later, his former attorney general called Harding "a modern Abraham Lincoln whose name and fame will grow with time." That time is still a long way off.

3. Andrew Johnson

Andrew Johnson has risen in scholarly dis-esteem since the publication of Schlesinger's 1948 poll probably because the post-Civil War Reconstruction has enjoyed a scholarly face-lift, and Johnson is now scorned for having resisted Radical Republican policies aimed at securing the rights and well-being of the newly emancipated African-Americans. (Before he was president, historian Woodrow Wilson did a lastingly thorough job of sully Reconstruction, depicting it as a vindictive program that hurt even repentant southerners.)

A native North Carolinian of humble origins, Johnson worked as a tailor and eventually settled in Tennessee, where he entered politics as a populist Jackson Democrat. He was elected to several high offices, including U.S. senator. Though no abolitionist, he was a staunch supporter of the Union and the only southern-



TOUGH TICKET. Admission to the impeachment of Andrew Johnson

er to retain his seat in the Senate after secession. For his loyalty, Lincoln appointed him military governor of Tennessee, where he set about suppressing Confederates and championing black suffrage. (Tennessee became the first southern state to end slavery by state law.) Lincoln selected him as his running mate in 1864, and Johnson became the 17th president only a month after being sworn in as vice president. Unfortunately, his subsequent battles with Radical Republicans in Congress over a host of Reconstruction measures revealed political ineptitude and an astonishing indifference toward the plight of the newly freed African-Americans. Vetoing renewal of the Freedman's Bureau and the first civil rights bill, he encouraged opposition to the 14th Amendment. An increasingly nasty power struggle—in which Congress attempted to strip him

of certain constitutionally delegated powers—resulted in the first presidential impeachment and a near conviction. Failing to be renominated, he returned to Tennessee and was again elected to the U.S. Senate. History's current verdict may prove to be overly harsh, but Johnson did turn a blind eye to southerners who tried to undo what the Civil War had accomplished.

4. Franklin Pierce

Extending the list of timid pre-Civil War compromisers,

Pierce was a Jackson Democrat from New Hampshire whom Whig foes called "doughface"—a northerner with southern principles. Elected as the 14th president, the handsome Mexican War veteran believed in national expansion even at the cost of adding more slave states. To that end, he supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which, along with the earlier Compromise of 1850, effectively repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820. Less successfully, he proposed annexing Cuba, but his opponents, suspecting the addition of a new slave state, outed the plan and forced him to renounce it. He did manage to secure U.S. recognition of a dubious regime in Nicaragua, presided over by an American proslavery adventurer, William Walker, who had instigated an insurrection and installed himself as president. Theodore Roosevelt later wrote of

Pierce that he was "a servile tool of men worse than himself . . . ever ready to do any work the slavery leaders set him." Not even a fawning campaign biography by Pierce's college friend Nathaniel Hawthorne could offset such damning reviews.

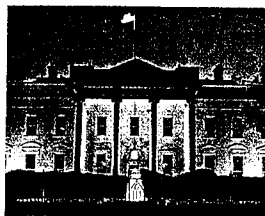
5. Millard Fillmore

The 13th president came to office on the coattails of a popular war hero, Zachary Taylor, who died in office a little over a year after becoming president. Born in a log cabin in central New York, Fillmore made his way to politics and the Whig Party via schoolteaching and the law. A largely ignored vice president, he got Taylor's attention when he told him he would support the Compromise of 1850 if the Senate came to a deadlock. Consisting of five

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- a **video interview** with author Jay Tolson, conducted by *U.S. News* Executive Editor Brian Kelly
- a detailed explanation of the **methodology** and results of similar, previously published polls
- an **interactive readers' poll**. Whose faces would you carve into a negative Mount Rushmore? Cast your votes, and we'll tally the responses.



For the "worst presidents" list, *U.S. News* used the bottom-10 rankings on five major scholarly polls. We awarded 10 points for the president on the lowest position on any poll and 1 point less for each holder of a successively higher spot on a poll. We did not include the current occupant of the White House.

GRANGER COLLECTION

separate acts (including the Fugitive Slave Law, compelling the federal government to return fugitive slaves to their masters), the compromise stood for everything Taylor opposed. When the ailing president died, his successor became an even more vigorous champion of the compromise measures. Fillmore's actions may have averted a national crisis and postponed the outbreak of the Civil War, but it was peace bought at an unconscionable price. Two decades after the notorious deal, the *New York Times* opined that it was Fillmore's "misfortune to see in slavery a political and not a moral question." *Misfortune* might now seem too kind a word.

6. John Tyler

At sixth worst, Virginian John Tyler was the first president to rise by succession from the vice presidency—when William Harrison succumbed to pneumonia only 30 days after being sworn into office. Born into the planter aristocracy, Tyler began his political career as a Jefferson Republican, opposing Federalist schemes for high protective tariffs and federally funded "internal improvements." As a U.S. senator, he supported Andrew



TEAM WHIG. Fillmore succeeded Taylor, a war hero who was naive about politics.

Jackson's crusade against the national bank but soon fell out with Old Hickory when he quashed South Carolina's attempt to nullify a modest tariff. (Tyler, a steady champion of states' rights and

slavery, defended South Carolina's prerogative to secede.) Joining the young Whig Party, he ran with popular war hero Harrison, and the ticket of "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" trounced the Democratic candidates. But once president, Tyler opposed everything his adopted party stood for, including a national bank. One fellow Whig accused Tyler of reviving "the condemned and repudiated doctrines and practices of the worst days of Jackson's rule." The entire Harrison-appointed cabinet resigned, and Tyler had to fight an attempt to impeach him. His one triumph: establishing the principle that a vice president who succeeds to the top office has no less authority than an elected president. No small accomplishment when most of his own party despised him.

7. Ulysses S. Grant

Ulysses S. Grant has risen from No. 2 on the 1948 Schlesinger list probably because of the same revisionist take on Reconstruction that lowered Johnson. Although there is no way to overlook the widespread graft and corruption that occurred on his presidential watch, he

BOLD



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(Ford Fusion beat Camry and Accord twice.)

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was in no way a beneficiary of it. "My failures have been errors of judgement," the popular former Civil War general admitted, "not of intent." More important, the 18th president now receives plaudits for his aggressive prosecution of the radical reform agenda in the South. His attempts to quash the Ku Klux Klan (suspending habeas corpus in South Carolina and ordering mass arrests) and his support for the Civil Rights Act of 1875 may have produced only short-lived gains for African-Americans, but Grant's intentions were laudable. He also worked for the good of American Indians, instituting the reservation system as an imperfect, last-ditch effort to protect them from extinction. Grant's reputation may continue to rise as a result of sympathetic studies—and because of a renewed appreciation of his own memoir, considered to be the best ever produced by a former president.



HARD TIMES. Secession and slavery hurt some presidential legacies.

8. William Harrison

Alas, poor Harrison. That the ninth president makes any list at all is an act of scholarly injustice. The Virginian's greatest claim to fame was defeating the

CORBIS BETTMANN

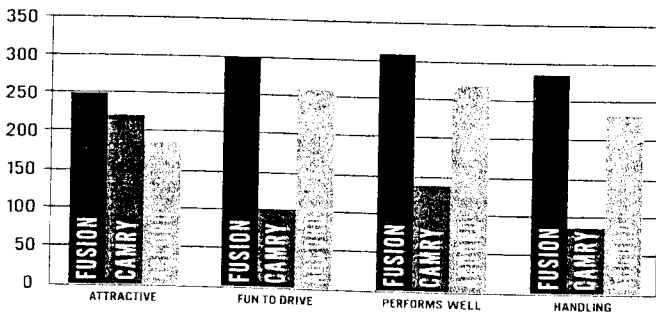
Shawnees in 1811 at the Battle of Tippecanoe. Delivering the longest inaugural address in U.S. history, he came down with pneumonia that made his 30-day presidency the shortest in U.S. history. Death would seem sufficient punishment for long-windedness; historians are guilty of piling on.

9. (tie) Herbert Hoover

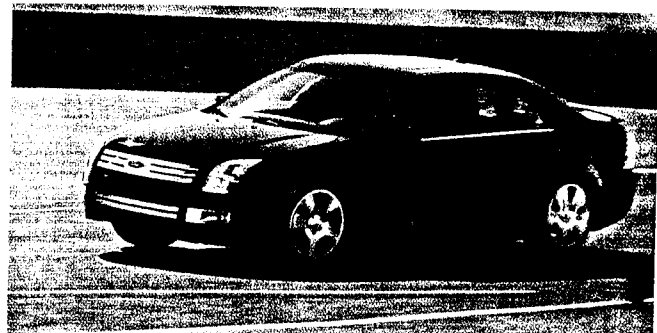
Herbert Hoover, the 31st president, and Richard Nixon, the 37th, share the ninth spot for entirely different kinds of failings. And both had offsetting qualities and achievements that keep them off the 10-worst list of some major rankings. Hoover, elected on the eve of the Great Depression, came to the office with the skills of a consummate technocrat and manager. The Iowa native and Stanford-educated engineer ran massive relief operations in Europe both during and after World War I. He was commerce secretary under Harding and

Recently in Los Angeles, Camry and Accord got a second chance to prove themselves against the all-wheel-drive Ford Fusion. *Road & Track* invited car enthusiasts to test-drive the midsize sedans back-to-back. And just like a month earlier, when *Car and Driver* hosted the same kind of competition in Washington, DC, drivers preferred the handling, performance and styling of the Fusion to the other two cars. Beating the imports in their own backyard. If that surprises you, find out what demanding drivers on both coasts have already discovered.

Check it out yourself. Visit a Ford Dealer or go to fusionchallenge.com.



results from 400 drivers in L.A., who were asked if the cars were attractive, fun to drive, performed well and handled with precision. "Yes" responses scored one point. "No" responses scored zero. The results speak for themselves.



large



Calvin Coolidge. Once the Depression set in, he lowered taxes and started public works projects to create jobs, but he steadfastly resisted outright relief. Hoover's adherence to conservative principles may not have been his greatest problem. A poor communicator, he came across as mean-spirited and uncaring. The homeless dubbed their shantytowns Hoovervilles. Perhaps his single greatest poli-

SOLITARY MAN. Nixon at Camp David. A man of considerable vision and political gifts, he had uneven judgment and a suspicious bent.

sion. He not only opened up U.S. relations with China but also reached an important arms-limitation agreement with the Soviet Union. He slowly, if not quite steadily, extricated America from the quagmire of Vietnam. He supported a number of progressive domestic policies, including the creation of the

10. Zachary Taylor

Sliding in at No. 10, Zachary Taylor was more a forgettable

president than a failed one. And the reason is simple: The 12th president was probably the least politically attuned man to occupy the White House in American history, ignorant, one might say, to the point of innocence. Born in Virginia and raised in Kentucky, he was a country boy and a fearless soldier who fought and com-

manded in major actions spanning the War of 1812 and the Mexican War. Jealous fellow generals mocked his lack of learning and polish, but no less than Abraham Lincoln praised the steady judgment that enabled him to overcome unfavorable odds in numerous bat-

tles. The Whigs saw a good thing when they picked him as their candidate in 1848. A slaveholder who defended the "peculiar institution" in the South, he opposed its extension into new states as vigorously as he objected to the idea of secession. Some think his opposition to what became the Compromise of 1850—which began to undo the Missouri Compromise—might have precipitated the outbreak of the Civil War. If it had, Taylor would not have hesitated to take on the would-be seceders. And his war record might have given them

If the worst presidents help us understand the great ones, they also remind us of how some merely good leaders often fail.

cy blunder was supporting a tariff act that fueled international trade wars and made the Depression even worse. But style points alone would have cost him the election against FDR. For all his good qualities, Hoover failed to rise to the greatest challenge of his time.

9. (tie) Richard Nixon

Nixon's failings were the stuff of dark tragedy: uneven judgment and a deeply suspicious character combined with great political gifts and considerable vi-

Environmental Protection Agency and the Consumer Product Safety Commission. He stepped up the war against crime on multiple fronts. But the drama of Nixon Agonistes concludes with his resignation under a cloud of wrongdoing. For obstructing the investigation of a petty crime committed by some of his own campaign operatives—an attempt to burglarize the Democratic National Headquarters—Nixon's name will forever be linked with one word: Watergate.

pause. But the test never came. He died after only a little more than a year in office.

SO WERE THESE AMERICA'S worst presidents? Or does this list merely prove that rankings are valuable to the extent they spark debate, unhelpful to the extent they foreclose it? A look at the rankings of several historians we approached individually yields a provocative contrast to the poll results—and suggests how some of the more interesting choices often get averaged out in the wash.

For all the efforts of some polls to offset liberal bias, for example, there are no scholarly polls that show where the weight of conservative opinion might rank the worst chief executives. Forrest McDonald, a noted University of Alabama historian of distinct conservative leanings, awards Lyndon Johnson the No. 1 spot “for pushing government,” he explains, “beyond the limits of what it can do.” Woodrow Wilson ranks second for “equating democ-



AT EASE. Hoover, a poor communicator, came across as uncaring.

racy with peacefulness, leading to World War II.” While giving Buchanan and Andrew Johnson typically low ratings (Nos. 3 and 4, respectively), he places Andrew Jackson at No. 5 (for “destroying the fiscal integrity of the United States”) and Jimmy Carter (“complete-

ly ineffectual”) at No. 6. Hoover does not make this list, but Martin Van Buren comes in at No. 9 “for presiding over the longest depression in U.S. history.”

Sins of commission. While the large surveys tend to be harder on inaction and incompetence, some of our respondents cast a sterner eye on sins of commission. Jackson Lears, a professor of cultural history at Rutgers University, is particularly critical of heedless bellicosity in some of his picks. His choices of Buchanan, Nixon, and Reagan for the bottom three may reflect a standard liberal bias (though Lears describes himself as a “left-conservative-Jeffersonian”), but he ranks John

F. Kennedy at No. 5 for having “put the whole world under the shadow of nuclear war.” Lears locates Teddy Roosevelt at No. 6 for being the only president “who celebrated the regenerative effects of military violence” and William McKinley at No. 7 for having “allowed

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T. R. et al. to push him into a savage and unjustified war in the Philippines.”

Walter McDougall, a professor of history and international relations at the University of Pennsylvania, uses two broad criteria to evaluate presidents: One, he explains, is “damage done,” and the other is what he calls the “Kuklick yardstick,” after the argument set forth in Bruce Kuklick’s book *The Good Ruler*. In McDougall’s summary of that book, “The American people call on their president to give them the leadership and policies they want or need at a given time. Hence, whatever smug historians deem later, the only true measure of how ‘good’ a ruler was must be the opinion of the people he served.” Three of McDougall’s picks for the worst are based on both criteria: James Buchanan (No. 1), Lyndon Johnson (No. 2), and Andrew Johnson (No. 3). Three others earn their spots strictly on the basis of the Kuklick yardstick: Harry Truman



PROTEST. Jobless World War I vets seek relief from Washington.

(No. 7), Jimmy Carter (No. 8), and Richard Nixon (No. 9).

To most historians, the Kuklick yardstick is heresy—which is why Truman has risen in the rankings, and why Bush may ultimately fare well in them. “I think we should put little weight on how a

president was viewed in office,” says Mount Holyoke historian Joseph Ellis, a self-described man of the left who thinks that Bush will probably be included among the failed presidencies. Yet Ellis adds a caution that almost seems to support Kuklick’s view: “In some sense,” he says, “most presidents and people like to think how presidents shape history. But really presidents are much more the playthings of historical conditions.”

Maybe what we learn from the least of our presidents—apart from the fact that even the worst often have remarkably redeeming features—is that it requires a rare combination of qualities to be among the best. Strength of character, principles, and political skills are necessary, to be sure, but so are the flexibility and judgment that allow them to gauge the needs of a time. If the worst help us understand the great, they also remind us of how merely good leaders often fail. ●



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