

The Best and Worst US Presidents

Special Report: From the start of the Republic, some U.S. presidents favored government activism to address the nation's problems, while others let the states do what they wanted and business tycoons have their way, a distinction that Robert Parry says can define the best and worst.

By Robert Parry

Typically, the week of Presidents' Day brings out lists of the best and worst U.S. presidents based on how they're viewed by the general public or by mainstream historians, but often those rankings simply measure popularity or repeat conventional wisdom. The presidents get rated based on what "everyone" thinks rather than their real impact.

Official U.S. history also has been systematically distorted by an entrenched racism that has minimized responsibility of some early presidents for building the ideological framework that rationalized the enslavement of African-Americans and the genocide of Native Americans. Only slowly has some of that bias been squeezed out, but it still pervades the typical textbook.

And, part of the Republic's early struggle over slavery was the battle to reinterpret the Constitution, which was drafted by the Federalists to make the national government "supreme" over the states and responsible to "provide for the general Welfare." But many Southern slaveholders saw the broad federal powers as an eventual threat to slavery so after failing to block ratification they turned to simply reinterpreting the document's clear language.

Thus, "states' rights" and a "strict constructionist" view of federal power derived from the interests of slavery from the beginning of the Republic. The same notions later justified racial segregation and were embraced by laissez-faire capitalists who wanted no federal constraints on their exploitation of labor and despoliation of the environment.

The damage that these concepts did to the American people both black and white was vast. Beyond the barbarity of slavery (and Jim Crow laws) for blacks, working whites suffered from low wages and from the boom-and-bust economic cycles of unregulated capitalism in the Nineteenth, Twentieth and, indeed, Twenty-first centuries.

So, in rating the top and bottom presidents, I believe their roles in fulfilling or blocking the constitutional mandate of a national government to "provide for the general Welfare" should be a key factor. Those who set the United States on a course for greater well-being for the majority of the people should score

higher, and those who inflicted unnecessary suffering and misery should be held accountable.

Rather than counting down the top and bottom numerical the usual style my approach will be to cite the five or so presidents who did best by the country, in my opinion, and the five who did the worst, listing them in chronological order.

One of the Best: George Washington.

Though Washington is regularly included on the list of great presidents, he is often given faint praise for his actual service as the nation's first chief executive under the Constitution. That may reflect the lingering hostility toward the Federalists who principally drafted the Constitution, got it ratified and structured the early government.

Though the Federalists made their share of mistakes and can be fairly criticized for elitism, one of the chief reasons why they have been disparaged in U.S. history was their general opposition to slavery (as reflected most clearly in the abolitionist sentiments of Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton) and their belief in a strong and activist central government.

That put them on the outs with the powerful (and politically victorious) backlash in the 1790s and early 1800s to redefine the Constitution away from its original intent of a powerful federal government, toward a system more supportive of states' rights and thus more tolerant of the South's slave interests.

Though a Virginian and a slaveholder, George Washington gained a sense of the new nation from his service as the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army which brought together Americans across all geographic, cultural and racial lines. Washington, like other officers in the Continental Army, became the first true Americans in the sense of seeing the diverse 13 colonies/states as one nation.

From his military post, Washington also understood how unworkable were the Articles of Confederation, which made the 13 states "sovereign" and "independent" and thus inept at supporting a national effort such as the Revolutionary War and the establishment of a functioning republic in the first years after the conflict ended.

The failure of this "states' rights" concept led Washington and other Federalists to convene the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787. They scrapped the old system entirely and replaced it with a structure that eliminated the idea of state sovereignty and declared a national sovereignty

based on "We the People of the United States."

This Constitution's centralizing of government power was recognized by both supporters and opponents at the time and explains the fierce opposition from defenders of the old decentralized system. Though the Constitution implicitly accepted slavery as a necessary compromise to bring in the Southern states key defenders of slavery warned that the combination of central authority and Northern abolitionism would eventually lead to slavery's eradication, or as Virginia's Patrick Henry colorfully put it, "they'll free your niggers!"

As the first U.S. President under the Constitution, it fell to Washington to build the new government virtually from scratch, and he delegated much of that responsibility to his Revolutionary War aide-de-camp Alexander Hamilton, who was named Treasury Secretary. Since there were only three Cabinet members at the time (the others being the secretaries of war and state), Hamilton had a nearly blank slate to sketch the new government's structure.

In some ways, Hamilton was even more an archetypal new American than Washington, since Hamilton was a bright and ambitious immigrant who had been raised in extreme poverty in the West Indies and who was sent to America by people who saw his potential. While attending college in New York City, he was swept up in the revolutionary fervor for American liberty, organized his own artillery unit, impressed Washington with his bravery and because he was fluent in French became an important intermediary to the French allies. At his request, he also led the final American bayonet charge in the decisive Battle of Yorktown.

Though Hamilton's home was in New York, his allegiance was to the new country, not to any particular state, which made him a source of suspicion in the eyes of Thomas Jefferson and other early leaders who were anchored in their home states or their "countries," as they put it.

Besides his perceived rootless origins and his self-made rise from poverty, Hamilton was disdained for his hatred of slavery, which he despised because he had witnessed its abuses firsthand in the West Indies. He offended Virginia slaveholders with his foot-dragging over their demands that the new government pursue compensation from Great Britain for freeing many of their slaves, an issue that Secretary of State Jefferson pressed aggressively.

During George Washington's presidency, Hamilton acted as what we might call "Washington's Brain," hatching plan after plan for implementing the new government but also making many tough decisions that offended the Federalists' political enemies. As the point man for Washington's government, Hamilton also became the target of well-financed political attacks, some hatched secretly by Jefferson who emerged as the leader of the Anti-Federalist coalition, based in

the South but drawing strength from Hamilton's political rivals in New York.

Through these bitter battles, Washington generally backed Hamilton but sought to remain above the fray. Washington's executive genius as displayed as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, as president of the Constitutional Convention and as the first U.S. President was always less his personal brilliance than his ability to select talented subordinates, to delegate authority and to incorporate the opinions of others into his final decisions.

As historically important as Washington was as "the father of the nation," he was a leader who didn't let his personal ego dominate his actions. Though Jefferson and other critics of a strong central government were quick to accuse the Federalists of "monarchism" and allege that they secretly wanted to appoint a king, Washington set the standard for limiting personal power by leaving the presidency after two terms.

When Washington did step down, the new nation was off to a promising start, having put the government's finances in order and dodging efforts to draw America in on the side of either Great Britain or France in their renewed fighting. Washington also set what could have become another important precedent by using his will to free his slaves.

One of the Worst: Thomas Jefferson.

To understand why I consider Thomas Jefferson, the third president and one of four faces on Mount Rushmore, one of the worst, you first have to separate Jefferson's words from his actual beliefs and actions.

Many Americans and historians regard Jefferson favorably because of his role as the key drafter of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, expressing some of the Revolutionary War's most radical and noble sentiments, particularly that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Yet, Jefferson didn't believe any of that. Not only was he a major slaveholder in Virginia having slave boys as young as 10 whipped if they didn't work hard enough and apparently imposing himself sexually on at least one and possibly more slave girls Jefferson wrote that he considered blacks inferior to whites, somewhere between orangutans and white people.

Jefferson was also a hypocrite when he lectured his fellow Americans on the need for frugality and the evils of debt while he pampered himself with luxuries and amassed personal debts far greater than he could sustain, which led him to further brutalize his slaves for profit.

And, he was a “chicken hawk,” writing cavalierly about the blood of patriots and tyrants fertilizing the tree of liberty, but running away from battles at Richmond and Charlottesville when he was Virginia’s governor during the Revolutionary War.

Yet, without doubt, Jefferson was a brilliant propagandist, deploying words both to fortify his own positions and to tear down the defenses of his enemies. In the 1790s, he mounted one of the most effective political campaigns in U.S. history against the Federalists, as they struggled to establish the new government under the Constitution. He secretly funded vicious newspaper attacks, particularly against Treasury Secretary Hamilton and President John Adams.

Yet, Jefferson’s most long-lasting and pernicious deception was his reinterpretation of the Constitution, which he had virtually no input in writing because he was in Paris as the American representative to France in 1787. But Jefferson’s dodgy wordsmithing as he recast the Constitution’s meaning had almost a modern-day feel to it. Rather than seek to change the new governing document through the amendment process, Jefferson simply asserted that the words didn’t mean what they said.

The Constitution’s Article I, Section 8 empowered the federal government to “provide for the common Defense and the general Welfare of the United States” and gave Congress the authority “to make all Laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into Execution the foregoing Powers.” But Jefferson proclaimed his own principle of “strict construction,” declaring that Congress only could exercise the specific powers, e.g. coining money, building post offices, etc., as listed in Article I, Section 8.

Jefferson’s crimped interpretation of the Constitution and his reassertion of “states’ rights” including the supposed right to “nullify” federal law or even to secede pleased his plantation base in the South, which saw its huge investment in slavery better protected.

Through his skillful use of language, Jefferson, a pampered son of Virginia’s aristocracy who practiced and defended slavery, also portrayed himself as the great protector of American liberty while painting John Adams and Alexander Hamilton both of whom were self-made men who rose from very humble origins and who opposed slavery as pro-monarchy elitists.

Jefferson’s undeniable political skills enabled him to defeat Adams in the election of 1800, relying on Southern slave states, Hamilton’s rivals in New York, and the Constitution’s “three-fifths clause” that allowed 60 percent of slaves to be counted as people for the purpose of representation in Congress and in the Electoral College.

Jefferson's hypocrisy surfaced again during his presidency. While rhetorically insisting on his narrow interpretation of the Constitution, he effectively embraced the Constitution's broad powers when they served his purposes, such as when he purchased the Louisiana Territories from France in 1803, though no such authority was spelled out in Article I, Section 8.

Though the Louisiana Purchase doubling the country's size is considered Jefferson's greatest achievement as President, he also saw it as a way to entrench slavery in the United States by opening the new lands to the sale of African-Americans.

With slave importation banned, slaves could be bred on plantations in Virginia and then sold to new plantations to the west. The process enriched his slaveholding allies and infused his own depleted net worth with added wealth.

As President, he also established the policy of expelling Native American tribes to west of the Mississippi River if they resisted white domination, an approach that set the stage for the Trail of Tears and generations of genocide.

In the years after his presidency, Jefferson grew even more committed to the Southern slave cause. Though he would periodically express his personal distaste for slavery, he would cloak pro-slavery arguments in legalistic or obscure language.

For instance, when he founded the University of Virginia to help train young southern aristocrats, he did so to keep them from getting tainted by going north to college where they might be exposed to anti-slavery views and a possible role for the federal government in eradicating the system. But he called his reasoning for launching the university "Missourism," a confusing term by which he meant the right of the new states carved from the Louisiana Territories to practice slavery.

Unlike Washington, Jefferson refused to free his slaves in his will, although he did let some children of his reputed slave concubine Sally Hemings run away, possibly including some of his own offspring. But other slaves were sold off after his death to help pay the staggering debts that he had amassed to finance his luxurious lifestyle.

Through his many hypocrisies, Jefferson put the young nation on a collision course with the Civil War. As Jefferson scholar John Chester Miller observed in his landmark book on Jefferson's attitudes toward slavery, *The Wolf by the Ears*, "Jefferson began his career as a Virginian; he became an American; and in his old age he was in the process of becoming a Southern nationalist."

[For more on Jefferson, see Consortiumnews.com's ["Tea Party and Thomas](#)

Jefferson.”]

One of the Best: Abraham Lincoln.

Jefferson’s protection of slavery and the “states’ rights” movement that he built in the early 1800s propelled the United States toward worsening tensions over slavery and ultimately to the Civil War. It fell to Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President, to defeat the Confederate States, reunify the nation and finally abolish slavery. In doing so, Lincoln reaffirmed a key original purpose of the Constitution, to establish the supremacy of the United States over the individual states.

Though Lincoln was not a fervent abolitionist, he came to understand that the carnage from the Civil War revealed the need to once and for all eliminate the buying, selling and abusing of African-Americans. He therefore issued the Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, 1863; created regiments of freed blacks to fight for the Union; and backed up his wartime emancipation edict by pushing through the Thirteenth Amendment ending slavery, shortly before he was assassinated on April 15, 1865.

Whether Lincoln could have orchestrated a more effective Reconstruction is one of American history’s great missed opportunities. The efforts by the radical Republicans, who asserted themselves in the years after Lincoln’s death, led to the important enactments of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments seeking to guarantee equal protection under the law and the right to vote for Americans regardless of race.

But those demands for fair treatment of former slaves were countered by another wave of white-supremacist propaganda that caricatured black officeholders as big-lipped buffoons and made “carpetbagger” a dirty word. Ultimately, Reconstruction failed and the South’s white aristocracy reasserted its control, revived Jefferson’s concepts of “states’ rights,” and drove much of the United States into a century of racial apartheid enforced by lynching and other acts of terrorism.

This Confederate resurgence also created a political alignment of sorts between the unreconstructed South which resented federal interference and the North’s new industrialists who opposed government efforts to regulate commerce.

Though Lincoln’s presidency was cut short by an assassin’s bullet, his contribution to the country cannot be overstated. Through the carnage of the Civil War, he finally addressed one of the nation’s founding crimes, the slavery of African-Americans.

In doing so, he corrected some of the distortions that Jefferson had inserted

into the national narrative. But Lincoln's death at the start of his second term left much of the business unfinished and enabled the states' rights rationalizations to reemerge through the era of Jim Crow and the Gilded Age.

One of the Best: Franklin Roosevelt.

The problems created by the resurgence of Jefferson's restrictive view of the Constitution, which jointly served the interests of white supremacists in the South and rich industrialists in the North, contributed to gross inequalities across the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

In the South, blacks were oppressed and terrorized by the Ku Klux Klan; across the nation, factory workers and small farmers were exploited by the Robber Barons. America may have been a land of opportunity, but it was increasingly a place where most of that opportunity ended up in fewer and fewer hands.

This combination of unregulated capitalism and the stunning disparity in wealth that it created contributed to boom-and-bust cycles that wreaked further havoc on average Americans who found their small businesses shut down, their farms foreclosed on, and their jobs often gone.

This cascade of panics, shocks and various recessions finally culminated in the Great Depression, which began with the stock market crash of 1929 and reverberated across the country in the form of bank runs, massive layoffs and lost farms.

It was Democrat Franklin Roosevelt who, after winning a landslide election victory in 1932, threw the weight of the federal government behind an array of initiatives to put people back to work, to invest in the nation's infrastructure and to stabilize the financial system through regulation of the banks. In effect, what Roosevelt did was to finally give meaning to the constitutional mandate that the national government "provide for the general Welfare."

Not every one of Roosevelt's ideas worked perfectly and he arguably pulled back on government stimulus too soon allowing the country to slide back into recession in the late 1930s but his New Deal, including passage of Social Security for the elderly, laid a strong foundation for the creation of America's Great Middle Class, which was essentially a product of a series of federal laws over several decades: from union protection to transportation projects to safer banking to the minimum wage to the GI Bill to technological research and development to conservation and environmental safeguards.

Despite facing fierce political opposition himself from an old guard that still pushed Jefferson's constitutional revisionism of "strict construction" Roosevelt eventually fashioned a consensus around the necessity of federal government

activism, which continued through the next seven presidents, both Democrat and Republican.

Besides pulling the United States out of the depths of the Great Depression, Roosevelt guided the country through World War II, coordinating a sometimes fractious alliance that defeated fascism in Europe and Asia. Despite a shameful decision to intern many Japanese-Americans during the war, the Roosevelt administration also began the gradual movement toward the federal government taking a more supportive position in favor of civil rights for minorities.

Among the Best: John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson (though with a big asterisk).

The post-World War II presidents including Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower and continuing through John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson are all marred by excesses of the Cold War, even as they deserve credit for building on Roosevelt's New Deal foundation.

Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson also grappled with the terrible legacy of slavery and segregation. These presidents advanced the civil rights cause in fits and starts, fearing the political consequences of offending the Old South and the many white racists throughout the country.

But what distinguishes Kennedy and Johnson in this regard is that they finally brought the federal government down decisively on the side of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and the movement to end segregation and Jim Crow.

The passage of landmark civil rights legislation represented a historic repudiation of Jefferson's Anti-Federalist/states' rights positions on the Constitution or put differently, the civil rights laws belatedly gave meaning to Jefferson's idealistic (but betrayed) rhetoric in the Declaration of Independence about all people being created equal.

Kennedy also contributed his own soaring rhetoric in the cause of peace (most notably in his American University speech on June 10, 1963), and Johnson expanded Roosevelt's New Deal with the Great Society, pushing through Medicare for the elderly, declaring a "war on poverty" and enacting environmental laws.

But the Kennedy/Johnson escalations of the Vietnam War one of the Cold War's greatest crimes will forever muddle and muddy their legacies. Though Kennedy increased the number of U.S. military advisers in Vietnam, his defenders note that he signaled plans to withdraw U.S. forces after his expected reelection in 1964.

However, after JFK's assassination on Nov. 22, 1963, Johnson reversed that tentative decision. After winning a landslide victory in 1964, Johnson sent in a

half-million U.S. combat troops and pummeled both North and South Vietnam with massive air strikes.

LBJ's supporters contend he escalated the war out of fear that Republicans, like Richard Nixon, would otherwise exploit a "who-lost-Vietnam" debate the way they did the "who-lost-China" argument during the anti-communist hysteria of the McCarthy era in the early 1950s.

Johnson supposedly calculated that holding off a communist victory in Vietnam was the price he would have to pay to gain passage of his Great Society programs. Instead, the war began eating away the foundation for the decades-old New Deal consensus. Many young Americans grew increasingly suspicious of government, while tax money that could have gone to addressing domestic needs was squandered on a bloody stalemate.

The public's harsh judgment of Johnson over the Vietnam War might have been mitigated if he had been successful in negotiating peace by the end of his presidency, but Nixon and his 1968 campaign maneuvered behind Johnson's back to sabotage the Paris peace talks by persuading the South Vietnamese government to boycott in exchange for a Nixon promise to get Saigon a better deal, which meant extending and even expanding the war.

Though LBJ learned of what he called Nixon's "treason," Johnson decided not to expose the scheme before the election apparently for fear of splintering the nation if Nixon still managed to win. Johnson also hoped that he could convince a victorious Nixon to let the peace talks move forward. However, after winning, Nixon chose to live up to his promise to the South Vietnamese government and extend the war for four more years.

Because of the Vietnam War, it may be questionable to rate Kennedy and Johnson this highly. Others might give JFK a pass because they believe he would have withdrawn U.S. military advisers if he had lived, but not LBJ for the carnage that he authorized.

Still, their joint role in confronting America's grim record of racial oppression stands as one of the great political accomplishments of U.S. history. It also was a rare example of a major party putting principle before politics. Kennedy and Johnson both knew the consequences of supporting Dr. King and the civil rights movement: the Democrats would lose the white vote in the South and in many working-class areas of the North. But they did it anyway.

One of the Worst: Richard Nixon.

Richard Nixon was a transitional figure to modern America, but not in a good way. His political scheming, which began as a supporting actor in Joe McCarthy's

post-World War II “red scare,” continued through his involvement in CIA covert ops under President Dwight Eisenhower and then his own domestic covert ops against LBJ and the Democrats.

Besides sabotaging Johnson’s Vietnam peace talks in fall 1968, Nixon adopted what became known as the “Southern strategy” to profit politically from white resentment against the civil rights laws of the 1960s. In doing so, he betrayed the proud Republican legacy of ending slavery and supporting fair treatment for blacks.

Those two maneuvers extending the Vietnam War and exploiting white anger drove deep wedges into the American populace, effectively dividing the country between young and old, hawk and dove, white and black, liberal and conservative.

The bitterness and hostility that Nixon engendered would define and poison U.S. politics for the next half century. The nastiness of today’s Fox News and right-wing talk radio would be hard to envision without the venom that was released during Nixon’s years.

Nixon did continue some of the reformist momentum that dated back to FDR, particularly in Nixon’s support for environmental laws, and he moved boldly to open diplomatic relations with communist China and to advance détente with the Soviet Union.

But his us-against-them nastiness as displayed against Vietnam War protesters and his no-holds-barred politics as demonstrated in his creation of a burglary team to conduct break-ins against his enemies represented an ugly assault on the democratic process itself.

Ultimately, Nixon’s excesses were his undoing as the Watergate scandal plunged the nation into an acrimonious two-year crisis that ended in Nixon’s resignation on Aug. 9, 1974. But Nixon’s maudlin self-pity made the angry Republican base even angrier as it set its sights on endlessly getting even with Democrats and liberals.

What Nixon touched and irritated was the itch of Southern white “victimhood,” which had spread through other parts of the country especially among conservative white men.

One of the Worst: Ronald Reagan.

The most skillful politician in harnessing white resentments was Ronald Reagan, a former movie actor who was talented in twisting facts into colorful anecdotes about “welfare queens” buying vodka with food stamps, trees causing pollution, and desperate Latin American peasants representing a Soviet “beachhead” and a

lethal threat to the United States.

Having honed his skills as a General Electric pitchman, Reagan could sell almost anything; his words and images could transform reality into the opposite.

Reagan launched his national campaign for President in 1980 with an appeal to "states' rights" in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the site of an infamous lynching of three civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner in June 1964. Reagan played on this ugly white resentment even as his aw' shucks style softened the crude appeals.

Like Nixon in 1968, Reagan also apparently benefited from his campaign's secret maneuvers to undercut the sitting president, Jimmy Carter who was desperately trying to negotiate the freedom of 52 hostages held captive in Iran.

According to what is now overwhelming evidence, Reagan's campaign went behind Carter's back to contact Iranian officials with promises of a better deal for them if they held the hostages until after the 1980 election or until Carter left office. As it turned out, Iran released the hostages immediately after Reagan was sworn in. [For details, see Robert Parry's *America's Stolen Narrative and Secrecy & Privilege.*]

After becoming the 40th President, Reagan lost little time in declaring an end to the long era of FDR's New Deal and the bipartisan consensus that had built on his legacy for nearly half a century. In his inaugural address, Reagan declared that "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem."

Essentially, Reagan moved to restore the principles of "states' rights" and "free markets," resuscitating the coalition of white supremacists and laissez-faire capitalists who reigned from the end of Reconstruction to the start of the Great Depression.

Ever the master pitchman, Reagan sold many middle-income whites on the necessity for massive tax cuts weighted heavily to the rich, who supposedly would juice up the economy through a trickling down of the money, what Reagan called "supply-side economics."

The strategy blew a hole in the national debt and accelerated what became a three-decade shift toward massive income inequality, a level that hadn't been seen in America since the Gilded Age of the early 1900s. The Great Middle Class began to stagnate and contract. Boom-and-bust returned with the savings-and-loan collapse, a troubling harbinger of things to come.

In foreign policy, Reagan brushed aside the bipartisan strategy of détente with the Soviets, especially around arms control. As part of his new red-ink budget,

Reagan demanded a major arms buildup and support for brutal proxy wars in Central America and Africa, supposedly justified by the rapid ascendance of the Soviet Union when in reality the Communist bloc was careening toward a final crackup.

While blind to the signs of the coming Soviet collapse, Reagan threw massive sums of money and weaponry at Islamic fundamentalists fighting a Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan. To buy Pakistani help in financing the Afghan mujahedeen, the Reagan administration also turned a blind's eye to Pakistan's secret development of a nuclear bomb. And the Afghan "freedom-fighters" included foreign jihadists led by a wealthy Saudi named Osama bin Laden.

Another major part of Reagan's legacy was the systematic substitution of fantasy and propaganda for fact and reason. The Right began a massive investment in an ideological media and attack groups to go after independent-minded journalists. The goal was to indoctrinate a substantial portion of Americans in propaganda "themes" un-tethered from reality. Reagan's success in this regard was impressive.

Overall, what Reagan accomplished was to win over a majority of white men to the revisionist view of the Constitution that was first developed by Thomas Jefferson. Some of the "intellectuals" of Reaganism, such as Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, even espoused the false notion that Jefferson's "strict construction" revisionism was the "original intent" of the Framers when the true "original intent" was the pragmatic nationalism of the Federalists.

One of the Worst: George W. Bush.

After the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, the United States got a bit of a respite on its steep path of decline with the election of President Bill Clinton in 1992. But Clinton only put a mild brake on the process and, in some ways, let the careening bandwagon of deregulation go even faster.

Still, Clinton did reverse some of the Reagan-Bush tax cuts and brought a touch of sanity back to the nation's fiscal order by balancing the budget and putting the nation on a course toward paying off the federal debt.

Then came the Election of 2000, which Clinton's Vice President Al Gore won both in terms of the national popular vote and what should have been the deciding state of Florida. But George W. Bush came out on top, thanks to the machinations of his brother Jeb's state administration in Florida and his father's cronies on the U.S. Supreme Court who blocked a full recount which would have shown Gore winning by a narrow margin. [For details, see Neck Deep.]

Instead, the lightly qualified George W. Bush became the 43rd President. Bush

moved rapidly to resume Ronald Reagan's strategy of slashing the taxes of the rich and freeing businesses from as many regulations as possible.

Bush continued those budget-busting policies even after he missed the warning signs that Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda extremists, who had turned their wrath on the United States, were planning the devastating 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. As Bush morphed into a "war president," he attacked Afghanistan and then Iraq without raising taxes. He simply added another trillion or so dollars to the federal debt.

Between the extravagance of waging two wars on a credit card and the excitement of freeing up Wall Street to sell securitized subprime loans as AAA-rated stock, the Bush administration was rolling pell-mell down a steep incline toward global catastrophe. The instability was made worse by the growing separation of the United States into a shockingly unequal society, a small group of have-a-lots on one side and a vast multitude of the near-poor on the other.

By September 2008, a Wall Street crash pushed the nation to the precipice of another Great Depression. Though the Bush administration moved to bail out the too-big-to-fail banks with trillions of dollars, the crisis forced the layoffs of millions of Americans and the foreclosures of millions of homes. The process of hollowing out the Great American Middle Class, which had been scraping steadily along for three decades, accelerated.

Many middle- and working-class Americans found themselves facing the abyss. But the right-wing propaganda machine, which Ronald Reagan and his supporters had built, continued churning out excuses for what happened, shifting the blame away for right-wing policies and out-of-control capitalism to meddling "liberals" and "gub-mint" interference.

When Bush finally left office on Jan. 20, 2009, he left behind not only an economy in shambles but a legacy of ill-considered wars, an unparalleled surveillance state, and a shocking record of torture and other war crimes. But few lessons were learned.

Bush's successor, Democrat Barack Obama, volunteered to "look forward, not backward." And the right-wing media reframed recent events as showing that what America needed was a weaker federal government and more "states' rights." In other words, the prevailing narrative is one that Thomas Jefferson and other Anti-Federalist slaveholders would have appreciated.

Looking back at the actual wisdom of the Framers and the presidents who recognized the true message of the Constitution the real answer to America's current difficulties would seem to be another era of an activist federal

government reviving the battered middle class, raising taxes on the rich to address income inequality, putting the unemployed to work rebuilding the nation's infrastructure, and tightening regulations on Wall Street and other out-of-control businesses.

But the Right and much of the mainstream media insist that we gaze back at the Founding era through a distorted prism that rearranges the heroes and villains in ways designed to confuse, not to inform.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).
