

LP² STUDY GROUP PROPOSAL FOR SUMMER 2022

BAD PRESIDENTS

Donald Trump's recent presidency has triggered a fierce popular debate with some critics claiming he is the worst president ever. In fact, American history is littered with often ruinously unsuccessful chief executives. That isn't what we normally teach our children or tell ourselves. This study group will examine these failed presidents, what they did wrong and why—and will also look at “Good-Bad” presidents who sometimes had a successful first term before crashing and burning in the second. Looking at American history through the lens of presidential failures can significantly alter one's view of U.S. history and recent politics.

Dan Hertzberg is a retired financial journalist with a career at major financial news organizations including the Wall Street Journal and Bloomberg News. He has coordinated study groups on financial bubbles, the impact of depressions on U.S. history, U.S. budget deficits and the Chinese economy (Summer, 2022).

Type of Study Group: Presentation followed by discussion

Readings and other Materials/Online Services:

Where They Stand: The American Presidents in the Eyes of Voters and Historians by Robert Merry;

Coordinator will provide online access to additional material such as the articles listed in the syllabus below.

******* SYLLABUS - A WORK IN PROGRESS *******

WEEK 1

TOPIC: What makes a bad president?

The issue of “presentism”—judging the past by current standards; how presidential rankings have changed over time.

READINGS:

Where They Stand by Robert Merry, pp. xxi, 3-13, 44-50, 164-66, 219;

“Historians just ranked the presidents. Trump wasn't last.” by Gillia Brockell, *The Washington Post*, 6/30/21;

“The 10 Worst Presidents: Besides Trump, whom do scholars scorn the 1
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most?” by Petula Dvorak, *The Washington Post*, 2/20/18;

“Presidential Rankings are a Game—not History” by David Head, *UCF Today*, 7/21/21;

“How Would You Rank the Greatest Presidents” by Megan Gambino, *Smithsonian Magazine*, 8/12/12.

QUESTIONS:

How bad do you have to be to win the title of a Bad President? Is it fair to apply our current views to presidents who served in office when slavery was legal? How should we judge presidents who won re-election despite behavior we find questionable?

WEEK 2

TOPIC: Andrew Jackson

READINGS:

Where They Stand by Robert Merry, pp.20-23, 25-36;

“What happens when racism and executive overreach intersect in the Oval Office” by Laura Ellyn Smith, *The Washington Post*, 7/16/19;

“Andrew Jackson was a slaver, ethnic cleanser and tyrant. He deserves no place on our money” by Dylan Matthews, *Vox.com*, 4/21; “Andrew Jackson’s Bank War and the Panic of 1837” by Eric Hilt and Katherine Lang, *economics.harvard.edu*;

“Andrew Jackson and Presidential Power” by John Yoo [Yes, that John Yoo], *Charleston Law Review* (2008), pp. 521-26, 526-36, 557-560; “U.S. History Jacksonian Democracy 1820-1840”, *CUNY Open Educational Resources*, “Democratic Reforms” and “Party Politics and the Election of 1824”.

QUESTIONS:

Why is Andrew Jackson generally rated so highly as a successful President by historians? Does it really matter that Jackson killed the Bank of the United States? Wasn’t Jackson’s treatment of Native Americans just a reflection of popular sentiment at the time and an historical inevitability?

WEEK3

TOPIC: James Polk

READINGS:

Where They Stand by Robert Merry, pp. 37-40, 117-118,

121-122; “Into the West” by Sean Wilentz, *nytimes.com*, 11/20/09;

“Andrew Jackson and Presidential Power” by John Yoo, *Charleston Law*

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QUESTIONS:

Should we judge Polk differently because he promised from the beginning to serve only a single term as president? Polk presided over a vast expansion of the territory of the United States. How should we judge this? Does it really matter that Polk started the Mexican War and lied about it?

WEEK 4

TOPIC: Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore and Franklin Pierce

READINGS:

Taylor: *Where They Stand* by Robert Merry, p. 95;

Fillmore: *Where They Stand* by Robert Merry, pp. 95-96, 112; View:

“Millard Fillmore: Last of the Whigs (1850-1853)” by Professor Dave, *YouTube*;

“Remembering the sins of Millard Fillmore” by Carole Emberton, *The Washington Post*, 1/5/18;

“Why can’t Donald Trump be more like Millard Fillmore” by Steven Lubet, *The Hill*, 12/27/20;

Pierce: *Where They Stand* by Robert Merry, pp. 96-99;

“Franklin Pierce: Domestic Affairs” by Jean H. Baker, *Miller Center for Public Affairs*.

WEEK 5

TOPIC: James Buchanan

READINGS:

Where They Stand by Robert Merry, pp. 99-103;

“How Would You Rank the Great Presidents” by Megan Gambino, *Smithsonian Magazine*, 8/12/12 [brief quote beginning “Just as we can learn from the successes...”];

“What Democrats Can Learn from the Forgotten Impeachment of James Buchanan” by Joshua Zietz, *Politico*, 12/18/19;

James Buchanan and the Coming of the Civil War by John Quist and Michael J. Birkner, Chapter 5: “President James Buchanan: Executive Leadership and the Crisis of Democracy” by Michael A. Morrison, pp. 134-158;

“Who’s the worst president of them all?” by Glenn W. LaFantasie, *Salon.com*, 2/21/11.

WEEK 6

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TOPIC: Andrew Johnson and Ulysses Grant

READINGS:

Johnson: *Where They Stand* by Robert Merry, pp. 104-107, 112; “Andrew Johnson: Life in Brief” by Elizabeth R. Varon, *UVA/Miller Center; A Short History of Reconstruction* by Eric Foner, pp. 84-86, 112-114; Grant: *Where They Stand* by Robert Merry, pp. 24-25, 79-82, 83-84: “Who’s Buried in the History Books” by Sean Wilentz, *The New York Times*, 3/14/10.

WEEK 7

TOPIC: Rutherford Hayes and Benjamin Harrison

READINGS:

Hayes: *Where they Stand* by Robert Merry, pp. 82-83;
“Crisis Chronicles: The Long Depression and the Panic of 1873” by Thomas Klitgaard and James Narron, *Liberty Street Economics*, 2/5/16; “The Historical Presidency: The Gilded Age Presidents and the Economy” by Mark Zachary Taylor, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 51 (4), pp. 860-883;
Harrison: “The Historical Presidency: The Gilded Age Presidents and the Economy” by Mark Zachary Taylor, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, “Presidential Vision” section;
“Benjamin Harrison, Ideas and the Seeds of Economic Crisis 1889-1893” by Mark Zachary Taylor, paper presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Conference, 9/11/20.

WEEK 8

TOPIC: Woodrow Wilson

READINGS:

Where They Stand by Robert Merry, pp. 125-131; 146-150;
“Woodrow Wilson and Federal Segregation” by Kathleen Wolgemuth, *Journal of Negro History*, Vol.44, No. 2 (April 1959);
“Woodrow Wilson and the U.S. Ratification of the Treaty of Versailles” by John Pyne and Gloria Sesso, *Organization of American Historians Magazine of History*, Vol. 9, No. 3, (Spring 1995), pp. 58-64.

WEEK 9:

TOPIC: Warren Harding and Herbert Hoover

READINGS:

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Harding: *Where They Stand* by Robert Merry, pp. 90-92, 107-109;
“What If Warren Harding Wasn’t a Terrible President” by Ronald Radosh
and Allis Radosh, *Slate*, 7/16/2014;

Hoover: *Where They Stand* by Robert Merry, pp. 110-112; “Herbert
Hoover: Domestic Affairs” by David Hamilton, *UVA/Miller Center*.

WEEK 10: Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan

WEEK 11: George W. Bush and Donald Trump

WEEK 12: Discussion

What makes a Bad President? What Makes a Good President?
Views on Obama and Biden.