

Who were our best presidents? Worst presidents?

By Scott Tubbs

Tubbs teaches history at Stevens High School. He has a master's degree in history from Oregon State University.

February conjures thoughts of presidents. As every American youngster knows, two of our finest — George Washington and Abraham Lincoln — were born in February.

The office of president is the central element of our nation's political system. It is clear our founding fathers expected Congress to be the leading branch of government, fearing executive tyranny. But from the outset the president was extremely influential; eventually the executive branch became dominant.

The office is both an institution and a person. It combines executive power with enlightened responsibility. As Woodrow Wilson stated, "The president is at liberty, both in law and conscience, to be as big a man as he can. His capacity will set the limits."

What makes a great president? Who were our greatest presidents? Who were our worst presidents?

Perhaps the most telling tale of a president's record is his combined degree of success on the domestic front and in foreign affairs. History offers numerous chief executives who succeeded in one of these areas, but fell short in the other. Lyndon Johnson, for example, had he not had to deal with the Vietnam War fiasco, probably would have gone down in history as one of the 20th century's greatest presidents — his Great Society program was one of the most remarkable outpourings of impor-



Tubbs

tant domestic legislation in U.S. history. Richard Nixon, on the other hand, displayed genius in foreign policy, but betrayed the country with his involvement in the Watergate affair.

The traits that seem to appear across the board among our best presidents are honesty, compassion, optimism, resourcefulness, the willingness to deviate from prescribed policy and established precedent, an intuitive wisdom combined with a keen sense of timing, a dogged determination fueled by confidence in their motives, and the innate ability to exert forceful leadership at crucial junctures in history.

Historians and political scientists concur that our most outstanding presidents were Washington, Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Others who headed especially meritorious administrations include Andrew Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Harry Truman.

What is it about our two most popular February-born presidents that makes them worthy of such recognition?

Washington is aptly referred to as the "Father of Our Country." His wise and predominately impartial nature was crucial to the success of the new Constitution as the framework for the United States, for he knew that "there is scarcely any part of my conduct that may not hereafter be drawn into precedent." In fact, it is doubtful the representatives at the Constitutional Convention would have delegated so much power to the executive branch had it not been a foregone conclusion that Washington would be the first chief executive. He was elected unanimously.

Washington was viewed as a demigod by virtually the entire nation's populace. No other American has experienced such widespread reverence — its scope is almost incomprehensible today.

While in office, Washington's common sense and scrupulous judgment turned possible crises in both internal issues (the potentially explosive Whiskey Rebellion of 1794) and foreign affairs (the extremely unpopular Jay Treaty of 1795) into positives, thus setting the course for the ultimate success of the "American experiment."

Lincoln, the first Republican president, made one of the most sudden ascents from relative obscurity to high eminence in American politics. As president, he faced a massive internal crisis — secession of 11 states — that had been brooding since the Constitutional Convention. Lincoln was trapped between a desire for compromise with the South, so as to avoid a collapse of the Union, and a need to maintain national authority over the South, lest it challenge a democratic Congress. He handled the situation brilliantly, synchronizing shrewd political maneuvers with battlefield victories. The most obvious result, though it is not why the "Great Emancipator" fought the war, was the death of slavery in the United States.

Lincoln's plan for Reconstruction was also wise. He wanted to proceed "with malice toward none, with charity for all ... to bind up the nation's wounds." Unfortunately, he was assassinated before the South could realize the plan's benefits. Shortly before his death, an aide

suggested to the weary president that he rest. He replied, "I suppose it is good for the body. But the tired part of me is inside and out of reach."

Lincoln was a 19th-century Aesop — he effectively used humor to prove a point. His droll stories, dry jokes and curt remarks plainly expressed his opinions. Once, irked by the inactivity of a key general, Lincoln wrote to the commander, "If you do not want to use the army, I would like to borrow it for a few days." For Lincoln, humor was a psychological necessity — a sort of emollient against periods of melancholy brought on by the darkness confronting his term. He was, nevertheless, a serious thinker with the gift of reaching much further into the heart of a situation than what his contemporaries could manage.

Experts generally agree that our worst presidents were James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Ulysses Grant, Warren Harding and Richard Nixon. The latter three are so designated because of their scandalous administrations. It should be noted that, whereas Nixon was a knowing participant in the scandal from the outset, Grant and Harding were not dishonest and were apparently unaware of any scandals, though they must be held responsible for the goings-on of their administrations.

Johnson's poor legacy comes from his ineptness at Reconstruction after the Civil War. Keep in mind, however, that he succeeded Lincoln, and for that fact might have been destined for a less-than-successful term. Buchanan, faced with the same problems as Lincoln, but four years earlier, largely ignored some issues and delayed addressing others, hence tacitly allowing the sectional storm to propagate to a fervid peak by the time Lincoln took office.

What about John F. Kennedy? Of all presidents, he seems to occupy a unique place. Kennedy's intelligence, handsome appearance, quick wit and personal charm, oddly combined with the controversial circumstances of his death, have elevated him, in the popular mind, to a stature equal with Washington and Lincoln. However, Kennedy's record in office does not support such laud.

Over 40 men have brought immense talents to the presidency, most only to find it an unyielding step in their otherwise successful political and public careers. Even some of the better presidents, despite their success, seemed overwhelmed by the office. Upon leaving the presidency, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Never did a prisoner, released from his chains, feel such relief as I in shaking off the shackles of power."