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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
WSJ.com

OPINION | FEBRUARY 28, 2009

Was George W. Bush the Worst President?

A historian urges us to take a deep breath before we answer.

By **THOMAS FLEMING**

Several polls of historians have named George W. Bush the worst president in American history. This baffles me. I've been writing about presidents for a long time. What I know, and what I presume these gentlemen know, doesn't connect.

Is Mr. Bush worse than John Adams? When a shooting war at sea started between the United States and revolutionary France in 1798, Honest John wrote a letter to George Washington, offering to resign so that George could resume the job. How's that for presidential leadership? Meanwhile, Adams had kept Washington's cabinet officers on the job, although he loathed them. He finally fired them in a fit of hysteria, which made them wonder if he had lost his mind.

Is Mr. Bush worse than Thomas Jefferson in his second term? Rather than build a decent navy to deal with the British -- who had a habit of boarding American ships on the high seas and forcing kidnapped sailors into semislavery -- Jefferson declared an embargo on all trade with England and the rest of Europe. The American economy came to a horrific standstill; smuggling became New England's chief industry. Someone described the embargo as "cutting a man's throat to cure a nosebleed." Nonplussed, Jefferson quit, telling only James Madison, his secretary of state, who was de facto acting president for the last year of Tom's term.

James Madison, who officially succeeded Jefferson in 1808, made presidential passivity into an art form. "Little Jemmy," as they called him in New England, watched while 4,500 British troops disembarked from their ships, marched to Washington, D.C., and burned the White House, the Capitol and almost everything else worth torching. You can't do much worse as a war leader than that performance.

Woodrow Wilson? When World War I exploded, Irish-Americans objected to his pro-British tilt. Wilson responded that ethnics like these loudmouthed micks were "pouring poison into the veins of our national life," alienating the largest voting bloc in the Democratic Party. Meanwhile, as a Southern-born pol to his wingtips, he segregated almost all employees of the federal government.

Next, Wilson talked Congress into declaring war on Germany on the assumption that we would not have to send a single soldier to France. Before the war ended, we had 2,000,000 troops overseas, and in three months of fighting lost 144,000 men.

Elected by seven million votes thanks to the electorate's loathing for Wilson, Warren G. Harding confessed to reporters that he was not up to the job. He told one newsman that he wanted to make the U.S. tariff higher than the Rocky Mountains to help Europe's industries recover from World War I. The appalled reporter realized the president had one of the biggest issues of the era exactly backward.

Harding had a concealed box at the Gayety Burlesque Theater where he spent many afternoons and nights. In the leftover hours he concentrated on poker and trysts with a blonde named Nan Britton -- reputedly in a closet off the Oval Office -- while his appointees looted the federal government.

Is Mr. Bush worse than Roosevelt in his second term? Re-elected by a massive majority, FDR wanted to pack the Supreme Court with Democrats. Congress, dominated by members of his own party, wasted a year wrangling over the bill and ultimately rejected it. Meanwhile, FDR's intemperate remarks about greedy businessmen wrecked confidence and triggered a semireplay of the Great Depression in 1937. The Republicans made massive gains in the 1938 midterm elections. FDR was rescued from an exit even more humiliating than Jefferson's by World War II, which he used as an excuse to run for a third term.

Worse than Jimmy Carter, the self-proclaimed Washington "outsider" who presided over the most horrendous stagflation in our history? As his poll numbers sank, Mr. Carter had the temerity to lecture citizens on their "crisis of spirit." His approval rating had plummeted to 22% when Ronald Reagan defeated him. Let us skip Bill Clinton. He and Bush are too contiguous; proximity makes comparisons inevitably rancorous.

My purpose is not to denigrate these men. John Adams had great political courage. He often espoused unpopular views, warning us, among other things, that a majority can be as tyrannical as a king or dictator -- something that we may need to remember in the next few years.

Thomas Jefferson displayed good judgment in his first term when he put aside his ideological scruples and purchased the Louisiana Territory. James Madison deserves admiration for the way he gave his remarkable wife, Dolley, a chance to create the role of First Lady and establish women as important political players. Woodrow Wilson's idealism was flawed, but his vision of America's role as a world power was profound. FDR's masterful confrontation with the fear created by the Great Depression made his first term an unforgettable achievement.

In this light, however wavering, maybe it's time to suspend the rush to judgment on George W. Bush for 10 or 20 years. I suspect we will decide Mr. Bush's first term, with his decisive response to 9/11, deserves some praise, and that his second term succumbed to an awesome amount of bad luck, from his generals' disagreements on how to fight the war in Iraq to the Wall Street collapse of 2008.

Many presidents have run out of luck in their second terms, but Mr. Bush's record in this department will be hard to match. Beyond the popularity polls there may be a dimension we should remember in judging every president: sympathy.

Mr. Fleming is a former president of the Society of American Historians. His most recent book, "The Perils of Peace, America's Struggle to Survive After Yorktown," (Smithsonian) has just been issued in paperback.

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Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page A11

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