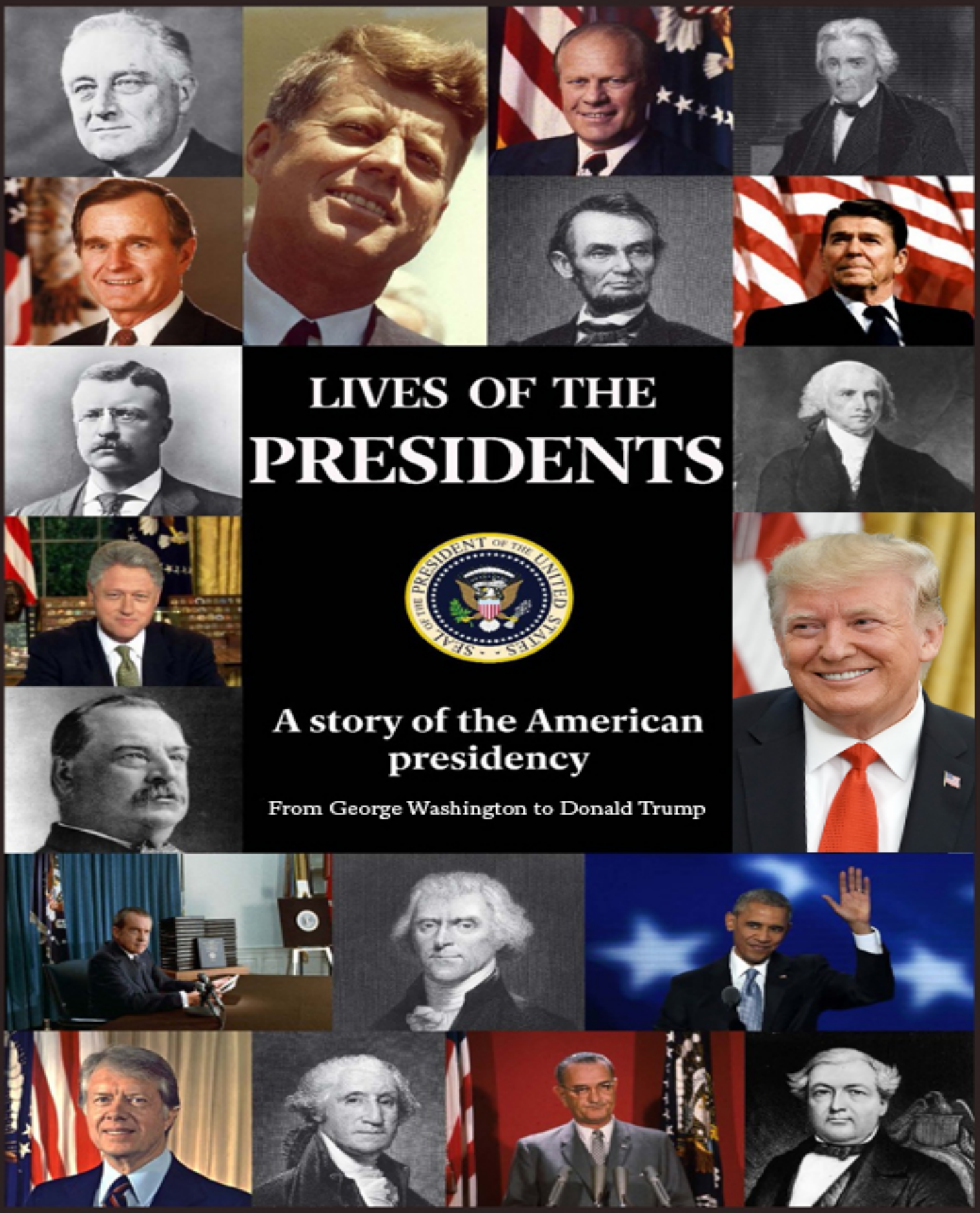
The INDEPENDENT



LIVES OF THE PRESIDENTS

A story of the American presidency

From George Washington to Donald Trump

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A story of the American presidency: from George Washington to Donald Trump

The INDEPENDENT

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The INDEPENDENT

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INTRODUCTION

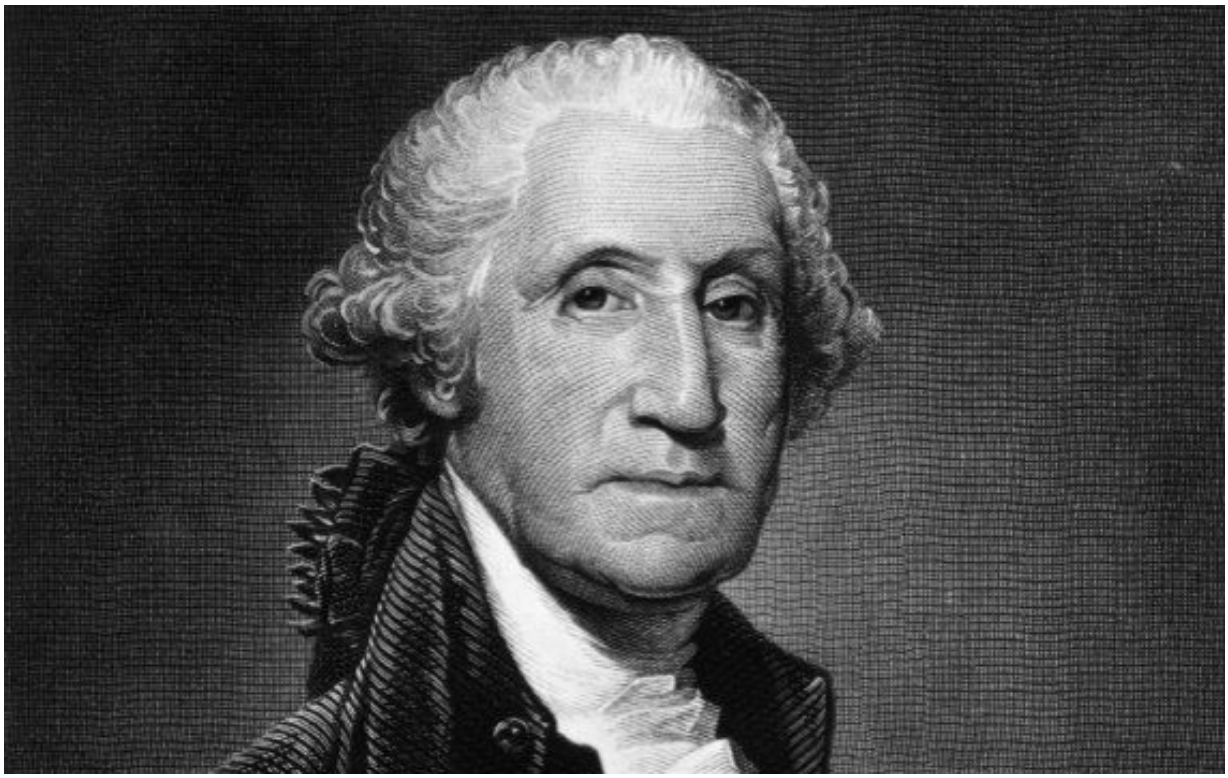
American presidents are unlike other heads of state. Their lives and deeds echo far beyond the shores of their own land. More than any royal dynasty, the men who have occupied this high office have shaped the destiny of the world. That is why the most sensational race for the White House in living memory is being watched with anxiety and hope not just by Americans but by millions of people of all nationalities.

This unique eBook is a celebration of the most important job on Earth. It chronicles the achievements and failures of some of the most influential people who have ever lived. To read their stories in sequence is to feel the great tides of history at work: the clashes of ideologies, races and empires; the painful evolution of democratic principles; the noble and dubious military adventures; the panics, crashes and recoveries. Drawn from a wide range of sources (including, in most cases, official White House biographies), these are narratives that will inform your understanding of both past and present.

If you want to understand the true significance of the current cut-throat battle to become (probably) the most powerful man on earth, you need to understand the extraordinary collection of colourful individuals who came before. This collection offers a rare chance to do so.

GEORGE WASHINGTON
1st - THE FATHER OF THE NATION

1789-1797



How to deal with a saint? For a secular saint is what George Washington has become. History records him as the man who led American forces to victory in the War of Independence, and as the first President of the infant United States, who did more than anyone to ensure the success of an untried and unprecedented experiment in democracy. But in Washington's case, objective history more often than not takes a back seat to myth.

His name is everywhere. His face adorns the dollar bill and the 25 cents coin. Across the modern US, 26 mountains are named after him, as well as hundreds of schools, colleges and universities, towns and counties, various bridges, parks and forts; not to mention an entire state of the union and the very capital of the country he did so much to found. The only other world capital to share the distinction with Washington DC is Monrovia, named after the fifth President, James Monroe, who created Liberia as a home for freed slaves.

Washington often seems as remote as a saint, a half-mythologised figure from distant antiquity. And indeed, this stern-looking white Virginian in clasped hair and frock coat, dead for more than 200 years, would seem to have little to do with the teeming, multicultural superpower of today; about as relevant to the contemporary United States as the Emperor Augustus is to modern Italy. Everyone pays lip-service to George Washington, but few people have much idea of the human being behind the symbol.

Nor did his wife Martha greatly aid the historian's cause, destroying almost entirely the correspondence of 40 years of marriage that might have given posterity a truly unvarnished portrait of the man. Her action was understandable enough, to preserve her privacy and relationship with a man who by the end of his life had become America's first mega-celebrity, on whom the mantle of divinity was already descending. Anything connected with him - a pen, a stirrup, even a fragment of his nightgown - was treated as reverently as a holy relic.

Nor did the early chroniclers help. For Parson Weems, the first of Washington's countless biographers, his subject was "a hero and demigod... the greatest man who ever lived". In his The Life of Washington, published in 1800, a year after the first President's death, Reems described him as "just as Aristides, temperate as Epictetus, patriotic as Regulus, modest as Scipio, prudent as Fabius, rapid as Marcellus, undaunted as Hannibal, as Cincinnatus disinterested, to liberty firm as Cato, as respectful of the laws as Socrates".

And what Reems didn't know, he made up; thus the tale of the cherry tree. The six-year-old Washington is said to have been given a hatchet and, as young boys are wont to do, he went around chopping at everything in sight. Alas, he destroyed a lovely young cherry tree in the garden. His father noticed, and asked young George if he knew what had happened. The future President paused only a second before answering: "I can't tell a lie, Pa, I did cut it with my hatchet." At which point his father embraced him, saying that "such an act of heroism is worth more than a thousand trees, though blossomed with silver and their fruits of purest gold".

In Washington's case, therefore, the first draft of history is not very helpful. Nor is the other item of trivia about him, as well-known as the tale of the cherry tree (though this one happens to be true). Washington had appalling teeth. By the time he became President in 1789 he had only one tooth left, and one of his many sets of dentures is on permanent display at his estate at Mount Vernon. But once you move beyond the trivia and set aside the legends, a truly remarkable man none the less emerges - in some ways as

relevant to 21st-century America as he was to the fledgling late 18th-century republic.

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A fourth generation Virginian, George Washington was born in 1732. His father Augustine, a tobacco farmer, died when he was 11, and George's education was modest. But he quickly developed a taste for adventure and the outdoor life.

The history of America, and the world, could have been very different had his domineering mother, Mary, not forbidden him to become a midshipman in the British navy, a position that had been arranged by the powerful Fairfax family - Virginia landowners and vital patrons of Washington. Undeterred, the Fairfaxes gave him another job, as a surveyor on a trip to establish the boundaries of their vast estates in what was then America's inland wilderness. In 1749, at the age of only 17, the future President gained his first public office, as a surveyor for Culpeper County. He spent most of the next three years surveying Virginia's frontiers, and learning the rugged outdoor skills that he would later call on as a soldier.

On the death of his brother Lawrence in 1752, George inherited the estate at Mount Vernon, on the Potomac estuary 15 miles south of present day Washington, which would be his true home for the rest of his life. By then he was an arresting figure, slender, exceptionally tall for the period at 6ft 2in, and an outstanding horseman. However, most crucially for US history,

he took over Lawrence's position as a major in Virginia's militia - again at the instigation of the Fairfax family. Thus began Washington's career in soldiery that would culminate in victory at the Battle of Yorktown in 1781, sealing American independence.

But it was during an earlier war that he learnt the skills of battle. In 1753, the 21-year-old Washington was an obvious choice of Virginia's governor to lead an expedition to warn off the French, who had moved south from Canada to build forts along the Ohio river on land claimed by Britain.

The following year, what became known as the French and Indian War began in earnest. Washington led a force of 160 men west and staged a surprise attack on a French unit. But that victory - which the French claimed was an unprovoked assault - drew a ferocious counterattack from the enemy, leading to humiliating surrender at Fort Necessity. It was Washington's first taste of defeat. But as in the Revolutionary War against the British two decades later, setbacks only seemed to make him stronger.

He emerged with honour from the disastrous Braddock campaign mounted by the British in 1755 in a second attempt to drive the French from the Ohio valley and in 1756 was named commander-in-chief of all Virginia's forces - he was only 24 at the time. By now an expert in the stealthy and improvised form of warfare needed in the forests of the American wilderness, Washington led the expedition to capture the strategically vital Fort Duquesne in 1758. Five years later, the French had abandoned all claims to lands east of the Mississippi, and the war was won.

In 1758, Washington returned to civilian life and for the next 16 years led his preferred life of a gentleman-farmer at Mount Vernon. His marriage to the wealthy widow Martha Dandridge Custis made him one of the richest planters in Virginia. In 1759, his political career began as he was elected to Virginia's assembly, the House of Burgesses, where he would serve until 1774, alongside the likes of Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry.

All the while, however, confrontation was growing between the colony and its ultimate ruler, Britain, over the issue of taxation. Washington was proud of his English heritage, but no less outraged than his fellow citizens by London's new policy of making the colonies help pay for war debts and for their continued defence, without according them the slightest say in decisions that affected them.

In 1769, Washington emerged as a leader in the resistance movement, when he proposed to the Virginia assembly a colony-wide boycott of British goods. Britain gave some ground, but the underlying tensions grew and exploded with the Boston Tea Party of 16 December 1773. The British navy blockaded the port of Boston in reprisal, while the colonies - regarding a move against one as a move against all - convened the first Continental Congress to protect their rights. Like most others in the Virginia delegation, Washington was all but convinced that the only solution was independence.

Events then moved fast. By the time of the second congress in 1775, fighting had broken out in Massachusetts, and Boston was occupied by the

British military. War in the north was under way; the only question was who would lead the colonial forces. To lock the southern colonies into the struggle, it was argued, a southern commander was essential. Washington, who had broad military experience and first hand knowledge of the British army, was the obvious choice.

The new commander-in-chief of the Continental Army took charge of a ragtag militia of 16,000 men on 3 July 1775. The war, America's longest conflict until Vietnam, would drag on for eight years. There were moments when all seemed lost, but the war would end in victory and the birth of what would become the richest and most powerful country in history.

Nowhere is the disentangling of myth from reality over Washington more important than in assessing his record as a general. For admirers, he ranks alongside Hannibal, Caesar and Napoleon as one of history's greatest commanders. In terms of his influence on history, that status might be justifiable. Undoubtedly too he was a gifted organiser and administrator, a born leader of enormous personal bravery who bowed to no setback and turned what was little more than an armed rabble into America's first regular military force. As a strategist, however, his record is mediocre. America probably would not have won its independence without Washington, but a more skilled, less cautious battlefield commander could surely have won it more quickly.

At first the war went badly for the colonies. In November 1776, the British drove Washington's forces from New York. Without the spectacular victory

at Trenton, after Washington's force had crossed the half-frozen Delaware river on Christmas night, the war effort might have collapsed entirely.

Washington quickly secured another victory at Princeton, driving the British from New Jersey. By September 1777, however, he was reeling again, with the defeats of Brandywine and Germantown, and the British capture of Philadelphia. Exhausted, demoralised and desperately short of supplies, his men set up winter quarters at Valley Forge in Pennsylvania. Somehow, Washington rebuilt his force, in what was perhaps the turning point of the entire war. The Continental Army that re-emerged to take the field in June 1778 was no longer a collection of ill-trained state militias, but the first true American army.

28th June 1778: George Washington at the Battle of Monmouth in New Jersey during the American Revolutionary War

The conflict dragged on, but with the gradual entry of the French into the fray, the balance of power shifted. The Continental Army faced other perilous moments. But in October 1781 General Cornwallis and his army, trapped at Yorktown between the forces of Washington and Lafayette by land and a French fleet by sea, were forced to surrender. In 1783 the Treaty of Paris was signed, the last British troops left New York for home, and the United States of America was an internationally recognised country at last.

For a second time, Washington went home to his beloved Mount Vernon. But not before he had headed off the Newburgh Conspiracy of 1783. The episode, when officers who had been unpaid for months were plotting to take power from Congress, was the closest the US has ever come to a military coup. The address with which Washington quelled the uprising was one of his finest moments, underlining once more his belief in the supremacy of civilian over military power.

But his retirement lasted only four years. It quickly became clear that the Continental Congress and the existing Articles of Confederation between the states were utterly inadequate; without the glue of war to hold it together and submerged in war debt, the country threatened to disintegrate into its 13 component parts unless an effective central government was created. In 1787, the Constitutional Convention began in Philadelphia. Washington the war hero, the most famous man in the country, was the obvious choice to preside over it. And although he might not have liked the idea, he would almost certainly be the first President.

However noble the new constitution's goals, however deftly engineered the separation of powers, and the checks and balances between the three branches of government, it was ultimately no more than a piece of paper, untested in real life. Washington did more than anyone to turn a document into a functioning polity, combining a strong central government with the jealously guarded rights of the 13 individual states.

As case after case before the Supreme Court proves, conflict between these two objectives continues to this day. But it was never more visible than in Washington's first term between 1789 and 1793, in the rivalry between two brilliant colleagues: Thomas Jefferson, then Secretary of State and champion of states' rights, and Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury and leader of the Federalists. Ultimately, Washington, convinced that without a strong central authority the infant country would fall apart, sided with Hamilton. The price was an estrangement from Jefferson that endured until his death.

Washington was all too aware of the burden on his shoulders. "I walk an untrodden path," he wrote soon after taking office. "There is scarcely any part of my conduct that may not hereafter be drawn into precedent." In fact, he literally invented the modern presidency.

30th April 1789: The inauguration of George Washington

He instigated the cabinet (albeit consisting then of just four persons, the secretaries of state, treasury and war, and an attorney general, compared with the two dozen or so posts of cabinet rank today). Under Washington, the basic model for relations between the presidency and Congress emerged, as did the tradition that a president takes the lead in foreign affairs.

It was Washington who established the precedent that a president should serve no more than two four-year terms. In truth, he had intended to retire after only one, but Hamilton and Jefferson alike pleaded with him to stay on in the interests of national unity. "North and South will stay together if they have you to hang on," Jefferson wrote to him. But in 1797, Washington left power for good, and his two-term precedent endured, with the sole exception of Franklin Roosevelt (after whose death the two-term limit was finally written into the constitution).

Washington even established the title of his office. He had resisted overtures to become king, but others pressed even more bombastic designations. "His Highness the President of the United States of America and Protector of Their Liberties," was one suggestion, "His Exalted High Mightiness" was another. At Washington's request, it was decided he should be called simply the President of the United States, or "Mr President".

Less happily, he presided over the emergence of some other enduring traditions of American government. One was infighting among senior aides, of which the rift between Hamilton and Jefferson was an early forerunner. Another was that of a troubled second term. Between 1789 and 1792, Washington put barely a foot wrong. But after being unanimously re-elected in March 1793, he was quickly confronted by a devastating national health crisis, a home grown tax revolt that briefly threatened a second revolution and, above all, by a huge foreign crisis.

The storming of the Bastille in 1789 and the revolt against overweening monarchical power was one thing, a tribute to the ideals of the American Revolution a decade earlier. The descent of the French Revolution into the Great Terror, and the spectre of a new war between France and Britain in which the young United States would be forced to take sides, were quite another. Jefferson's sympathies, and those of the public, lay with France. Washington and Hamilton, however, believed that a new war with Britain that at the least would cut off trade with Europe, and at worst might destroy a still fragile country, simply could not be risked.

Jefferson resigned in December 1793, and the following year Washington began negotiations on a treaty with Britain. The deal that emerged was widely seen as a sell-out to the former colonial master, and the President was vilified by the Jeffersonian press. It was an early lesson that in a democracy, government involves tough choices. Washington had paid a heavy price in popularity, but he had bought vital time for the new country to find its feet.

Domestic crises arose as well. In the summer of 1793, the capital, Philadelphia, was swept by yellow fever. The city was all but evacuated, but only the onset of winter ended the mosquito-born epidemic. The following summer, mobs in western Pennsylvania took to the streets in protest at a new government tax on whiskey. Briefly the 6,000-plus protesters threatened to secede, and the "Whiskey Rebellion" only ended when a 13,000-strong federal army was mobilised against them. Washington

himself commanded the force, the only time in US history that a president has led his troops in person.

Somehow, too, he found time to supervise the construction of the new national capital that would soon bear his name. Washington DC was laid out by the French architect Pierre L'Enfant but, as befitted a former surveyor and lifelong freemason, the first President kept an eagle eye on developments. He laid the cornerstone of the Capitol building in person in 1793, and closely monitored the construction of the White House (completed in 1800, a year after his death).

However, he conspicuously failed to solve one problem - America's original sin of slavery. He himself had been a slave owner since 1743, when he inherited 10 from his father. As he grew older, he appears to have personally turned against the practice, above all because of the contradiction with the ideals of liberty and equality in whose name the Revolutionary War was fought.

He kept the issue out of the new draft constitution, knowing full well it might tear the country apart at its birth. A letter to his nephew from 1797, the year he returned for the last time to Mount Vernon, was prophetic. "I wish from my soul that the legislature of this state [Virginia] could set the policy of a gradual abolition of slavery," he wrote. "It would prevent much future mischief."

When he died in 1799, Washington owned 316 slaves. In his will, he called for them to be given their freedom, after the death of his wife Martha, but she carried out his instructions while still alive, in 1801. Sixty years later, the US was plunged into a civil war over slavery - mischief that almost destroyed the country, just as Washington had feared.

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Even from these bare bones of his life, two things are plain about George Washington. First, he was an undeniably great man. Like every human being, he had flaws. His own included a fierce temper, which he gradually learned to control. As a young man he could be excessively driven and ungracious. As noted earlier, he had shortcomings as a battlefield commander. Whether as general or president, he could be reserved and distant.

Nor was he the most intellectually gifted member of the extraordinary group of men who founded America. Washington had a good, but not a great mind, according to Jefferson (who had no doubt that his own intellect fell into the latter category), and was no more than an adequate communicator. "His colloquial talents were not above mediocrity," in Jefferson's words, "possessing neither copiousness of ideas nor fluency of words." Then again, such gifts probably mattered less then than they do now. Washington may also have been hampered by his poor teeth - which could explain his clenched-mouth and slightly pained appearance in the famous portrait by Gilbert Stuart that adorns the dollar bill.

But his personal bravery was astounding. As Jefferson put it: "He was incapable of fear, meeting personal dangers with the calmest unconcern." In public life he was solid and unflappable and, as his contemporaries all testified, possessed an enviable judgment of both men and events. The combination made him a born leader. Washington was the man to whom his peers instinctively turned to in a crisis.

For Abigail Adams, the wife of Washington's successor John Adams, his defining quality was his unaffected dignity. "The gentleman and the soldier are agreeably blended in him," she wrote. "Modesty marks every line and feature of his face."

Washington was never vain. Probably no great leader has coveted power less and none has been less corrupted by power. He had none of the haughty sense of destiny possessed by, say, General de Gaulle - the iron belief that a desperate country would come to him on bended knee, and that he would dictate the terms on which he accepted the summons of history.

Not once, but three times Washington walked away from power: in 1759 (in Virginia), in 1783 (after the war) and in 1797. His election as President was no triumph to gloat over, but "the event which I have long dreaded". The news, he said, left only "a heart filled with distress" as he contemplated the "ten thousand embarrassments, perplexities and troubles to which I must again be exposed".

In that sense, Washington is the role model for every one of the presidents who have followed him - even though his example has usually been honoured in the breach. No country cherishes its legends quite like the US, but the accounts of contemporaries such as Abigail Adams have no need of embellishment by the likes of Parson Weems. Washington's record speaks for itself.

After he left the presidency in 1797, he was the most famous private citizen on the planet. His death two years later plunged the young nation into grief, and the funeral ceremonies and commemorations of his life continued for months afterwards. "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen," was the famous phrase of Harry "Light Horse" Lee, Washington's old comrade-in-arms from the Continental Army, and later governor of Virginia. Or as the assembled members of the Senate put it in a note to Washington's successor, John Adams: "Our country mourns its father."

The second, even more salient fact about Washington is that without him the country might not have existed. And even if it had, it might have quickly disintegrated into its component parts or fallen victim to a military coup, had not Washington's hand been at the tiller.

Today, the position of the US as an economic, military and cultural colossus is taken for granted. It is easy to forget how precarious its birth was. In 1776, there was no guarantee the newly proclaimed country would win the

war. That it prevailed was due in large part to Washington's powers of leadership.

But winning the war was only the start. The United States that had won independence was broke and in semi-chaos. It had to work out how to govern itself and - more importantly - put that system into practice. Without Washington's guidance of the Constitutional Convention, and the open secret that he would be the first president, that task too might have proved impossible.

Today, George Washington does not overly impinge on the American consciousness. Biographers and historians have turned their focus to the other founding fathers: Adams, Hamilton and Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and James Madison. But, without Washington, these undeniably great men could have been mere footnotes of history.

And if you seek Washington's monuments, look around. Not just at the physical ones - from the eponymous obelisk that rises sword-like from the heart of the country's capital, to the face on Mount Rushmore, to all those towns, counties, roads, schools, hills and mountains across the continent that bear his name - but to the intangible ones as well. Each year, for instance, the US celebrates President's Day on the third Monday of February. The holiday was designated Washington's Birthday (22 February according to the modern calendar, 11 February by the Julian calendar in use when he was born), and was first celebrated in 1796, when he was still president.

Meanwhile, Washington's Farewell Address of September 1796, a few months before he returned to Mount Vernon for good, ranks second only to Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address in the canon of sacred presidential texts. Never delivered orally but published in every newspaper, the text is as relevant today as when it appeared more than two centuries ago.

In it, the departing president offers a stirring defence of federal government, and warns against excessive partisanship in politics. Though Washington never wore his faith on his sleeve, the Farewell Address stresses the importance of religion as a basis for personal morality, without which no society can function. In words that ring especially true right now, he argued for stable credit and the avoidance of "the accumulation of debts". Revenue was needed to pay debts, but "to have revenue there must be taxes... and no taxes can be devised that are not inconvenient and unpleasant."

Not only did Washington anticipate by five years Jefferson's famous warning about the perils of "entangling alliances" (the phrase used in the address was "permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world"). A century and a half before Dwight Eisenhower spoke of the danger of a "military-industrial complex", Washington was also urging his fellow citizens to avoid "overgrown military establishments" that were "inauspicious to liberty".

America's devotion to its military may be traced back to Washington, the first of a number of presidents to have served as generals, of whom

Eisenhower is but the most recent. None, however, more perfectly fused military and political service to his country. Washington's example helps explain why generals often are touted as, and sometimes become, presidential candidates. The former Nato commander Alexander Haig in 1988, Colin Powell in 1996, retired general Wesley Clark in 2004 - every soldier who runs for the White House hopes that Washington's stardust will land on their shoulder, that they will be seen as another citizen-warrior, as wise, as honourable and as impartial as the first president.

In the meantime, each year the entire text of the 1796 Address is read aloud on the floor of the Senate and entered into the Congressional record - another reminder of the giant shadow cast by George Washington over America's political history.

He remains that most tantalising of figures, as appealing in our anxious times as 200 years ago: the national leader who rescues his country, but who would rather be anywhere than in the political arena. Not surprisingly, Washington was the first president of the Society of the Cincinnati, founded in 1783 to preserve the ideals of the War of Independence and named after Cincinnatus, the 5th century BC Roman leader who agreed to serve as dictator during a war, but after victory immediately returned to his plough.

In Washington's case the parallel was unmistakable, except perhaps in two respects. By the 1790s he was one of the biggest landowners in America, and his Mount Vernon estate was not so much a farm as an agro-industrial conglomerate of its day, boasting a large fishing operation in the Potomac

estuary, large grain production, and the biggest whiskey distillery in the country. And while Cincinnatus was away for mere weeks, Washington's absences were measured in years.

Today, Washington is unanimously ranked as one of the three great presidents in American history, a blue chip in the fickle stock market of presidential reputations. The "father of his country" is in the exclusive company of Lincoln, who won the Civil War, and Franklin Roosevelt, who led the US through the Great Depression to victory in the Second World War.

He may be out of fashion in the academic world, but not with the public, who flock to Mount Vernon every day of the year, shuffling like pilgrims through the house itself, inspecting the fabulous new museum, and savouring the handsome grounds and magnificent views across the Potomac estuary.

These visitors may not believe in holy relics. They realise the great man never actually cut down a cherry tree and did not voluntarily confess all to his father, but they do know he was the man who did more than anyone to ensure the success of the world's most ambitious experiment in democracy.

And at a moment when America's image is more tarnished than it has been for many decades, the person of Washington - real or imagined - is surely more precious than ever.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"My movements to the chair of government will be accompanied by feelings not unlike those of a culprit who is going to the place of his execution."

"Precedents are dangerous things; let the reins of government then be braced and held with a steady hand, and every violation of the Constitution be reprehended: if defective let it be amended, but not suffered to be trampled upon whilst it has an existence."

"As the sword was the last resort for the preservation of our liberties, so it ought to be the first to be laid aside when those liberties are firmly established."

"Labour to keep alive in your breast that spark of celestial fire called conscience."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." Henry Lee

"One of the greatest captains of the age." Benjamin Franklin

"You commenced your Presidential career by encouraging and swallowing the greatest adulation, and you travelled America... to put yourself in the way of receiving it... As to what were your views... they cannot be directly inferred from expressions of your own... As to you, sir... a hypocrite in public life, the world will be puzzled to decide whether you are an apostate or an imposter, whether you have abandoned principles or whether you ever had any?" Thomas Paine

"Too illiterate, unread, unlearned for his status and reputation." John Adams

MINUTIAE

» Washington's presidential salary was $25,000 - equivalent to around $1m today. He spent around seven per cent of this on alcohol.

» He was the only president to be inaugurated in two cities: New York City and Philadelphia.

» His favourite recreations were billiards, cards and foxhunting.

» He struggled for many years with the unsatisfactory dentures of the day, made not (as is often believed) of wood but, rather, from a variety of other unlikely substances, including lead, ivory, cows' teeth and hippopotamus bone. The latter proved excessively porous and was stained black by the port he drank.

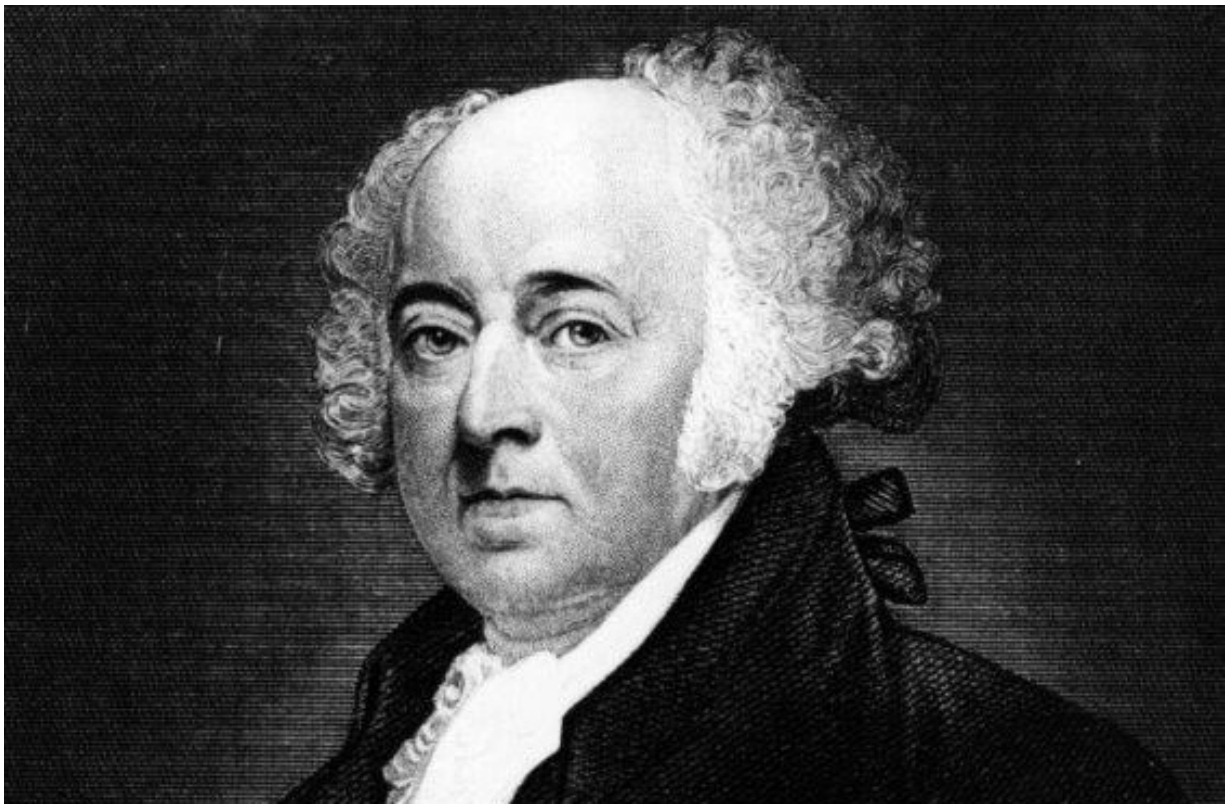
» The story about the cherry tree was entirely imaginary - made up soon after his death by his biographer, Parson Mason Locke Weems.

» George Washington was the only president to be elected unanimously.

By Rupert Cornwell

JOHN ADAMS
2nd

1797-1801



A brilliant but short-tempered lawyer and small-time farmer from Massachussetts, Adams first made a name for himself by defending the British soldiers accused of killing unarmed civilians in the Boston Massacre in 1770. Soon afterwards, he became involved in the struggle for independence. An influential pamphleteer, he served as a diplomat in France and the Netherlands during the Revolutionary War, and was on the panel charged with drafting the Declaration of Independence.

In 1789 he was elected vice-president under George Washington - a post that he found frustrating: "My country has in its wisdom contrived for me the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived," he complained to his wife. His concern for the minutiae of protocol was much mocked at this stage in his career; his enemies referred to him derisively as "His Rotundity".

He became president at a time when the Napoleonic wars were causing great difficulties for the US, both at sea and in the intense partisanship that the issue provoked at home. The factional divisions that had begun to appear under Washington soon dominated his presidency.

Adams was not helped by the then unresolved constitutional anomaly whereby the runner-up in the presidential election automatically became vice-president. Adams was a Federalist; Thomas Jefferson, his Vice-President, was a Republican; and the election contest between the former friends had been a bitter one. There were predictable tensions.

Adams's presidency was also coloured by a deteriorating relationship with France - which, under the ruling Directory, suspended commercial relations and refused to receive US envoys. This culminated in 1797 with the scandal known as the "X, Y, Z Affair", in which bribes were demanded by French agents in return for the possible normalisation of diplomatic relations. Adams exposed this in Congress, and the resulting anti-French feeling increased his popularity, at the expense of the Republicans.

This encouraged him to pass the notorious Alien and Sedition Acts (1798), which were ostensibly intended to frighten foreign agents out of the country but also dealt a severe blow to freedom of the press by making it a crime to "write, print, utter or publish... scandalous and malicious writing or writing against the government of the United States..." (This aspect of the legislation was allowed to lapse in 1800.)

Adams built up the navy to defend US shipping against French privateers, but resisted popular pressure for war, and sending a peace mission to France probably contributed to his defeat in the 1800 election. (Nonetheless, he considered his diplomacy "the most splendid diamond in my crown".) He spent the final hours of his administration appointing his supporters to many judgeships and court offices. He then ungraciously left town to avoid Jefferson's inauguration. Jefferson undid many of these "Midnight Appointments".

Adams retired to his farm at Quincy, Massachussetts, where he lived not only to be 90 but also to see his son, John Quincy Adams, elected president. (His other two sons were profligate: one died an alcoholic at 30; the other lived rather longer but also drank, and died in debt.) In later years Adams was reconciled to Thomas Jefferson, and the two enjoyed a famous correspondence. Bizarrely, they died on the same day: 4 July 1826, which also happened to be the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"People and nations are forged in the fires of adversity."

"The people, when they have been unchecked, have been as unjust, tyrannical, brutal, barbarous, and cruel, as any king... The majority has eternally... usurped over the rights of the minority."

"By my physical constitution, I am but an ordinary man. The times alone have destined me to fame - and even these have not been able to give me much."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"Vain, irritable, and a bad calculator of the force and probable effect of the motives which govern men." Thomas Jefferson

"He... is always an honest man, often a wise one, but sometimes, and in some things, absolutely out of his senses." Benjamin Franklin

"You stand nearly alone in the history of our public men in never having had your integrity called into question or even suspected." Benjamin Rush

MINUTIAE

» On his farm in Quincy, he began each day by drinking half a pint of cider.

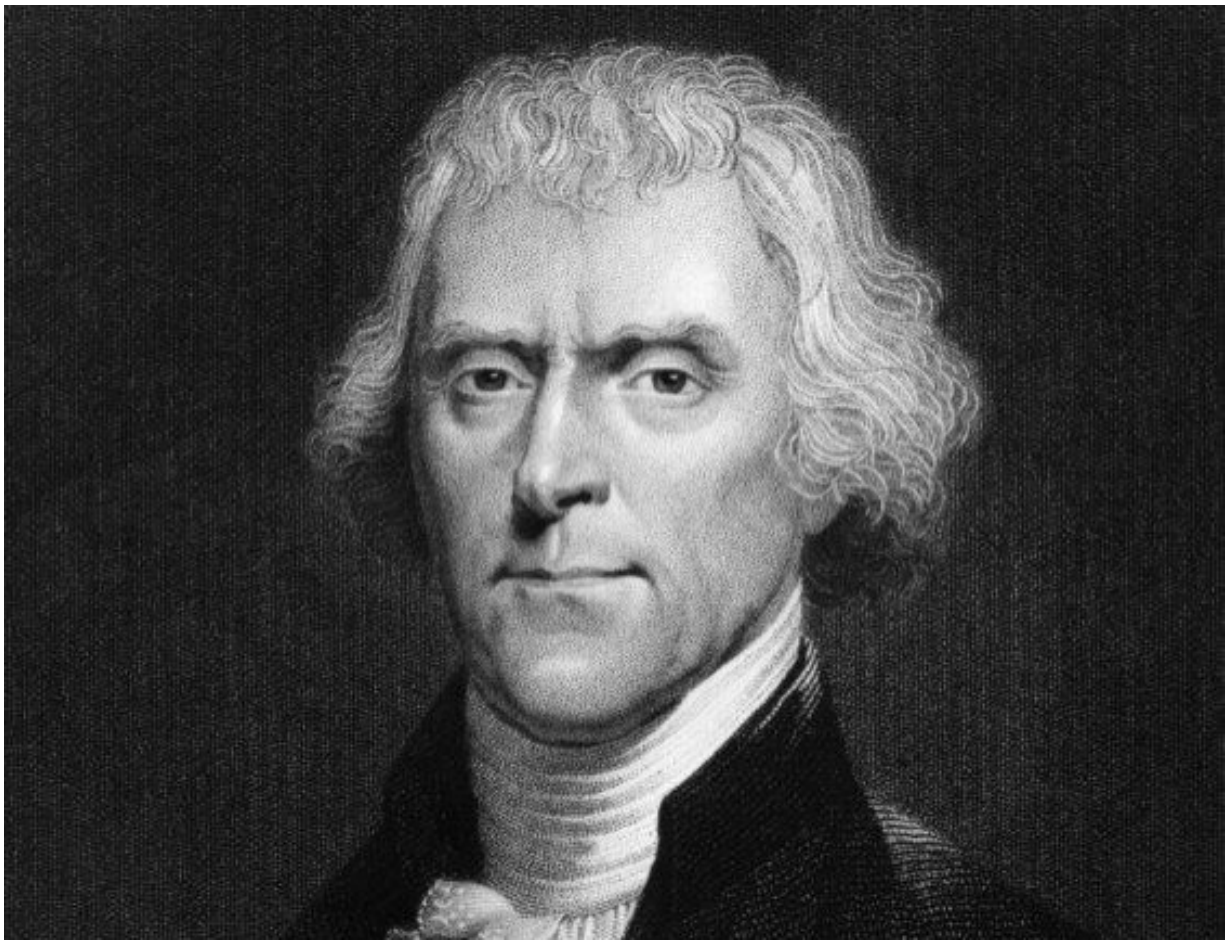
» He was the first president whose son became president too.

» He was the first to live in the White House (then the Executive Mansion).

THOMAS JEFFERSON

3rd

1801-1809



One of the most intellectually gifted of all statesmen, Jefferson was a major force in American politics long before becoming president. He was governor of Virginia during the Revolution, was principal author of the Declaration of Independence, and served as Secretary of State under George Washington and as Vice-President (though not a supportive one) under John

Adams. His sympathy for the revolutionary cause in France saw him become leader of the nascent Democratic-Republican party, in opposition to the more conservative Federalists.

He opposed a strong, centralised Government and championed the rights of individual states. A fervent opponent of slavery (although this did not stop him owning slaves), he was also a champion of tolerance - who was so proud of having enacted a statute establishing religious freedom in Virginia that he asked for this, rather than his presidencies, to be mentioned on his gravestone.

Tall, thin and freckled, Jefferson was an austere president. He reduced military expenditure, reduced the national debt, and presided with conspicuous lack of pomp. Several foreign ambassadors were offended by his habit of receiving them in his pyjamas. But he was also conscientious and effective, reversing the more repressive policies of his predecessor.

A highlight of his first term was the Louisiana Purchase (1803), whereby the US paid Napoleon $11.25m for the southern part of the French North American empire, doubling the size of the nation and creating what Jefferson called an "empire for liberty".

His second term was less successful, being overshadowed by the Napoleonic wars, which had led to both both Britain and France interfering with the neutral rights of American merchantmen. Jefferson's attempted

solution, an embargo upon American shipping, was not only unpopular but proved harmful to the economy.

His personal life was complicated. His wife, Martha (nee Skelton), had died in 1782, and his subsequent private life provoked several scandals - which may or may not have been justified. He was once challenged to a duel, by a neighbour, John Walker, who accused him of trying to seduce his wife. Jefferson met him privately and talked him out of it. Some years later, apparently trying to impress the wife of another friend (Richard Cosway), he tried to jump a fence and badly injured his wrist. It never entirely healed. Meanwhile, modern DNA evidence suggests (but not conclusively) that Jefferson did indeed father at least one child by his slave and mistress, Sally Hemings.

But it is as a thinker that he is chiefly remembered. On relinquishing the presidency, he returned to his mountain home at Monticello, Virginia, which he had built himself several decades earlier. Here he occupied himself with his correspondence, his inventions, and such projects as the American Philosophical Society (of which he was president).

Like John Adams, he died on July 4, 1826.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."

"The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"He lives and will live in the memory and gratitude of the wise and good, as a luminary of Science, as a votary of liberty, as a model of patriotism, and as a benefactor of human kind." James Madison

"A ridiculous affectation of simplicity... may have had a momentary effect with the few ignorant and unsuspecting, but have long ago excited the derision of the many, who know that under the assumed cloak of humility lurks the most ambitious spirit, the most overweening pride..." William Loughton Smith

MINUTIAE

» Every morning, Jefferson would soak his feet in a bath of cold water.

» He was a great believer in beer. "I wish to see this beverage become common, instead of the whiskey which kills one third of our citizens."

» He is the only president to have a plant named after him: Jeffersonia (also known as rheumatism root).

» Despite his opposition to slavery, Jefferson was one of America's biggest slave-owners (He had inherited them).

» Jefferson died $107,000 in debt - equivalent to many millions today.

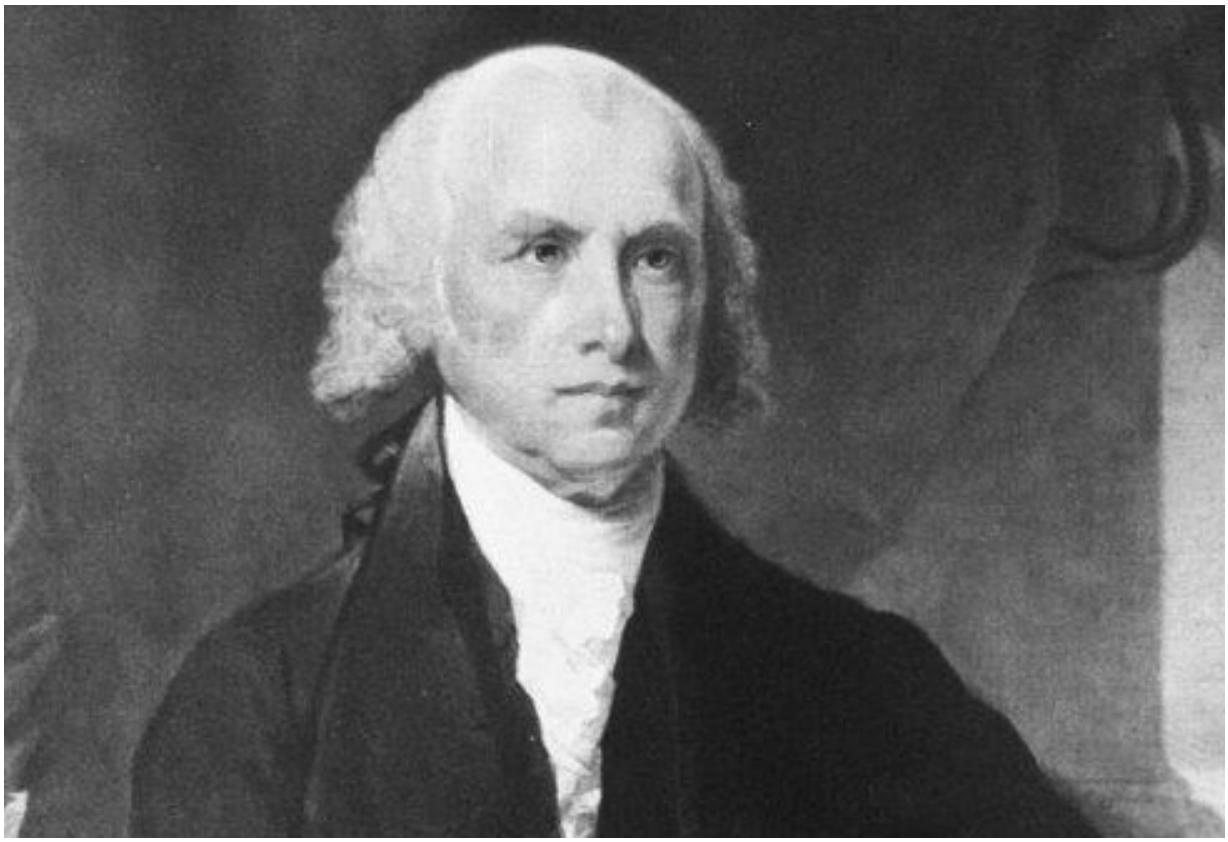
» He risked the death penalty by smuggling rice samples out of Italy; descendants of the strain are still grown in the US today.

» Jefferson was a prolific inventor; his more practical inventions included the swivel chair and the dumb waiter.

JAMES MADISON

4th

1809-1817



A small, unprepossessing man (dismissed by the essayist Washington Irving as "but a withered little apple-John"), Madison was nonetheless one of the most important early presidents.

Brought up in Orange County, Virginia, and educated at what would later become Princeton, he helped with the framing of the Virginia Constitution

in 1776, served in the Continental Congress, and was a leader in the Virginia Assembly. Madison was a prominent contributor to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, and was subsequently described as the "Father of the Constitution" - although he always insisted that that document was not "the off-spring of a single brain" but "the work of many heads and many hands".

In Congress, he helped frame the Bill of Rights and enact the first revenue legislation. As Secretary of State under Jefferson, he was a champion of the unpopular Embargo Act and was mocked for his ineffectual protests against seizures of US shipping by the warring French and British.

His first term as President was dominated by unsuccessful attempts to end British and French abuses of American shipping. (He also seized West Florida from Spain, so consolidating US control of the Gulf Coast.) His second term was dominated by the war that he was eventually persuaded to declare on Britain, in 1812. The war proved largely disastrous: America was militarily unprepared, and the British were able to inflict a series of defeats, culminating in the sack of Washington (and burning of the White House and the Capitol) in 1814; Madison was forced to flee. But the military tide began to turn in America's favour, notably at sea, and the restoration of the status quo at the Treaty of Ghent in 1815 allowed the war to be presented as a success. An upsurge of nationalism followed, and Federalists who had opposed the war were so thoroughly discredited that their party never recovered as a political force.

Meanwhile, the economic pain of the embargo on international trade had begun to stimulate the domestic economy. And while it would be hard to describe Madison as a popular president ("He seems to be incapable of smiling," said one observer), his presidency was widely seen as a success.

His lack of charm was, in any case, partly compensated for by the vivacity of his young wife, Dolley. Her "Wednesday drawing-rooms" were the toast of Washington. A flamboyant dresser - she often wore a feathered turban - she was also an extravagant home-maker. Congress gave her $26,000 to refurbish the White House; most of the work was undone by the British burning in 1814.

After his presidency, Madison retired with Dolley to Montpelier, his estate in Orange County, Virginia, where he lived for another 19 years, occasionally speaking out against the threat to the Union posed by disruptive insistence on the rights of individual states. He died in 1836; Dolley returned to Washington and once again became a prominent figure on the social circuit.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"A people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

"The advice nearest to my heart and deepest in my convictions is that the Union of the States be cherished and perpetuated."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"I can say conscientiously that I do not know in the world a man of purer integrity, more dispassionate, distinterested and devoted to genuine Republicanism; nor could I in the whole scope of America and Europe point out an abler head." Thomas Jefferson

MINUTIAE

» At 5ft 4in, Madison was the shortest US president to date. He was also the lightest, weighing just 7st 1lb.

» He suffered from a wide range of medical complaints, including dysentery, rheumatism and haemorrhoids.

» His nose was scarred from frostbite.

JAMES MONROE

5th

1817-1825

The continuing growth of the domestic economy - combined with satisfaction at the perceived "victory" over the British, led to the Monroe era being known as "The Era of Good Feelings". Monroe himself was sturdy and charismatic, and, as the last major political figure to have fought in the war of independence (hence the "Last Cocked Hat" nickname), he

proved a popular president; his popularity even survived a serious recession in 1819. In 1820 he was re-elected with all but one of the electoral college votes.

Apart from his purchase from Spain of the rest of Florida in 1819, he is best-known for the Monroe Doctrine, which he articulated in 1823 in response to fears that the European powers would help Spain to reconquer her former colonies in South America. "The American continents," he stated, "by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonisation by any European Power."

He also signed the Missouri Compromise (1820), whereby the balance between slave and non-slave states was maintained despite the admission of Missouri to the Union and the 36°30' parallel was established as the boundary above which slavery would not be permitted.

He oversaw the lavish refurbishment of the White House (burnt in 1814), helped by a $50,000 grant from Congress. But the budget ran out of control, as did Monroe's personal finances; and the two became unfortunately mixed. Monroe remained in financial dispute with Congress for much of the rest of his life. He was $75,000 in debt when he left office, went to live with his daughter, and died a virtual pauper in 1831. But he did choose (like Adams and Jefferson before him) an auspicious date on which to die: 4 July.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"The earth was given to mankind to support the greatest number of which it is capable, and no tribe or people have a right to withhold from the wants of others more than is necessary for their own support and comfort."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"A man whose soul might be turned wrong side outwards without discovering a blemish to the world." Thomas Jefferson

"Naturally dull and stupid; extremely illiterate; indecisive to a degree that would be incredible to one who did not know him; pusillanimous, and of course hypocritical... and will always be under the government of the worst of men." Aaron Burr

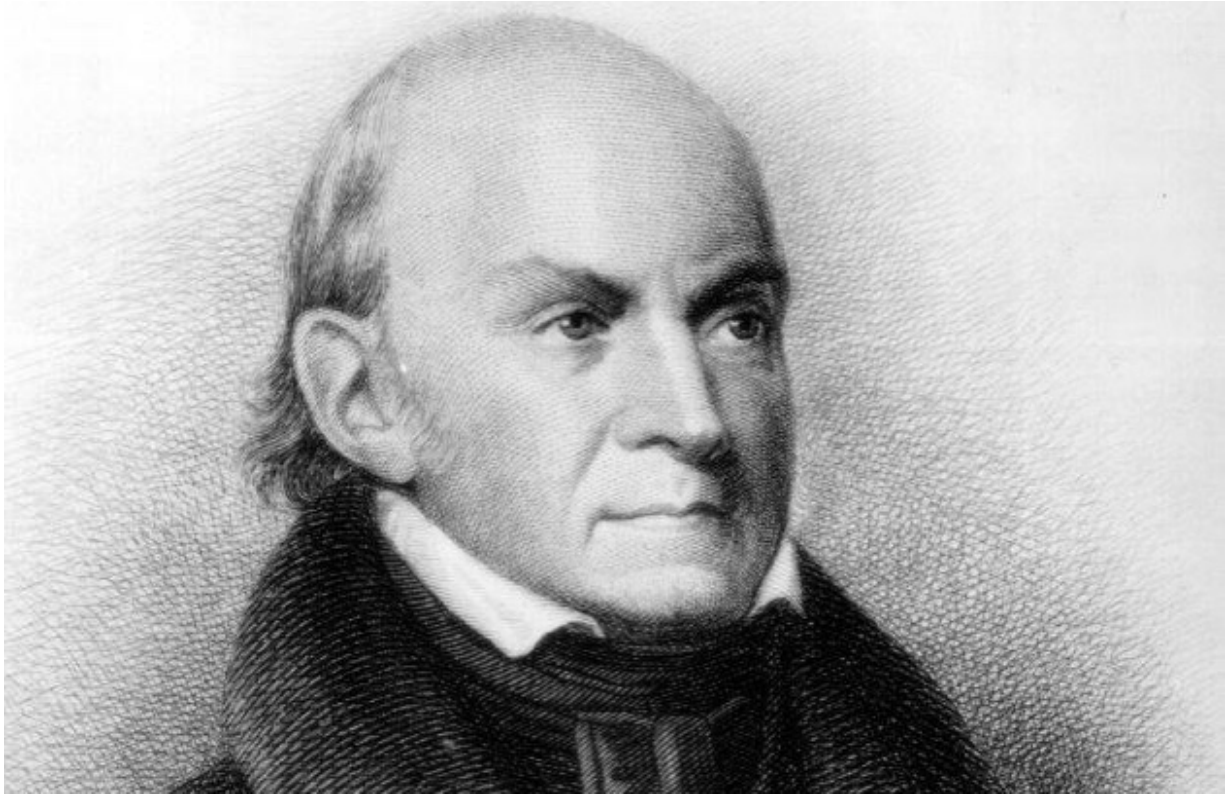
MINUTIAE

» Monroe once chased William Crawford, Secretary of the Treasury, from the White House, while brandishing a pair of fire tongs.

» At a dinner for foreign dignitaries, he broke up a duel between the French and British ministers by stepping between them with his own sword.

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS
6th

1825-1829



Despite being born and bred for the role, John Quincy Adams was one of the least liked presidents. Brilliant, hard-working and idealistic, he was also charmless and prone to depression. He was only the second president not to be re-elected. (His father was the first.)

He worked as his father's secretary while he was a diplomat in Europe, and was later appointed to a series of diplomatic posts himself, in the

Netherlands, Prussia, Russia and Great Britain. An accomplished linguist - he spoke seven languages - he also wrote copious diaries.

He became a Senator in 1802, and in 1814 was chief negotiator of the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the war with Britain. He then became Secretary of State under President Monroe. He was instrumental in obtaining from Spain the cession of the Floridas, helped to formulate the Monroe Doctrine, and was generally considered a towering success in the role.

His election to the presidency, in 1824, was messy. No candidate won a majority of electoral votes, and the election was decided by the House of Representatives. His main rival, Andrew Jackson (who had won substantially more popular votes and electoral votes), accused Adams of securing victory through a "corrupt bargain" with another candidate, Henry Clay, whom Adams appointed Secretary of State.

The hostility of Jackson and his supporters proved a constant handicap to Adams. His attempts to develop a national infrastructure of highways and canals - and a national university - were criticised as unconstitutional. Repeated charges of corruption - apparently unfounded - further undermined his popularity, and Jackson defeated him comfortably in 1828. Like his father, Adams left town in order to avoid his successor's inauguration.

Depressed by his defeat ("I have no plausible motive for wishing to live," he wrote in his diary), Adams retired to his farm in Massachusetts. But in 1830 he was unexpectedly elected to the House of Representatives, where he proved a far more effective figure than he had as president, tirelessly defending civil liberties. It was here that he earned his nickname, "Old Man Eloquent". His greatest success was obtaining the repeal (after an eight year battle) of the 1836 "gag rule", passed by southern Congressmen, that prevented the issue of slavery from being debated in the House.

In 1848, he collapsed on the floor of the House from a stroke. He died two days later.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"The four most miserable years of my life were my four years in the presidency."

"I am a man of reserved, cold, austere and forbidding manners: my political enemies say, a gloomy misanthropist, and my personal enemies, an unsocial savage."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"A disgusting man to do business [with]. Coarse, dirty and clownish in his address and stiff and abstracted in his opinions, which are drawn from books exclusively." William Henry Harrison

MINUTIAE

» Adams had an eye wound, sustained while trying to instruct his sons in the correct use of firearms.

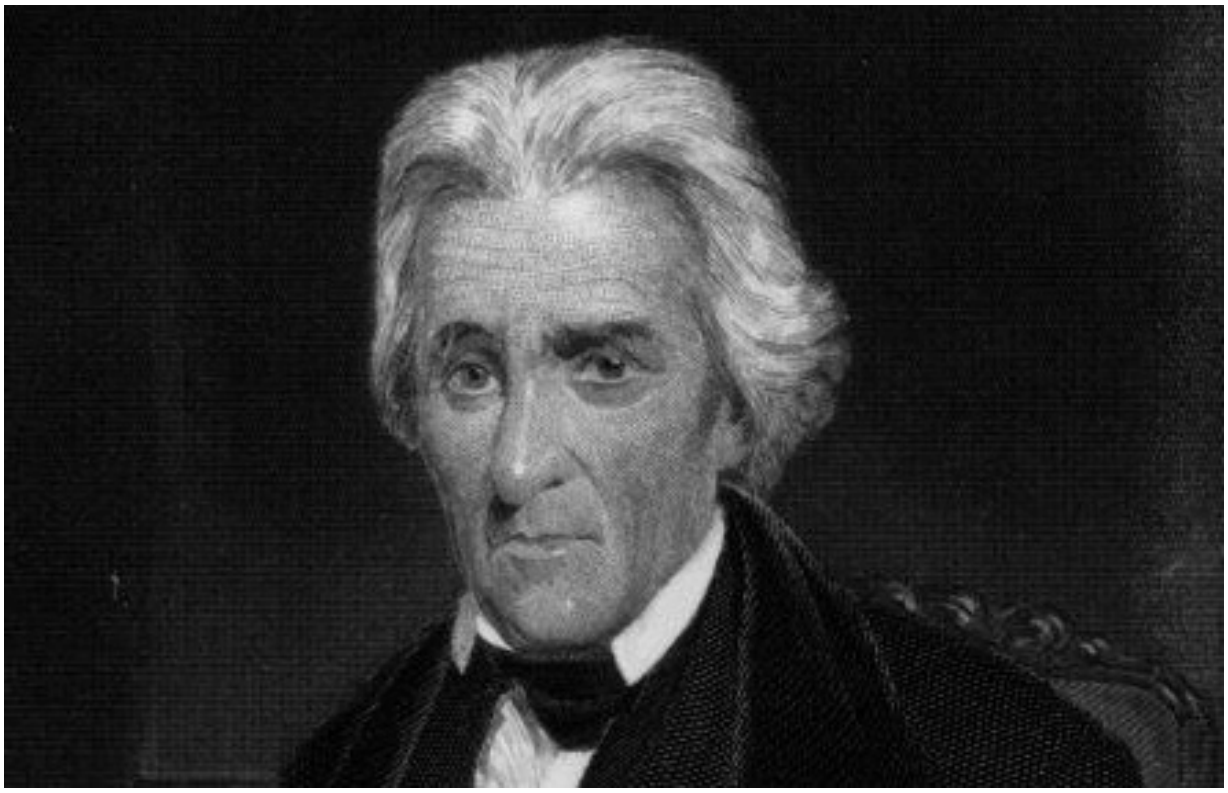
» Adams was an unforgivingly perfectionist parent, once forbidding his son to visit him until he had improved his class rankings at school. Two of his three sons became alcoholics, of whom one probably committed suicide.

» He was fond of taking ice-cold baths, and was also a keen swimmer. He regularly swam in the Potomac river, often in the nude, last doing so when he was 79.

ANDREW JACKSON

7th

1829-1837



A popular and populist figure, Jackson could not have been more different from the distinguished intellectuals who preceded him. Born in the backwoods of Carolina, he received scant education; fought in the Revolutionary War as a 13-year-old (and was left with a permanent scar on his face after being struck by a British officer while in captivity); and spent much of the remainder of his youth as a notoriously dissolute student.

He later fought in the war of 1812-1814, and became famous as the general who administered the final crushing defeat to the British at New Orleans in 1815. (News that the war was over had not yet filtered through.) He added to his reputation for boldness by invading Florida in pursuit of the war against the Seminole Indians in 1817-1818.

He ran unsuccessfully for the presidency in 1824 and spent most of the next four years preparing his campaign for 1828. The election was the dirtiest that US had yet seen, with vicious mudslinging on both sides, but Jackson ended up winning comfortably and went on to prove a surprisingly effective president.

Generally a supporter of slavery and the rights of southern states, he nonetheless fought one of his defining battles on the issue of "nullification". When South Carolina sought to nullify a federal tariff of 1828, Jackson insisted that such unilateral action was tantamount to treason, and threatened to uphold federal supremacy by force if necessary. The rogue state (mollified by a tactful reduction of the tariff) eventually backed down.

He also engaged in a high-profile power struggle with the Bank of the United States, vetoing a bill to renew the charter of what he regarded as an overprivileged monopoly rather than a valuable national institution. It was a long and bitter fight. "The bank is trying to kill me," Jackson observed to Martin Van Buren at one point. "But I will kill it!"

But Jackson's stance was widely seen as representing the interests of the common man, rather than the political elite, and in 1832 he was re-elected with more than 56 per cent of the popular vote (and almost five times as many electoral votes as his opponent, Henry Clay, who had supported the bank).

Jackson's opponents considered him autocratic. Unlike previous presidents, he rarely deferred to Congress in policy-making but, instead, used his power of the veto and his party leadership to pursue his own agendas. He was also accused of rewarding supporters with government jobs. "If you have a job in your department that can't be done by a Democrat, abolish the job," he allegedly said. (He could also be merciless to his enemies. "He could hate with a Biblical fury," wrote one biographer, "and would resort to petty and vindictive acts to nurture his hatred.")

Conscious of the need to keep his Southern supporters sweet, he opposed abolitionism and encouraged westward expansion at the expense of Native American tribes.

Perhaps not surprisingly, it was during his presidencies that the divided Republican party began to resolve into, on the one hand, the Democratic Republicans, or Democrats, adhering to Jackson; and, on the other, the National Republicans, or Whigs.

Despite his years in office, Jackson never shook off his reputation as a coarse, violent-tempered man. But the reputation did no harm to his

popularity. After his second term, he retired to the Hermitage, a mansion he had built near Nashville, Tennessee. His health deteriorated painfully, and he died there in June 1845.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"I know what I am fit for. I can command a body of men in a rough way; but I am not fit to be President."

"In general, the great can protect themselves, but the poor and humble require the arm and shield of the law."

"Our Federal Union: it must be preserved."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"A man of intelligence, and one of those prompt, frank, ardent souls that I love to meet." Aaron Burr

"A barbarian who could not write a sentence of grammar and hardly could spell his own name." John Quincy Adams

MINUTIAE

» He married Rachel Robards, a divorcée, in 1791. It later emerged that her divorce had not been finalised at the time, so he married her again in 1794. This incident came back to haunt them. In the 1828 election campaign,

Jackson's opponents made much of this "adultery", and Jackson blamed Rachel's distress at this for her sudden death - after his victory but before his inauguration. His niece, Emily, acted as his first lady; followed, after her death, by Sarah Jackson, the wife of his adopted nephew.

» A prolific dueller, Jackson killed at least one man, in 1806: Charles Dickinson, who had besmirched his wife's honour. The bullet fired by Dickinson remained lodged in Jackson's chest for the rest of his life.

» Two other bullets - the legacy of a brawl in 1813 - stayed in his arm for 20 years before being removed.

» As a teenager, Jackson had an unfortunate habit of slobbering. The teasing that this provoked has been blamed for his penchant for violence.

» His hobbies included cockfighting and racehorse breeding.

» Jackson survived the first attempt to assassinate a US president. Richard Lawrence, a madman, attacked him in the Capitol in 1835 with two pistols - both of which, miraculously, misfired.

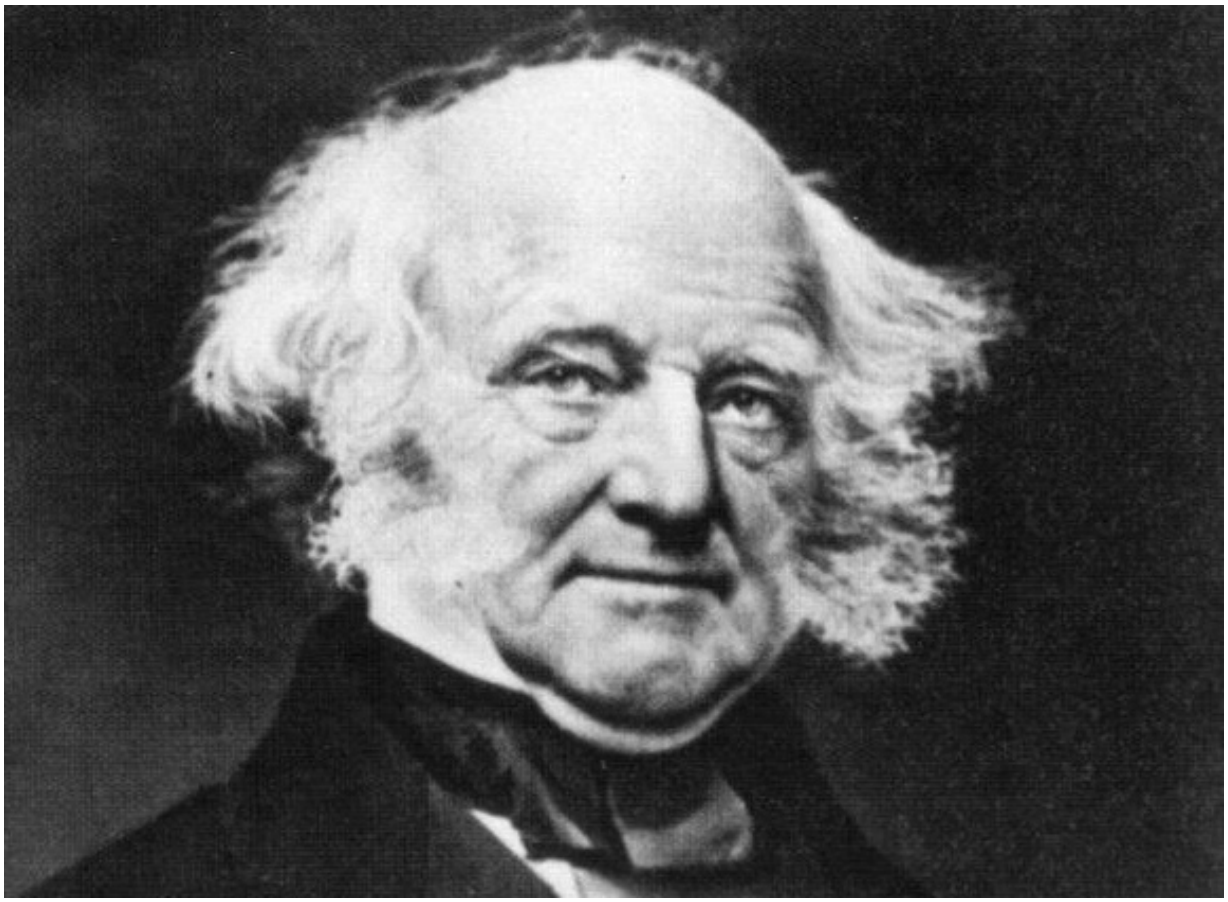
» He was the first president to ride on a railroad train.

» His face can be seen on $20 notes.

MARTIN VAN BUREN

8th

1837-1841



The only person apart from Thomas Jefferson to occupy all three great offices of the US state - Secretary of State, Vice-President and President - Martin Van Buren probably had more impact in the first two than in the third. A protégé - some would say a favourite - of Andrew Jackson, he was

as fastidious as Jackson was coarse; and, with him, was largely responsible for the creation of the Democratic party.

Like Jackson, he was an enthusiastic proponent of the "spoils" system - that is, the use of patronage to shore up political support.

The main events of his presidency were the financial panic of 1837 and the economic crisis that followed it; his lacklustre response - he was more concerned to protect government deposits from unstable banks than to explore fiscal remedies or provide public relief measures - probably put paid to his chances of re-election. His opponents mocked him as "Martin Van Ruin".

Van Buren's presidency was also associated with the resettlement of large numbers of Native Americans - including the notorious "Trail of Tears" in which 15,000 Cherokees were forcibly removed from Georgia and around one in four died en route to their new homes in what is now Oklahoma.

Such horrors did him little harm politically. The same could not be said of his decision to reject Texas's application for membership of the Union, (for fear of provoking war with Mexico); many southern politicians were alienated as a result. Nor did he get the credit that he arguably deserved for averting another war with Great Britain over covert US support for anti-British insurgents in Canada.

Resoundingly defeated in 1840, he attempted a comeback in 1848 as a representative of the short-lived Free Soil Party, which opposed slavery. He died in 1862.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"As to the presidency, the two happiest days of my life were those of my entrance upon the office and my surrender of it."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"He is what the English call a dandy. When he enters the senate chamber in the morning, he struts and swaggers like a crow in the gutter. He is laced up in corsets, such as women in town wear, and, if possible, tighter than the best of them." Davy Crockett

MINUTIAE

» A middle-class man who aspired to the aristocracy, Van Buren was famous both for his immaculate dressing and for his lavish furnishing of the White House. His critics particularly objected to the "golden spoons" he was alleged to use.

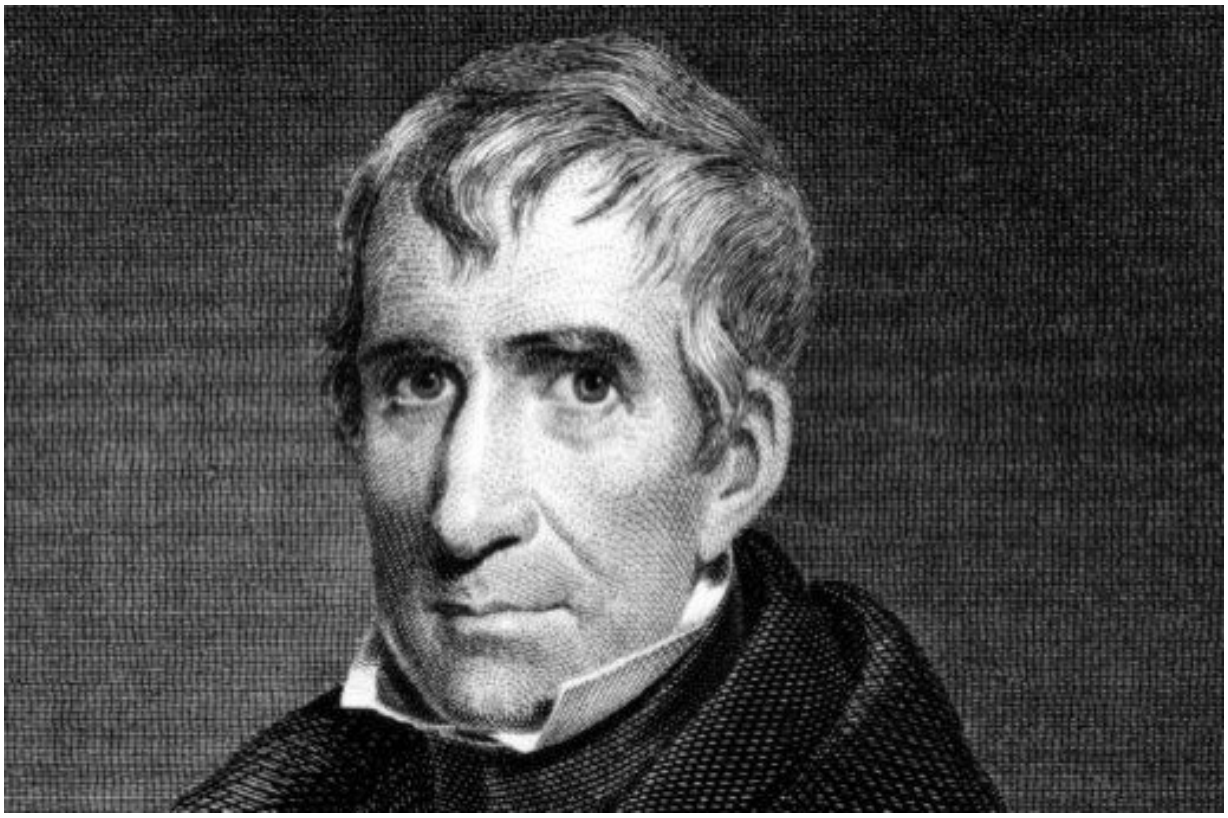
» He enjoyed opera, fine wine and occasional gambling - usually on the outcome of elections.

» His autobiography makes no mention of his wife.

WILLIAM HENRY HARRISON

9th

1841



The first president to die in office, Harrison was notable mainly for the brevity of his presidency (31 days); for the populism of his election campaign; and for his achievements before being elected. The child of an aristocratic Virginia planter family, he initially trained as a doctor before becoming a professional soldier. He served with distinction in the war of 1812-14, becoming a brigadier-general; but was chiefly famous for his

campaigns against the Native Americans, notably his crushing victories over Tecumseh's Indian confederation at Tippecanoe in 1811 and at the Battle of the Thames in 1813.

His presidential campaign presented him as a simple frontiersman, living in a log cabin and drinking cider - in contrast to the effete, champagne-sipping Van Buren. His supporters pressed his cause with an unprecedented degree of razzmatazz, with huge parades, rallies lasting several days, and a range of gimmicks and souvenirs such as whiskey sold in log-cabin bottles. He won by a majority of less than 150,000, but comfortably swept the Electoral College, 234 to 60. Shortly after taking office, he caught a cold that developed into pneumonia. He died on 4 April, 1841; and (according to the official White House history): "with him died the Whig program".

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"The people are the best guardians of their own rights and it is the duty of their executive to abstain from interfering in or thwarting the sacred exercise of the lawmaking functions of their government."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"As unconscious as a child of his difficulties and those of his country, he seems to enjoy his election as a mere affair of personal vanity. It is really distressing to see him." Senator John C Calhoun

MINUTIAE

» As well as having the shortest presidency, Harrison had the distinction of delivering (to date) the longest inaugural address: an hour and 45 minutes. It is possible that the cold he caught while delivering it may have contributed to the illness that eventually killed him.

» During the 1836 election campaign, Harrison's Democrat opponents took to asking voters to say Harrison's name backwards - producing the phrase "No, sirrah!"

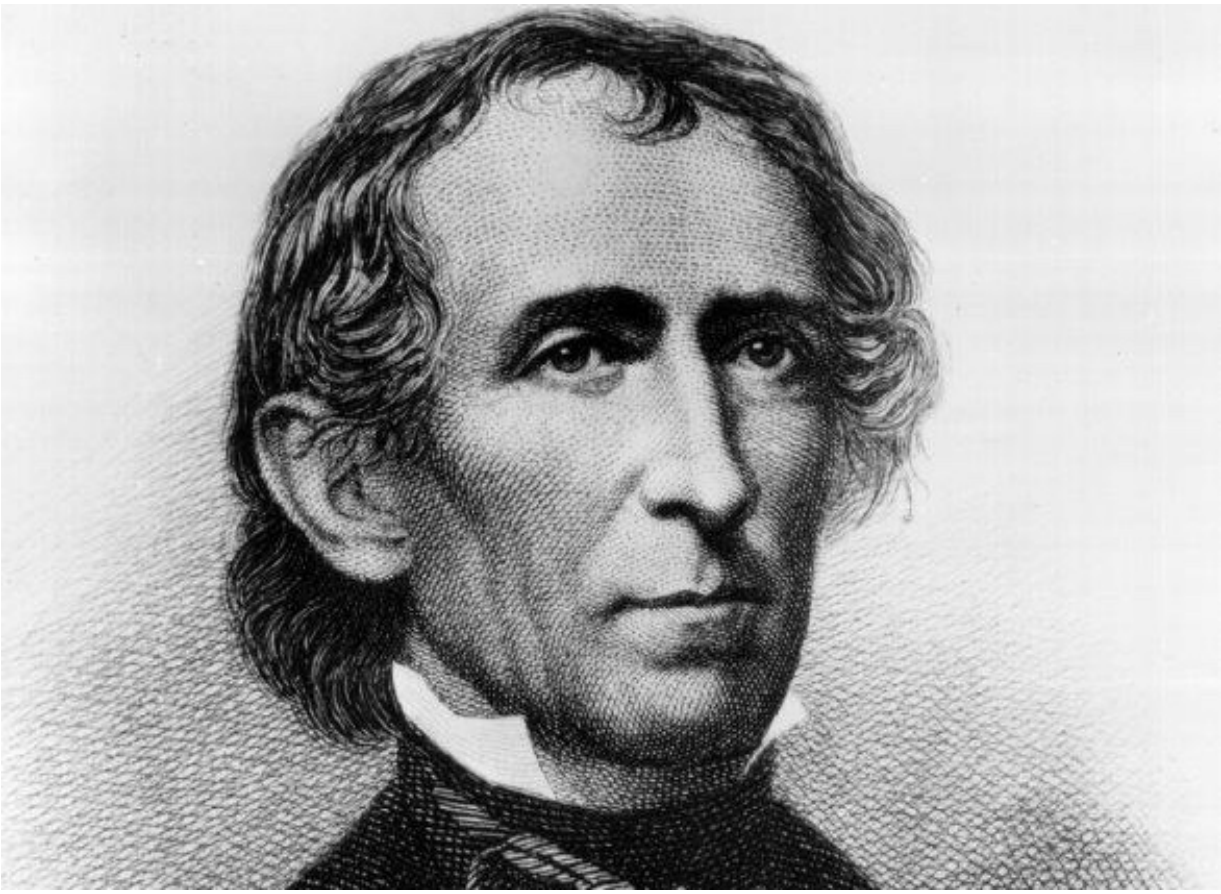
» He was a distant descendant of Henry III.

» The body of one of his sons, John Scott Harrison, was stolen by grave-robbers and sold to a medical school - only to be recognised by his son, who was a medical student.

JOHN TYLER

10th

1841-1845



Taking over his predecessor's duties unexpectedly, Tyler found the early months of his presidency dominated by the question of whether he had assumed merely the duties or the office as well. The constitution was ambiguous, but Tyler was in no doubt - returning mail addressed to the "Acting President" with the comment "addressee unknown". The

controversy was barely resolved when the Whigs who had swept Harrison to power were shocked to find that Tyler was not prepared to follow their programme meekly. Instead, he twice vetoed legislation initiated by the Whigs in Congress to re-establish the Bank of the United States, earning himself the impassioned hostility of his erstwhile supporters. He received numerous death threats, and the rest of his administration was hampered by ferocious opposition. Altogether, Tyler cast nine vetoes in four years.

His main accomplishments were the agreement with the UK of firm boundaries between Maine and Canada in the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842; and the beginning of the annexation of Texas. Tyler approved the treaty for this in April 1844 but the Senate refused to ratify it, and the process was not completed until after the end of his term.

Earlier in 1844 he had narrowly escaped death while inspecting the USS Princeton. A ceremonial firing of a new naval supergun - the world's largest - resulted in a disastrous explosion in which many of those on board (including the father of Tyler's future wife, Julia) were killed. But Tyler was unscathed.

A former governor of Virginia, he was a shy, dignified man who probably did not deserve - and certainly did not enjoy - the vituperation he suffered. He retired to his 1,200-acre estate near Richmond, with his new second wife, and fathered a further seven children. (He already had eight by his first wife.)

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Tyler tried to negotiate a peaceful settlement between North and South. When this failed, he served briefly as a member of the Provisional Congress of the Confederacy - which caused some to accuse him again of treachery. When he died, in 1862, his body lay in state at the Confederate Congress, draped in a Confederate flag; in Washington, his death was ignored. Not until 1915 did Congress authorise the erection of a memorial stone over his grave.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"Popularity, I have always thought, may aptly be compared to a coquette - the more you woo her, the more apt she is to elude your embrace."

"If the tide of defamation and abuse shall turn, and my administration come to be praised, future vice-presidents who may succeed to the presidency may feel some slight encouragement to pursue an independent course."

"In 1840 I was called to my farm to undertake the administration of public affairs, and I foresaw that I was called to a bed of thorns. I now leave that bed, which has afforded me little rest, and eagerly seek repose in the quiet enjoyments of rural life."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"His manner was remarkably unaffected. I thought that in his whole carriage he became his station well." Charles Dickens

"An honest, affectionate, benevolent, loving man... who had fought the battles of his life bravely and truly, doing his whole great duty without fear, though not without much unjust reproach." General Henry A Wise

"I could not believe that a man so commonplace, so absolutely inferior to many 15 shilling lawyers with whom you may meet at every county court in Virginia, would seriously aspire to the first station among mankind." John H Pleasants (editor of the Richmond Whig)

MINUTIAE

» Tyler was so unpopular, especially with his own party, that he was granted the first federally funded White House security force. Four plain-clothed guards were employed to protect him.

» Tyler had 15 children by two wives. The second (Julia) was five years younger than his eldest daughter when she married him. His immediate family thus spanned a century and a half. He himself was born during George Washington's administration; his youngest daughter died when Harry Truman was president.

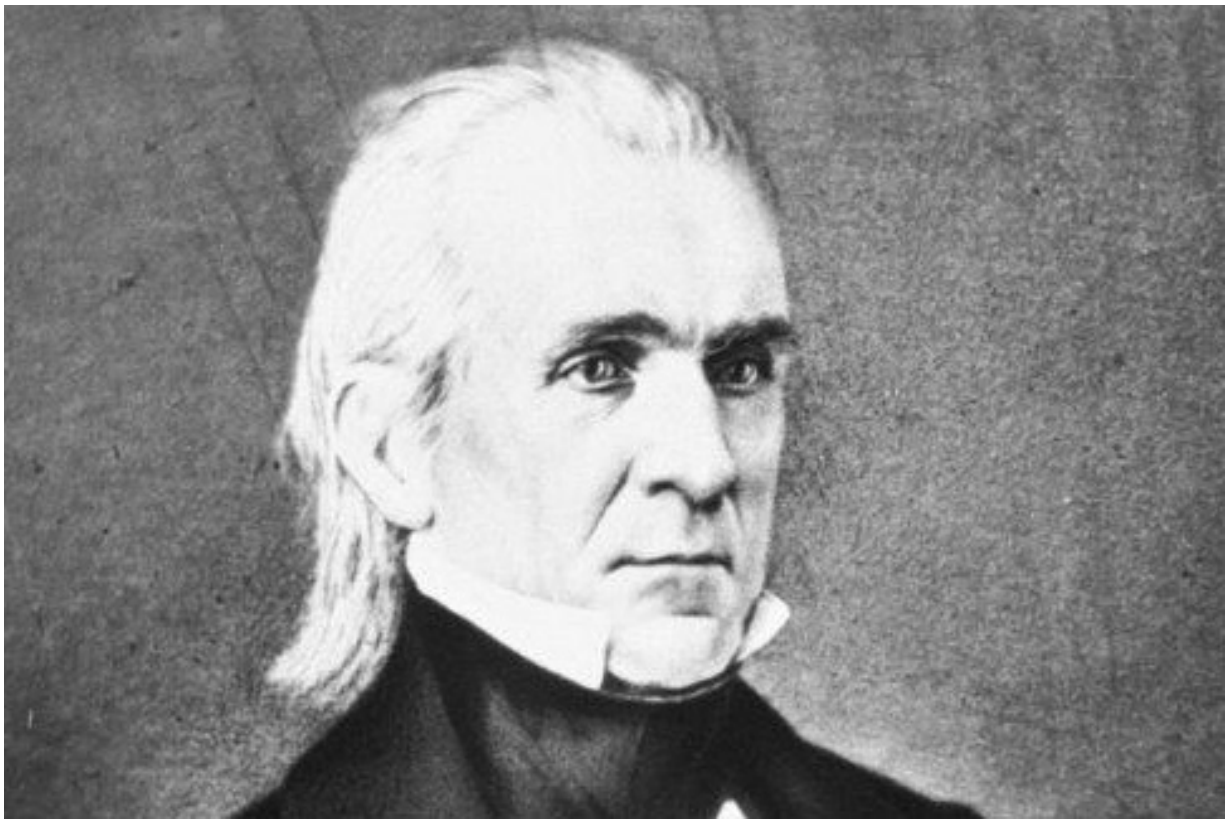
» He was a gifted violinist.

» He claimed to be a descendant of Wat Tyler, leader of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381

JAMES K POLK

11th

1845-1849



The original "dark horse" candidate, Polk was initially considered only a vice-presidential contender but won the Democratic nomination for the 1844 election at the ninth ballot, on the basis of his expansionist policies. Like his mentor, Andrew Jackson, he endorsed the idea that his nation had a "manifest destiny" to rule from sea to sea. He supported the "re-occupation" of Oregon, the "re-annexation" of Texas, and the acquisition of California.

These goals were largely achieved. The Oregon issue, and with it the question of the north-western border of the US, was peacefully settled with Great Britain. The Texas issue provoked war with Mexico, but American forces led by General Zachary Taylor won a series of resounding victories, even occupying Mexico City. By the end of Polk's presidency, the southern borders of Texas had been more or less settled in their present form, while Mexico had also ceded New Mexico and California in return for $15m.

These ostensible successes had their drawbacks. Polk's enemies denounced the Mexican war as an immoral war of aggression, and the vast expansion of US territory left a legacy of bitterness between North and South over the question of slavery in the new territories.

Polk, originally a North Carolina lawyer, retired at the end of his first term and died three months later, possibly from cholera, at his home in Nashville, Tennessee. A notorious workaholic, he was widely felt to have undermined his health by his obsessive labours in the White House.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"No president who performs his duties faithfully and conscientiously can have any leisure."

"I am sure I shall be a happier man in retirement than I have been during the four years I have filled the highest office in the gift of my countrymen."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"Politics had become his whole life, aside from which he had no aspirations, intellectual interests, recreation, or even friendships." Charles G Sellers

"I more than suspect that he is deeply conscious of being in the wrong - that he feels the blood of this [the Mexican] war, like the blood of Abel, is crying to heaven against him... He is a bewildered, confounded and miserably perplexed man." Abraham Lincoln

"James K Polk, a great president. Said what he intended to do, and did it." Harry S Truman

MINUTIAE

» Polk was plagued with diarrhoea for much of his presidency.

» When he was 17 he underwent an operation to remove his gallstones, without anaesthetic. (He drank alcohol to dull the pain.)

» Aged 49 when he took office, Polk was the youngest president to date.

» The Whig press denounced Polk as a coward for having once refused to take part in a duel.

» The California gold rush began in his presidency.

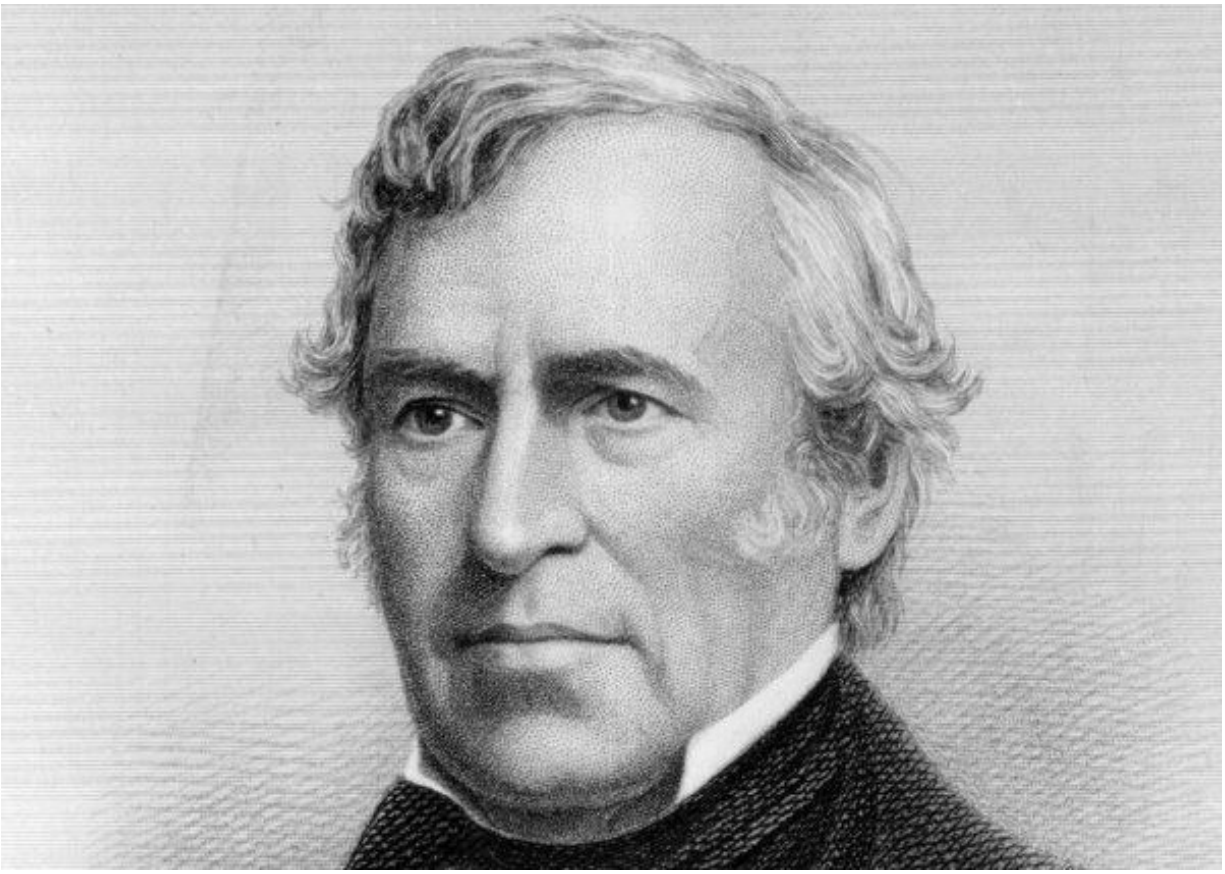
» His hairstyle - short at the top but long at the back - has been described as the first "mullet".

» His wife, Sarah Childress, banned dancing in the White House.

ZACHARY TAYLOR

12th

1849-1850



Taylor's military successes in the Mexican War - and a quarter of a century's previous experience policing the frontiers against Native Americans - made him an attractive candidate to northerners; the fact that he was a slave-owner (he had a plantation in Mississippi) was attractive to southern voters. This mixed appeal allowed the famously dishevelled Taylor to defeat more polished rivals such as Lewis Cass, the Democratic candidate, and Martin

Van Buren, who ran for the short-lived Free Soil Party (which opposed slavery).

His presidency was dominated by the issue of slavery, which he attempted to deal with in the same rule-of-thumb fashion that he had used as a soldier.

To end the dispute over slavery in newly acquired areas, he urged settlers in New Mexico and California to draft constitutions and apply for statehood. (Traditionally, people could decide whether they wanted slavery when they drew up new state constitutions.) Southerners were furious, since neither state constitution was likely to permit slavery; Members of Congress were dismayed, since they felt that the President was usurping their policy-making prerogatives. Taylor's rough-and-ready solution ignored several important side issues, such as the northern dislike of the slave market operating in the District of Columbia; and southern demands for a more stringent fugitive slave law.

By February 1850, southern leaders were threatening secession. Taylor held a stormy conference, in which he told them that, if necessary, he would personally lead the Army in order to enforce the law and the Union. Persons "taken in rebellion against the Union, he would hang... with less reluctance than he had hanged deserters and spies in Mexico."

He never wavered from this uncompromising stance for the remainder of his presidency; which did not, however, last long. That summer, he participated in a lengthy 4 July ceremony at the Washington Monument, on

a blisteringly hot day. His thirst and exhaustion caused him to accept a snack of cherries and milk (and, possibly, other offerings from onlookers). He fell ill almost immediately, and died five days later.

The tensions over slavery that he had attempted to resolve survived his presidency, but would not explode into civil war for another decade.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"For more than half a century, during which kingdoms and empires have fallen, this Union has stood unshaken. The patriots who formed it have long since descended to the grave; yet still it remains the proudest monument to their memory... In my judgement, its dissolution would be the greatest of calamities."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"He talks artlessly as a child about affairs of state, and does not pretend to a knowledge of anything of which he is ignorant. He is a remarkable man in some respects and it is remarkable that such a man should be President of the United States." Congressman Horace Mann

"Few men have ever had a more comfortable, labour-saving contempt for learning of every kind." General Winfield Scott

MINUTIAE

» Actress Lillian Gish claimed to be descended from him.

» When he was 17, he swam across the Ohio River and back.

» Taylor chewed a lot of tobacco, and was said to be an unusually gifted marksman with a spittoon.

» His wife, Peggy, hated the idea of her husband becoming president and prayed every day for his defeat during the 1848 election campaign. Chronic illness prevented her from serving as First Lady. Her daughter Betty took the role instead, while Peggy remained in seclusion on the second floor of the White House.

» He was the first president not to have previously held any other elected public office.

» His will was deemed inadmissible for probate, as it had been drafted on the assumption that he would die in combat.

» Not until Woodrow Wilson, more than 60 years later, would another southerner be elected president.

» Conspiracy theorists have suggested that Taylor was assassinated. In 1991, Taylor's remains were exhumed, but the minute traces of arsenic

found in tissue samples were considered too insignificant to be attributable to poisoning.

MILLARD FILLMORE

13th

1850-1853

Succeeding to the office after Zachary Taylor's untimely death, Fillmore was one of the least educated presidents. An apprentice clothier turned lawyer, he had read little apart from the Bible before he was 17 - after which he realised how little he knew, bought a dictionary, and attempted to fill gaps in his vocabulary by studying it. He entered politics as a 24-year-old, initially as a member of the Anti-Masonic Party, and was first elected

to Congress in 1833. He was still a relatively obscure figure when selected as vice-presidential candidate - Taylor met him for the first time after his inauguration - and he remained relatively obscure until Taylor's death.

His most significant act as President was to sign into law Henry Clay's Compromise Bill of 1850, which Taylor had opposed. After months of tense debate, before and after Taylor's death, the Compromise package (eventually broken up into five separate bills) admitted California to the union as a free state; granted territorial status to New Mexico; compensated Texas for settling its border dispute with New Mexico; abolished the slave trade in the District of Columbia; and, most controversially, placed Federal officers at the disposal of slaveholders seeking fugitive slaves.

Anger at this last piece of legislation, combined with some backfiring attempts by Fillmore to marginalise opponents within his party, resulted in his missing out on the Whig nomination for 1852. He left office with some bitterness, and, further embittered by the deaths in quick succession of his wife and daughter.

As the Whig party disintegrated, he refused to join the nascent Republican party but instead joined the far-right Know-Nothing Party, for which he stood in the 1856 presidential election (winning one state). He continued to dabble in politics thereafter, settling old scores and bemoaning the lack of official provision for the financial well-being of ex-presidents. He supported the Union cause in the Civil War but remained a hate figure for

anti-slavery campaigners; a mob vandalised his house after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. He died of a stroke in 1874.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"God knows that I detest slavery, but it is an existing evil, for which we are not responsible, and we must endure it, till we can get rid of it without destroying the last hope of free government in the world."

"The government of the United States is a limited government. It is confined to the exercise of powers expressly granted... and it is at all times an especial duty to guard against any infringement on the just rights of the States."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"In his rise from a log cabin to wealth and the White House, Millard Fillmore demonstrated that through methodical industry and some competence an uninspiring man could make the American dream come true." Official White House biography

"Whether to the nation or to the state, no service can be or ever will be rendered by a more able or a more faithful public servant." John Quincy Adams

"Fillmore lacks pluck. He wants backbone. He means well, but he is timid, irresolute, uncertain and loves to lean." Horace Greeley

"At a time when we needed a strong man, what we got was a man that swayed with the slightest breeze." Harry S Truman

MINUTIAE

» Queen Victoria thought him the handsomest man she had ever seen.

» In 1855, during a visit to the UK, he was offered an honorary degree by Oxford University. He declined it with the words: "No man should, in my judgement, accept a degree that he cannot read." (The text would have been in Latin).

» His first wife, Abigail, died after catching a cold at the inauguration ceremony of his successor, Franklin Pierce.

» His last words (presumably in reference to some soup he was being fed), are alleged to have been: "The nourishment is palatable."

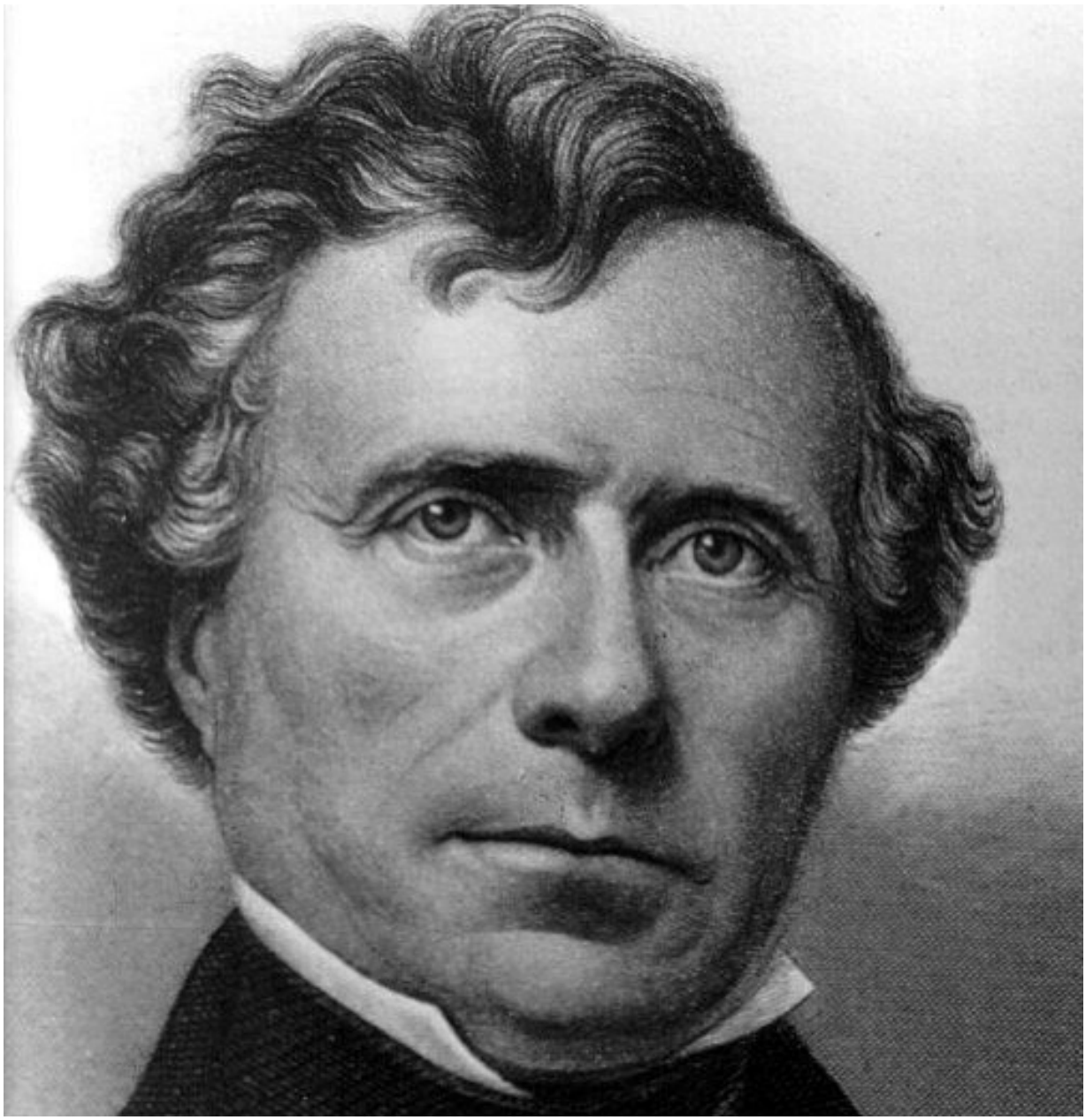
» It is often alleged that Fillmore installed the White House's first bathtub. This entirely fictitious presidential myth was invented by the humorist HL Mencken in 1917, but is still widely repeated as fact.

» Fillmore was the first president to open up trade with Japan, sending a fleet under Commodore Matthew Perry on a mission to make diplomatic and commercial contact.

FRANKLIN PIERCE

14th

1853-1857



Polls seeking to identify the worst US president of all time usually feature Franklin Pierce in their top five. Nominated by the Democrats as a compromise candidate (on the 49th ballot), he was elected by a landslide against Mexican war hero Winfield Scott. This unexpected success coincided with personal tragedy: his only surviving son (two others had died in infancy) was killed in a train accident two months before his inauguration.

His wife, unable to cope with her loss, blamed it on his political ambitions; they were never fully reconciled and she spent much of his term writing letters to her dead children. The strain proved a crucial setback in his lifelong battle with alcohol, and he relied increasingly on the bottle to help him deal with the strains of office.

These proved considerable. An ardent supporter of the rights of individual states, Pierce tried, like his predecessors, to prevent disagreements over slavery from tearing the Union apart. But his best-known piece of legislation had, if anything, the opposite result. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which allowed southern slave-owners to take their slaves wherever they wished, effectively overturned the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and opened up the possibility of slavery being expanded into the west.

This disastrous measure was prompted by a desire to promote a railroad from Chicago to California through Nebraska. (For similar reasons, relating to a southern railroad, Pierce had already sent James Gadsden to Mexico to

purchase the area now comprising southern Arizona and part of southern New Mexico for $10m.)

The provision that, in effect, residents of the new territories could decide the slavery question for themselves resulted in a rush of settlers into Kansas, as southerners and northerners vied for control of the territory. Shooting broke out, and "bleeding Kansas" offered a grim foretaste of the horrors of the Civil War.

As support for the Democrats collapsed, Pierce was further discredited when the contents of the Ostend Manifesto - recommending the acquisition of Cuba, by purchase or by force, from Spain - were leaked. He was not renominated for the 1856 election - "Anybody but Pierce" was the popular slogan when the Democrats were choosing their candidate.

Retirement saw Pierce lapse into alcoholism. His marriage finally collapsed, and his declared support for the Confederacy during the Civil War was the final nail in the coffin of his reputation. He died of cirrhosis in 1869.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"There's nothing left but to get drunk." (on losing his party's nomination)

"A Republic without parties is a complete anomaly. The history of all popular governments show how absurd is the idea of their attempting to

exist without parties."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"Pierce didn't know what was going on, and even if he had he wouldn't have known what to do about it." Harry S Truman

"There are scores of men in the country that seem brighter than he is, but [he] has the directing mind, and will move them about like pawns on a chessboard, and turn all their abilities to better purpose than they themselves could do." Nathaniel Hawthorne

"He was a small politician, of low capacity and mean surroundings, proud to act as the servile tool of men worse than himself but also stronger and abler. He was ever ready to do any work the slavery leaders set him." Theodore Roosevelt

MINUTIAE

» He was the first president to recite his inaugural address from memory.

» Pierce was the first president to have a full-time bodyguard, he was once attacked with a hard-boiled egg.

» His Vice-President, William Rufus King, died of tuberculosis before he could assume his duties.

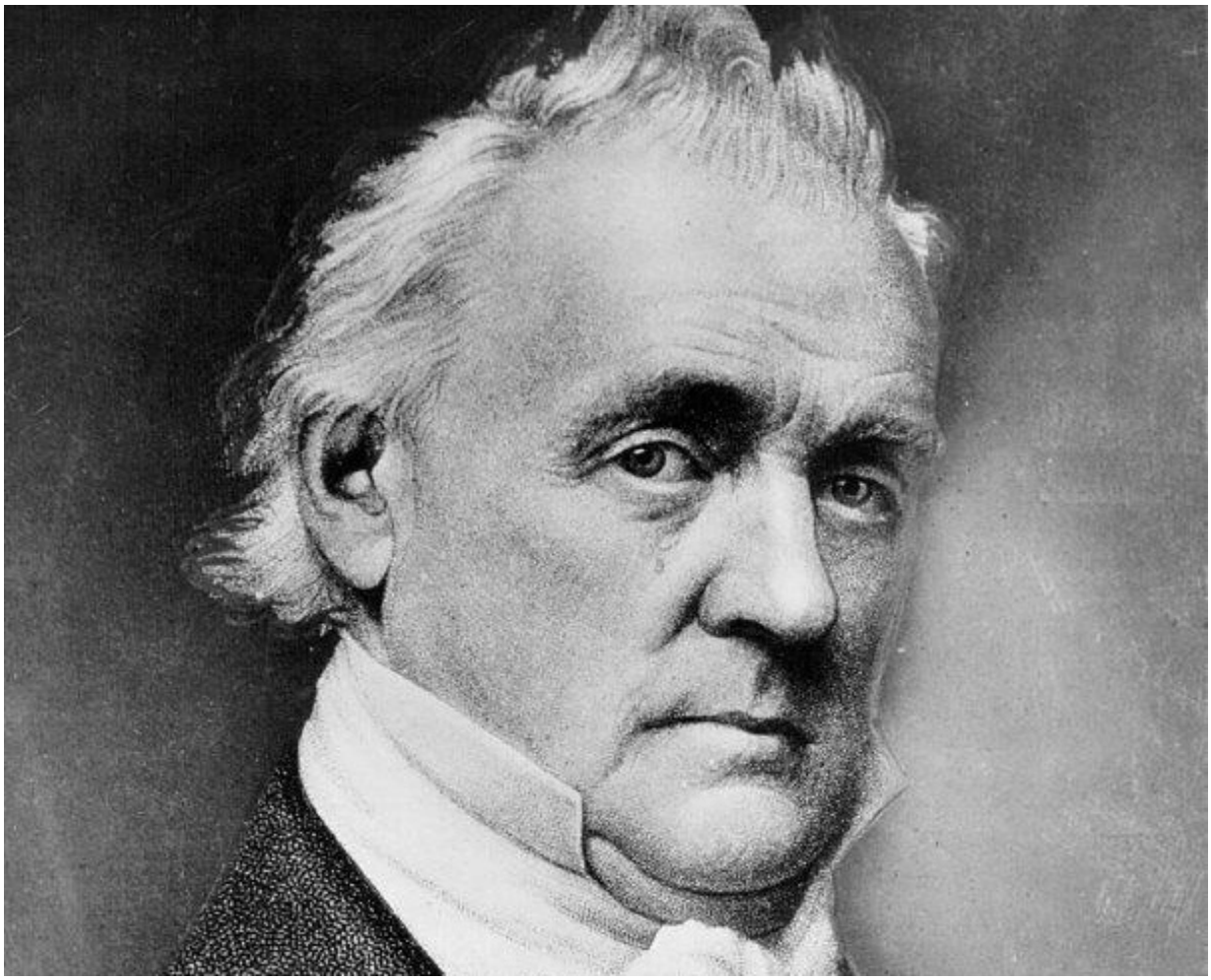
» He once ran over a pedestrian while driving his carriage in Washington (possibly in a drink-driving incident). He was arrested, but released when his identity became known.

» He was a keen fisherman.

» He observed the Sabbath so strictly that he refused to open his mail on a Sunday.

JAMES BUCHANAN
15th

1857-1861



Pierce's successor is another regular nominee for the title of worst ever president. A wealthy lawyer from Pennsylvania, he was tall, smart, eloquent and decent - but failed entirely to rise to the great political challenges of his time. After 40 unremarkable years in politics (which he may have entered

as a distraction from a failed romance), he came to power largely on the basis that, having been out of the country as ambassador to the UK since 1853, he was untainted by the controversy over the Kansas-Nebraska Bill. Once elected, he was plainly out of his depth. He underestimated the long-term threat posed by the new Republican party, and he failed to understand that constitutional arguments about the rights of states would not close the widening rift over slavery because the Northern states would not accept them.

When the Supreme Court's notorious Dred Scott ruling established that slavery could not be legislated out of existence, even in the newly emerging territories, Buchanan felt confirmed in his view that the controversy was all but settled. ("May we not, then, hope that the long agitation on this subject is approaching its end...?" he had said in his inaugural address, a few days earlier.) He could not have been more wrong.

He tried to end the troubles in Kansas by urging the admission of the territory as a slave state, but succeeded only in enraging the Republicans and alienating many in his own party. His support for a draft of the Kansas constitution (eventually rejected by Congress) that allowed slavery was further evidence of how out of touch he was.

Further evidence of Buchanan's inadequacy can be found in his lack of response to the financial panic of 1857 (caused by the failure of the Ohio Life Insurance Company of Cincinnati); and in the fact that, while

scrupulously honest himself, he presided over an administration that was notoriously corrupt.

In 1858, the Republicans won a plurality in the House, and the Federal Government reached a stalemate. By 1860, factional infighting had reached such a level that the Democratic party split, with both northern and southern branches nominating presidential candidates. This made victory for Abraham Lincoln and the Republicans a foregone conclusion - even though hardline southern states were determined to secede from the Union rather than accept a Republican administration.

Lincoln duly won, and, in Buchanan's final months, seven southern states withdrew to form the Confederate States of America. As they began to seize federal property, Buchanan had no idea how to respond. He denied the states' legal right to secede but also held that the Federal Government could not legally prevent them from doing so. He therefore did little beyond hoping for the best, effectively leaving Fort Sumter in Charleston to mercy of the Confederates.

He handed over power in March 1861, and spent the remaining seven years of his life in obscure retirement in Wheatland, his Pennsylvania home.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"My dear sir, if you are as happy on entering the White House as I on leaving, you are a very happy man indeed." (To Abraham Lincoln.)

"I believe [slavery] to be a great political evil and a great moral evil... But, while I entertain these opinions, I know it is an evil at present without a remedy... one of those moral evils from which it is impossible to escape without the introduction of evils infinitely greater."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"There is no such person running as James Buchanan. He is dead of lockjaw. Nothing remains but a platform and a bloated mass of political putridity." Thaddeus Stevens

MINUTIAE

» His head was almost invariably cocked to the left. This was the result of an unusual sight disorder, in which one eye was short-sighted and the other long-sighted.

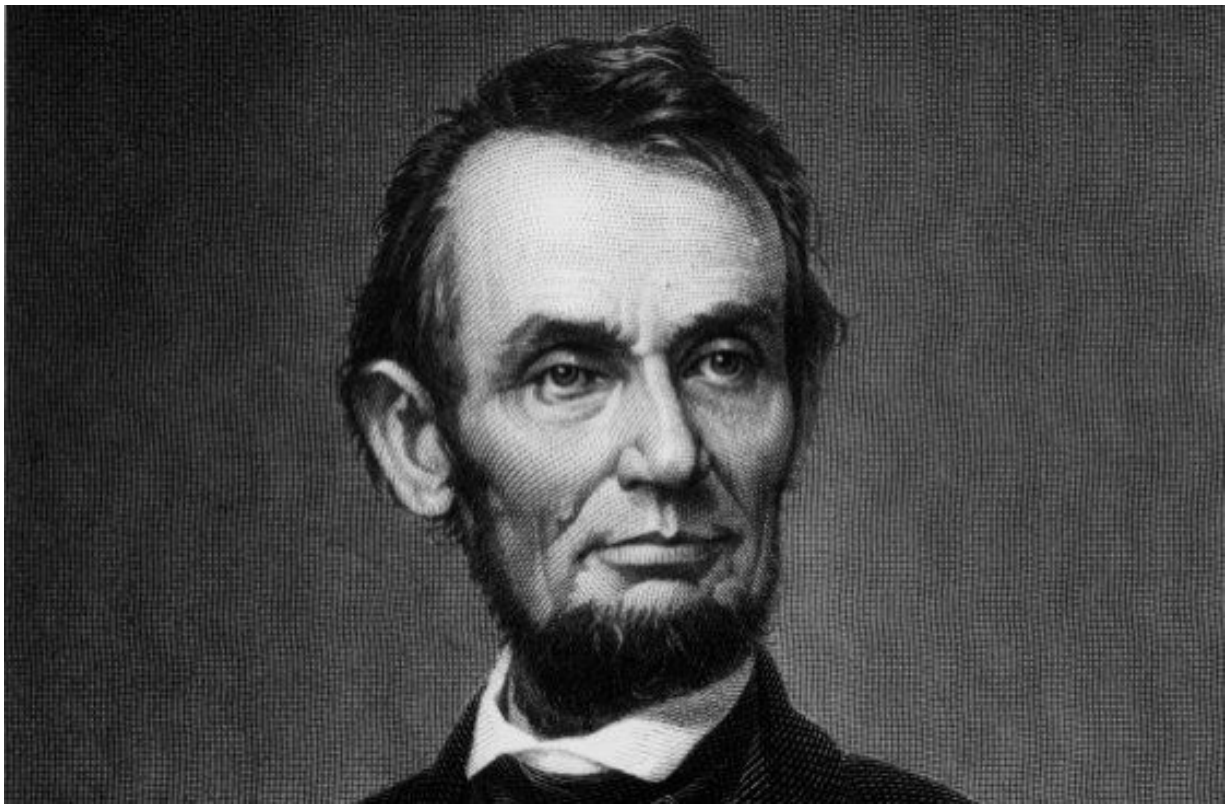
» James Buchanan was the only US president who never married. Harriet Lane, his niece, acted as his First Lady.

» Although his failure to marry probably resulted from the heartbreaking failure of a brief engagement (in his twenties, to Anne Coleman), rumour-mongers in Washington were quick to suggest another explanation, referring to Buchanan and his close friend William Rufus King as "Miss Nancy and Aunt Fancy".

» He enjoyed playing cards and drinking whiskey, but never seemed to get drunk.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN
16th - THE GREAT EMANCIPATOR

1861-1865



The genius of Abraham Lincoln is such that almost all American presidents and presidential aspirants since have turned to him for guidance and inspiration. Theodore Roosevelt hung a portrait of Lincoln above the fireplace of his White House office, saying that he wanted "so far as one who is not a great man can model himself upon one who was" to do "what Lincoln would have done". Franklin D Roosevelt considered Lincoln to be the ultimate political operator and sought to emulate his deeds. Harry

Truman, a Democrat with strong connections to the Confederacy and who consequently would never easily identify with a Republican president, admired the fact that Lincoln had had the strength of character to follow his instincts and, in the face of strong opposition, do what he thought was right.

There are other noteworthy examples. A few days after his nomination for the presidency in 1952, Adlai Stevenson, a man who had always been inclined to the loftiest political ideals, left the Illinois governor's mansion in Springfield and walked to Lincoln's old home just after midnight to sit in the famous Lincoln rocking chair for nearly an hour. The American magazine Newsweek recently recalled Stevenson saying that, once he had done that, he felt a "deep calm" about the possibility of taking on the enormous burden of being President of the United States. The great communicator himself, Ronald Reagan, whose speeches were so well crafted by his writers and then so brilliantly delivered, invoked Lincoln's name several times to describe his new vision for America. Even Richard Nixon found it useful to quote a few lines from a Lincoln speech, although they were deployed in a rather self-serving, and ultimately perverse, attempt to justify his role in the Watergate scandal.

But none of these comes as close to President Barack Obama's respect for Lincoln as perhaps one of the most extraordinary individuals in American history, and certainly one of the greatest presidents. Asked on American television about the book he would consider required reading in the Oval office, the senator from Illinois chose Team of Rivals, Doris Kearns Goodwin's magisterial biography in which she describes Lincoln's political

ascent from humble beginnings to a presidency marked by such uncommon magnanimity that it allowed him to embrace his enemies and invite them into his cabinet; people against whom he fought the fiercest political battles and who all wanted to be president. In his book The Audacity of Hope, Obama recalls that he once wrote an article for Time Magazine in which he said: "In Lincoln's rise from poverty, his ultimate mastery of language and law, his capacity to overcome personal loss and remain determined in the face of repeated defeat - in all this, he reminded me just... of my own struggles."

Obama may have been guilty of going too far in comparing himself to Lincoln, but few would disagree that in the way he conducted his campaign, in his speeches and in his political appointments he tried to reach out, as Lincoln did, beyond the comfort lines of his own party. In one memorable passage of the speech he delivered to the Democratic convention years before he was even thought of as a possible presidential candidate, Obama appealed to his audience in the hall and to Americans everywhere, to act and to think beyond mere party affiliations, and to regard themselves not as being a part of blue states or red states, but as being part of the United States of America. Lincoln would have approved. That was essentially the theme of his political life, and was one to which Obama returned time and time again.

So why has Lincoln attracted such unbounded admiration over so many years? At a time of the greatest crisis in the life of his country, he was blessed with the political skill and good sense to forge a team of the best

available talents that preserved a fledgling nation and freed America from the scourge of slavery. And he did it with diligence, magnanimity, honesty and integrity. His abiding faith in politics as an instrument to improve the lives of all citizens is still inspiring today and ennobles the concept of democracy.

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Lincoln came from no established political class. He was born in a log cabin on an isolated farm in rural Kentucky on 12 February 1809. So aware was he of the poverty all around him that throughout his life he would describe his childhood to any questioner by simply reciting a line from Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard by Thomas Gray: "The short and simple annals of the poor."

Young Abe was a boy who loved books. In a culture that rated manual labour more than intellectual pursuits, it was fortunate that he was allowed to spend so much time reading, which he was encouraged to do by his doting stepmother. His father was much less tolerant. Reading on his own and solidly for long hours, shutting out all contrarian noises, he developed great powers of concentration and a phenomenal memory.

Lincoln reached manhood at a fascinating time in the life of the emerging American nation. For the first time, people began to feel good about their prospects for a better life. It was indeed morning in America. They saw their country as a land of opportunity for all, not just the fortunate few. The

American Revolution had removed almost every barrier to success. It was perhaps the birth of the feeling that everything was possible. Both the privileges and disqualifications of class were rapidly disappearing and men had broken through "the bonds which once held them immobile".

The French visitor Alexis de Tocqueville was so impressed by what he saw that he was moved to write that "the idea of progress comes naturally into each man's mind; the desire to rise swells in every heart at once and all men want to quit the former social position". Ambition, he observed had become a "universal feeling". As if to emphasise the point, the Frenchman went on to say, as Doris Kearns Goodwin relates in her Lincoln biography, that every American "is eaten up with longing to rise".

What a powerful sentiment that was and what a great time to be alive. Young men such as Lincoln and those with whom he would eventually compete for high office, William Henry Seward, Salmon Chase and Edward Bates, accurately judged the mood and reacted to the temper of their times by deciding to devote their talents to public service. This was almost certainly due to the fact that Americans had fought for and won the right to govern themselves and thousands of young men, seeing a career in politics as a vindication of their struggle for self-determination, were bursting to throw their hats into the ring.

It must be said though that many did this, not in the interest of serving the public, but as a means of personal advancement. But that was not necessarily considered a disgrace. Upward mobility, however it was

achieved, was no bad thing. Newspapers were becoming more popular, and people anxiously sought them out to inform themselves about the newest trends. Politics was in vogue. It was the big game in town and participation was the thing. The ability to speak well and by oratorical brilliance to command the attention of the listening crowds was considered one of the finest arts. Voters turned out in record numbers in state and national elections.

Just past the age of 20, the bookish Lincoln left his family home in the country and headed for the budding town of New Salem, Illinois to devote his time to studying law. He attacked his legal studies with the same single-minded dedication and passion he reserved for reading and spent many hours trying to make up for the early learning he felt he lacked. As a practising lawyer in the courts he was admired by his fellow professionals and regarded by everyone who met him with great affection. He had been in New Salem for a few months when, at the age of 23, he decided to try to win a seat in the state legislature. It was an ambitious move and Lincoln knew it. He was largely unknown and he did nothing to hide his humble origins. His speeches on the campaign trail, as they would be all his life, were spiced with self-deprecating humour and a fund of anecdotes that had earned him a growing circle of friends and supporters.

Lincoln's inexperience proved to be too big a handicap and he lost. But even in that failed campaign, he demonstrated some of the qualities that would serve him well in his later life as a senator and as the President. He spoke the truth as he saw it. He was almost never pompous or too arrogant

to admit that he might be wrong. He tried to understand the position taken by others. He was a man of integrity and high principle. Those virtues would be important to him, because when he did get to the state legislature a few years later, he would face the issue that defined his career in politics and sparked a period of unequalled turbulence in the country.

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The issue of slavery would in various ways follow Lincoln to his death. Slavery was legal in Lincoln's home state, Kentucky, but his parents were against it. Their conviction had caused them such social and religious discomfort that they were forced to move, but that was as nothing compared with the trouble it was about to cause the young state legislator Abraham Lincoln. Moves to abolish slavery in the northern states led legislatures across the country to debate the right to keep slaves. When it came up for discussion in Illinois, the assembly voted by an overwhelming majority of 77 to six to defend the "right of property in slaves".

Lincoln was one of the dissenting voices and he had nailed his colours to the mast. He explained later that he had never wavered from the belief that if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. He never did change that view in the years that followed. What is interesting is that, in many respects, Lincoln's position on slavery was what would be called, in the world of politics today, very finely nuanced. For a long time, he found it difficult to convince the abolitionists that he was on their side. He believed that enslaving people was fundamentally wrong and should come to an end, but

he repeatedly made it clear he did not believe Congress had the power to interfere with the practice in states where it was already established. And right up to the time he arrived in Washington in 1847 as a congressman from Illinois, he felt slavery was such a bad practice that it would eventually wither on the vine and die of natural causes. Many other politicians felt the same way, but they, as with Lincoln, were ignoring the economic reality.

The American south had quickly been transformed into a vast and prosperous cotton empire trading with the world. The Industrial Revolution in Britain had opened up a seemingly unending demand for American cotton and very soon it accounted for no less than 57 per cent of all American exports. Central to this success were the industry's four million slaves.

This was not the kind of prosperity the south would ever willingly give up, and when Lincoln began his run for the Senate in 1858, he was forced to acknowledge the dangers the slavery issue posed to the very existence of the Union. The time had come for him to make a more emphatic statement about slavery and the way in which it threatened to tear the country apart. Quoting from the Gospels and referring to the North-South polarisation of opinion on the issue, he said: "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Further, to state his intentions in a way that could not be misinterpreted, he said plainly: "I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free."

Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas debating during a campaign for a U.S. Senate seat in Illinois. In the first of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Abraham Lincoln warned that 'A house divided against itself cannot stand'

He was applauded in the North but castigated as an enemy of the slave-owning South. As Doris Kearns Godwin wrote, it set the stage for "a titanic battle, arguably the most famous Senate fight in American history, a clash

that would make Lincoln a much better known figure and propel him to the presidency". Lincoln's opponent was Stephen Douglas, a Democrat who knew how to woo an audience and debunk the claims of his opponent. He went straight for the jugular. He attacked Lincoln as a "Negro-loving agitator bent on debasing white society". And when in his public speeches he asked voters whether they would entrust their government to a man who wanted black people to serve on juries and to be eligible for high office, he got just the response he expected - they shouted, "Never!"

Douglas's face-to-face debates with Lincoln energised the electorate as never before. People turned up in their thousands to hear their encounters which, unlike their pale imitations in our own century, frequently lasted for hours. But the race and the campaign had so captured the public's interest that everyone who came to listen to the candidates stayed to the end, frequently interjecting their own comments and observations as the two protagonists slugged it out. Newspapers lapped it up; reports of the debates circulated around the country and one observer described the verbal gymnastics of the candidates like watching two prize fighters locked in deadly combat.

In the end, Lincoln was forced to respond to his opponent's jibes by saying that he had never suggested "political and social equality between the white and black races" nor suggested that they should be able to vote, sit on juries or be allowed to intermarry. Douglas had put him on the defensive. Lincoln picked up some support when he urged voters to look beyond the present and to remember the essential message of the Declaration of Independence

that "all men are created equal", but he had failed to take the sting out of his opponents' attacks and lost that race for a seat in the Senate.

Not the kind to brood too long over failures, he was disappointed but not downcast. He was determined to find himself a role in the political life of his country and only two years later he found himself in an even bigger battle, this time to be the Republican party's nominee for president, competing against his old rivals, Seward, Chase and Bates.

Abraham Lincoln with his son Thomas

The Republican convention in Chicago was the political event of the decade. Party representatives from all over the country poured in to be part of the event. There was palpable excitement over the possible outcome of the party's deliberations and when the convention doors opened, people who had been waiting for hours swarmed in. In no time at all every seat had been taken by the 10,000 delegates. Seward's chances of clinching the nomination seemed good and, after intense discussions on a series of procedural matters, he duly emerged as the firm favourite. His supporters thought he was so comfortably ahead that at one point very early in the proceedings they were preparing victory celebrations.

Seward had immersed himself in politics, cultivated a number of influential friendships, and had never lacked self-confidence. He had also carefully prepared the ground before making his bid for the nomination by travelling

widely in America and in Europe, where he had been accorded the honour of audiences with Queen Victoria, the kings of Belgium and Italy, and Pope Pius IX, and meetings with Lord Palmerston and William Gladstone. To have met such an impressive list of the great and the good would represent quite an achievement for any American politician in any age, and it was seen as a boost to Seward's chances. And although some colleagues said he had shown bad judgement in spending so much time grandstanding outside the country, among people who had no votes, he remained the candidate of stature at home and abroad.

But political gatherings are unpredictable; they have a way of turning conventional wisdom on its head, and strong doubts emerged about the number of states Seward could carry for the party in a general election. Bates was then considered as the possible nominee, but his national popularity was also questioned. All hopes that Chase had of getting the nomination died, because his campaign team were unable to cope with the ferocious political infighting that swirled around the choice of a nominee. With those three fading in the home straight, thoughts turned to another candidate - when one delegate moved to propose the name Abraham Lincoln, 5,000 people jumped to their feet in noisy acclamation. More soundings were taken and there was more balloting of the delegates.

As tension mounted, the move to nominate Lincoln gathered momentum. Seward's people fought on. Chase and Bates continued to push their agendas, but across the convention there was a call for unity to give Lincoln a unanimous victory. And so to the consternation of the other candidates the

deed was done. The convention hall and the city of Chicago erupted into wild celebration. Seward was distraught and badly shaken by his party's failure to choose him. For many months, Chase reflected on how close he had come and couldn't quite come to terms with how he had failed to clinch it. Bates accepted the outcome with frustrated resignation. All were terribly disappointed.

A journalist at the time described how the surprise choice, Lincoln, was surrounded by throngs of joyful well-wishers. They filled the streets, converging on his house, and church bells tolled. The candidate received their congratulations with typical modesty, saying that it had been a victory not so much for him but for the party. Perhaps even at this early stage, Lincoln realised that his nomination would have far-reaching consequences. He knew his well-known anti-slavery reputation meant that the prosperous slave owning south would always be implacably hostile to his election, and he was right. Slavery was still the issue dividing the country, but there were others about which Lincoln had said little in his fight for the nomination, and consequently there were questions about his suitability to be a president.

Some commentators at the time concluded that the Republicans had simply made a bad choice. They felt that in comparison with men like Seward and Chase, Lincoln was a political pygmy, a backwoodsman, still largely unknown, and a speaker who tried to conceal his inadequacies by telling homespun stories. Others bluntly expressed the view that Lincoln was rather boring. It was even noted waspishly that he was very spare in his

personal habits, not very convivial and never smoked tobacco or drank. The presidential election was close. The Republicans won, but without the decisive mandate they had sought. Lincoln got less than a majority of the popular votes but achieved a solid majority in the Electoral College.

The President-elect immediately set about selecting his team for government, and in an extraordinary gesture of magnanimity the first names on his list were, Seward, Bates and Chase, the very men he had only recently fought and defeated in the nomination process. William Henry Seward, perhaps Lincoln's fiercest opponent, was persuaded to become Secretary of State. Chase was given the top job at the treasury and Bates was asked to become Attorney General.

Lincoln's decision to bring them into his government was a shock even to his associates. One of them remarked that it was possible to offer a job to one of his former opponents, but to offer jobs to all three was insane. And in Team of Rivals, Doris Kearns Goodwin relates that President Lincoln was closely questioned by a journalist about his philosophy of choosing to give jobs to men who had been his sworn political enemies, men who were still smarting at losing to him and who in all probability still harboured the belief that they were much better qualified to be President than he was. His reply is sage advice to any political leader or head of state.

Lincoln said: "We needed the strongest men of the party in the cabinet. We needed to hold our own people together. I looked the party over and concluded that these were the very strongest men. Then I had no right to

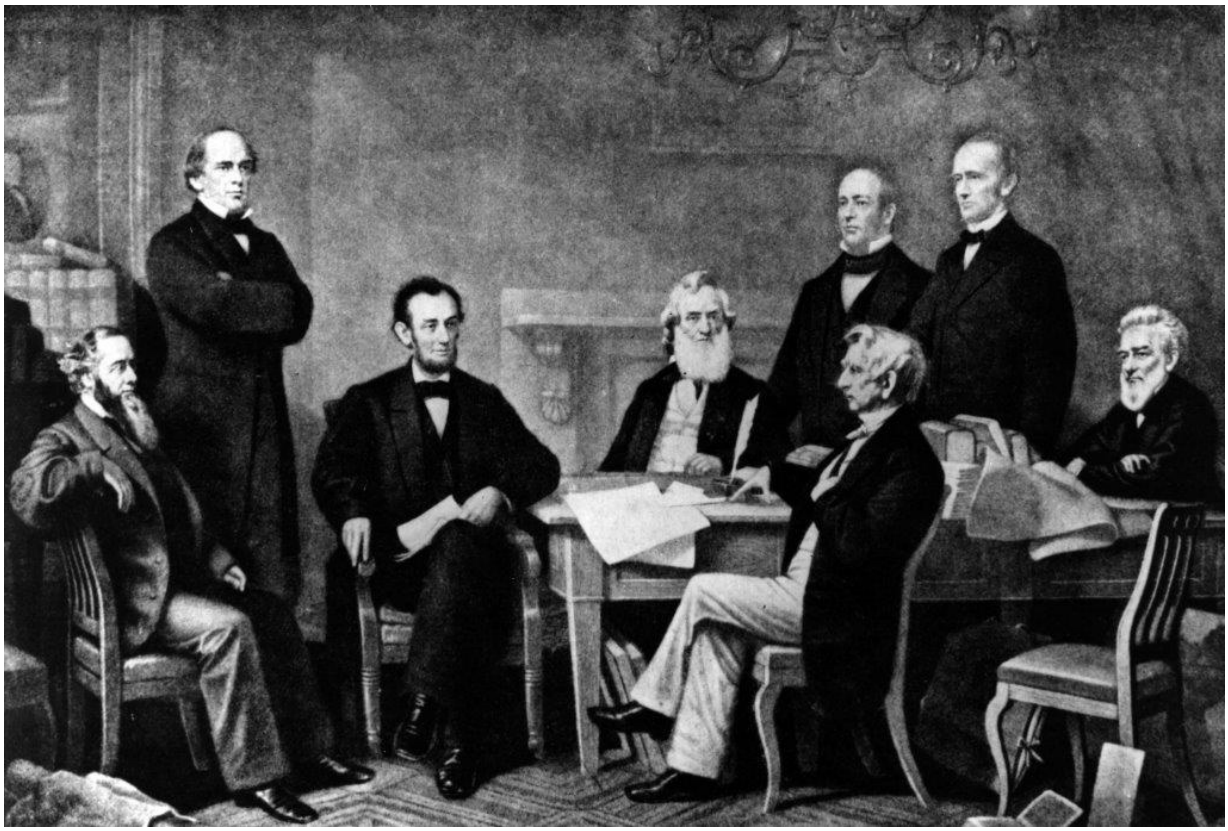
deprive the country of their services." This was in many ways the very essence of Lincoln's approach. All his life he'd wanted to feel worthy of the positions in which he found himself, but he also wanted to make sure that all his actions were based not on political expediency but on principled belief. The soubriquet "Honest Abe" was sometimes employed by Lincoln's detractors as a term of derision, but the man himself would never have thought it so.

One month before the new President was formally adopted into office, the storm clouds that had been gathering over the new administration burst open. Seven states, later to be joined by four others, seceded from the Union and declared the creation of a new nation, the Confederate States of America. Mr Lincoln's house was now truly and dangerously divided. One of the many historians of the period has suggested that the tragedy of the Civil War that followed was that neither North nor South realised until it was too late that the other side was not bluffing and was desperately in earnest.

It is interesting, as Roger Osborne points out in his book Civilisation, that in his inaugural address, Lincoln never promised to outlaw slavery and even offered to make the right to own slaves part of the constitution - but he was against any extension of slavery or secession from the Union. And so he promised at his inauguration to do everything in his power to "hold, occupy and possess" the property and places belonging to the Federal government that lay in Confederate territory. It is almost certain that what he had in

mind was Fort Sumter, a stronghold on an island near the mouth of Charleston Harbour in South Carolina.

The building flew a United States flag, a source of great offence to South Carolina and the Confederacy. Southerners appealed to the White House to take the flag down and leave the fort; to show that they meant business they surrounded the harbour with troops and guns. Lincoln responded by saying that he would send supplies to the beleaguered stronghold. That was taken, quite rightly, to mean that the President had no intention of giving up Fort Sumter. The die was cast. The Confederate commander General PGT Beauregard was given the order to turn his guns on the place. The bombardment went on for 30 hours. With supplies running low and with few options left, the Union officer hauled down the flag, ordered his men to leave and turned the fort over to the Confederacy.



22nd September 1862: Abraham Lincoln at the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, which gave slaves their freedom

No one died from the shots fired at Fort Sumter, but the Civil War had begun. The conflict was a profound tragedy for Lincoln's America. It claimed the lives of more than 700,000 people and devastated large parts of the country. The Union and Confederate armies had fought to a standstill and there was national relief when, after four years of bitter fighting and unconscionable brutality, General Robert E Lee bowed to the inevitable and, to avoid more pointless slaughter, surrendered to Lieutenant General Ulysses S Grant at Appomattox in Virginia in April 1865. The war was over, but it left a legacy of rancour and mistrust that would course its way through the veins of American politics and life for generations. Arguments

about slavery did not directly start the conflict, but slavery was the issue around which all the disagreements between the North and South converged.

One highlight is the effect of the war on slavery. At great risk, slaves in the Confederacy deserted their plantations to join the Union armies. By the end of the war there were more than 180,000 black soldiers fighting in 166 Union regiments. Emancipation was becoming a reality. Three years before, in 1862, Lincoln and his cabinet declared slavery to be illegal and all slaves free. One year later, dedicating a part of the Gettysburg battlefield as a final resting place for fallen Union troops, he made the speech for which he is famous, reminding his countrymen: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

***

The battle for true equality for all men in America went on for many years after Lincoln's tragic assassination by the mentally unbalanced John Wilkes Booth on 14 April 1865. As recently as March 1965, millions of black Americans in 11 southern states were still unable to vote. When they tried to register they were confronted by a number of humiliatingly frivolous questions to "test" their literacy, the most infamous of which was "how many bubbles are there in a bar of soap?" When they couldn't answer, they couldn't vote. Later that same year, President Lyndon Johnson drove past a

crowd of demonstrators and went up to Capitol Hill to urge Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act.

The Civil Rights march from Selma to Alabama had taken place only a few months before and Johnson adopted the anthem of the marchers' movement as his own. He said: "Even if we pass this bill the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a larger movement that reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life." The President continued: "Their cause must be our cause... because it is all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice." Johnson paused and concluded that speech to Congress with the words: "And we shall overcome."

1st October 1862: President Abraham Lincoln visiting soldiers encamped at the Civil War battlefield of Antietam in Maryland. It was one of the bloodiest in the whole American Civil War

Lyndon Johnson's biographer, Robert Caro, has written that while Lincoln cast off the chains of black Americans, it was Lyndon Johnson who led them into the voting booths, "closed democracy's sacred curtain behind them and placed their hands on the lever that gave them a hold on their own destiny." It is that hold of their destiny that began with Lincoln and continued with Johnson that let Barack Obama, a black American, to be nominated by his party and to fight and win the election to become the 44th President of the United States.

A few days before the election on 4 November, when their private polls convinced the Democrats they would defeat John McCain, word reached his speechwriter that Senator Obama wanted to "lean into bipartisanship a little more. Even though the Democrats have won a great victory, we should reach out and be humbled by it. Figure out a good Lincoln quote and bring it all together. Take a look at Lincoln's first inaugural address". The speechwriter duly obliged and came up with the line in which Lincoln appealed to "the better angels of our nature". At his speech in Chicago on the night of his victory, Obama used Lincoln's words to great effect: "We are not enemies, but friends. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection."

Abraham Lincoln making his inaugural speech during his second inauguration on 4th March 1865

At the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve members of many black churches in America concluded their ritual "watch night", a traditional prayer service that took on new meaning for African-Americans in 1862, on the eve of the enactment of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. This time the churches gave thanks too for the election of an African-American President who was inaugurated a few weeks before the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds..." (From his second inaugural address)

"Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery [to be allowed to continue], I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally."

"You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time."

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate - we cannot consecrate - we cannot hallow - this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never

forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us - that from these honoured dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion - that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain - that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom - and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." (Delivered at the dedication of the Soldiers National Cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on 19 November, 1863)

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"He was not born a king of men... but a child of the people, who made himself a great persuader, therefore a leader, by dint of firm resolve, patient effort and dogged perseverance." Horace Greeley

"The president is nothing more than a well-meaning baboon. He is the original gorilla. What a specimen to be at the head of our affairs now!" General George B McClellan

MINUTIAE

» Lincoln was famously ugly, and self-deprecating. Accused in a debate with Stephen Douglas of being two-faced, he replied: "If I had another face, do you think I would wear this one?

» Lincoln's son, Robert Todd Lincoln, was in the vicinity when his father was assassinated. He went on to witness the assassinations of two other presidents: Garfield, and McKinley.

» In the weeks following Lincoln's assassination, $22,000 worth of presidential china was stolen from the White House by souvenir-hunters.

» Lincoln oversaw the largest mass hanging in US history: of 38 Sioux Indians in Mankato, Minnesota, on 26 December, 1862.

» As a child, he was kicked in the forehead by a horse.

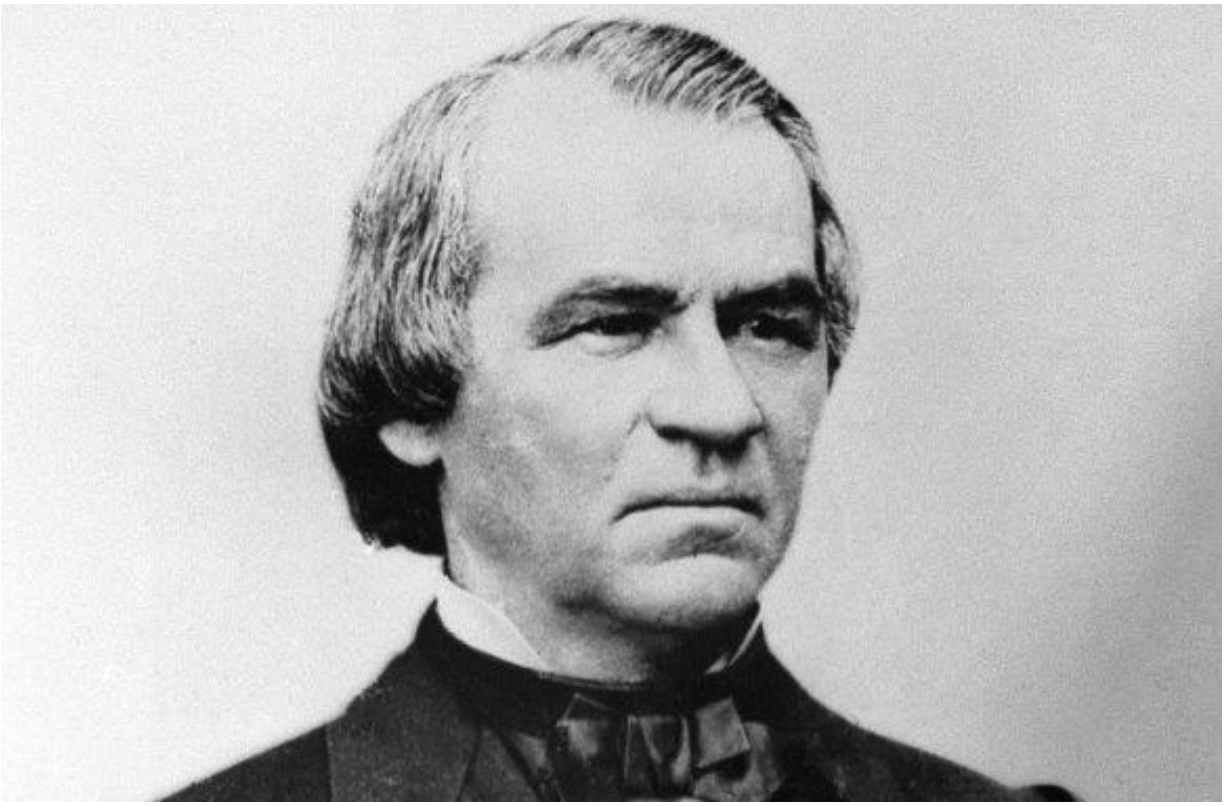
» He was an accomplished wrestler, who once ejected a violent troublemaker from a political meeting by throwing him 12 feet out the building.

» He received so many death threats that he had a special file in his desk, marked "Assassinations", in which to keep them.

By Trevor McDonald

ANDREW JOHNSON
17th

1865-1869



Johnson grew up in great poverty in North Carolina and did not even learn to read until he was 17 (when his future wife started to teach him).

After a brief career as a tailor, he cut his political teeth in Tennessee, becoming governor in 1853 and a US senator in 1857. He defended the rights of southern states in Congress, but was the only southern senator who refused to resign when his state seceded. Lincoln made him military

governor after Unionist forces overran Tennessee in 1862, and, although his sympathies were Democrat, he was elected Lincoln's Vice-President on a National Union Party ticket.

After Lincoln's murder, he began his presidency with a policy of "leniency, reconciliation and amnesty" towards the defeated south. But the Radical branch of the Republican Party placed him under severe pressure to adopt a less conciliatory approach - arguing, with some justice, that he was allowing reconstructed southern states to replace slavery with racially discriminatory "black codes".

The rest of Johnson's presidency was dominated by this power struggle. Radical legislation dealing with former slaves was vetoed by Johnson; the Radicals then mustered enough votes to override his veto - the first time this had ever happened. They followed this with the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which established negroes as American citizens and forbade discrimination against them, as well as initiating the Fourteenth Amendment (specifying that no state should "deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law") in the face of furious opposition from the south. (The Ku Klux Klan was founded in Tennessee the same year). Johnson exercised his veto 29 times, and was overridden 15 times.

Congressional elections in the autumn of 1866 strengthened the Radicals' grip. Legislation such as the Reconstruction Act of 1867 placed the southern states under military rule. Laws were also passed restricting the president's powers. It was an alleged violation of one of these, the Tenure of

Office Act, that led to the House voting for Johnson's impeachment. He was tried by the Senate in 1868 and acquitted by one vote. He was not nominated as a candidate in that year's presidential election and retired to Tennessee. He returned to Washington in 1875, shortly before his death, after being elected - uniquely for an ex-president - to the Senate.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"This is a country for white men, and by God, as long as I am President, it shall be a government for white men."

"There are no good laws but such as repeal other laws."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"One of the people by birth, he has remained so by conviction, continually referring to his origin… He was indifferent to money and careless of praise or censure." Jefferson Davis

"Johnson is an insolent drunken brute in comparison with which Caligula's horse was respectable." Senator Charles Sumner

MINUTIAE

» Johnson's inaugural address as Vice-President was rambling and incoherent. He had been drinking whiskey to dull the pain of typhoid fever.

» Johnson married at 18. His bride, Eliza McCardle, was 16 - the youngest age at which any First Lady has married.

» As a teenager, Johnson and his brother William were apprenticed to a tailor in Raleigh, North Carolina. After two years, they ran away, breaking their contract. The tailor offered a $10 reward for their return.

» It was under Johnson's presidency, in 1867, that Alaska was purchased from Russia for $7.2m. Residents were given three years to decide whether to stay in Alaska as Americans or move to Russia.

ULYSSES S GRANT

18th

1869-1877

One of the greatest of all generals, Ulysses Grant was marginally less successful as a president. As a Civil War hero who had aligned himself with the Radical Republicans late in Andrew Johnson's presidency, he had obvious potential and, having reluctantly accepted the Republican nomination, he duly won. His presidency consisted largely of allowing Radical Reconstruction to run its course in the South, supporting the policy with military force as necessary.

He did much to curb the power of the Ku Klux Klan (briefly suspending habeas corpus in North Carolina). He protected freedmen's civil rights, stabilised the currency, made peace with the Plains Indians and repaired relations with the UK. And he ratified (in 1870) the Fifteenth Amendment: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged... on account of race, colour or previous condition of servitude."

But all these successes were undermined by a series of financial scandals, in which his associates were too closely embroiled for comfort. These included the 1869 Gold Ring scandal, in which two speculators, Jay Gould and James Fisk, attempted to corner the gold market, using their (tenuous) association with Grant to strengthen their position; the 1872 Crédit Mobilier scandal, in which Grant's future Vice-President, Schuyler Colfax, was implicated in a scheme to defraud investors in the Union Pacific Railroad; an 1874 tax collection scandal that led to the resignation of Grant's Treasury Secretary, William Richardson; and the 1875 Whiskey Ring, in which at least $3m in taxes was stolen with the aid of senior government officials.

Grant himself is generally thought to have been honest, but the air of corruption hindered the recovery of financial confidence in the five-year slump that followed the Financial Panic of 1873. By the end of his second term, Grant's presidency was discredited, the economy was sunk in depression, and racial extremism was on the rise again in the South.

After leaving office, Grant travelled widely; retired to Illinois; nearly secured the Republican nomination for the 1880 presidential election; and then moved to New York City, where he was enticed into becoming a partner in a financial firm, run by the swindler Ferdinand Ward. The firm went bankrupt in 1884 and Grant was left almost penniless. He also learnt that he had incurable throat cancer. Desperate to provide for his family, he hurriedly wrote his Personal Memoirs, which he completed a few days before he died. This highly regarded work was a best-seller, earning his family nearly $450,000.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"It was my fortune, or misfortune, to be called to the office of Chief Executive without any previous political training."

"The truth is I am more of a farmer than a soldier... I never went into the army without regret and never retired without pleasure."

"The effects of the late civil strife have been to free the slave and make him a citizen. Yet he is not possessed of the civil rights that citizenship should carry with it. This is wrong, and should be corrected."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"I have carefully searched the military records of both ancient and modern history, and have never found Grant's superior as a general." General Robert Lee

"Various administrations have closed in gloom and weakness... but no other has closed in such paralysis and discredit as... did Grant's." Allan Nevins

MINUTIAE

» He wore false teeth and suffered from migraines.

» Grant was tone deaf and hated music.

» His wife, Julia, was cross-eyed.

» He liked to breakfast on cucumbers soaked in vinegar.

» While President, he was once fined $20 for speeding on his pony and buggy.

» When Grant was 44, his father, a wealthy tanner, decided to share out his fortune among his children. Grant refused to accept it, on the grounds that he had not helped to earn it.

» Grant smoked 20 cigars a day - which probably contributed to the throat cancer that killed him. He was also a heavy drinker whose military career was dogged by accusations of drunkenness.

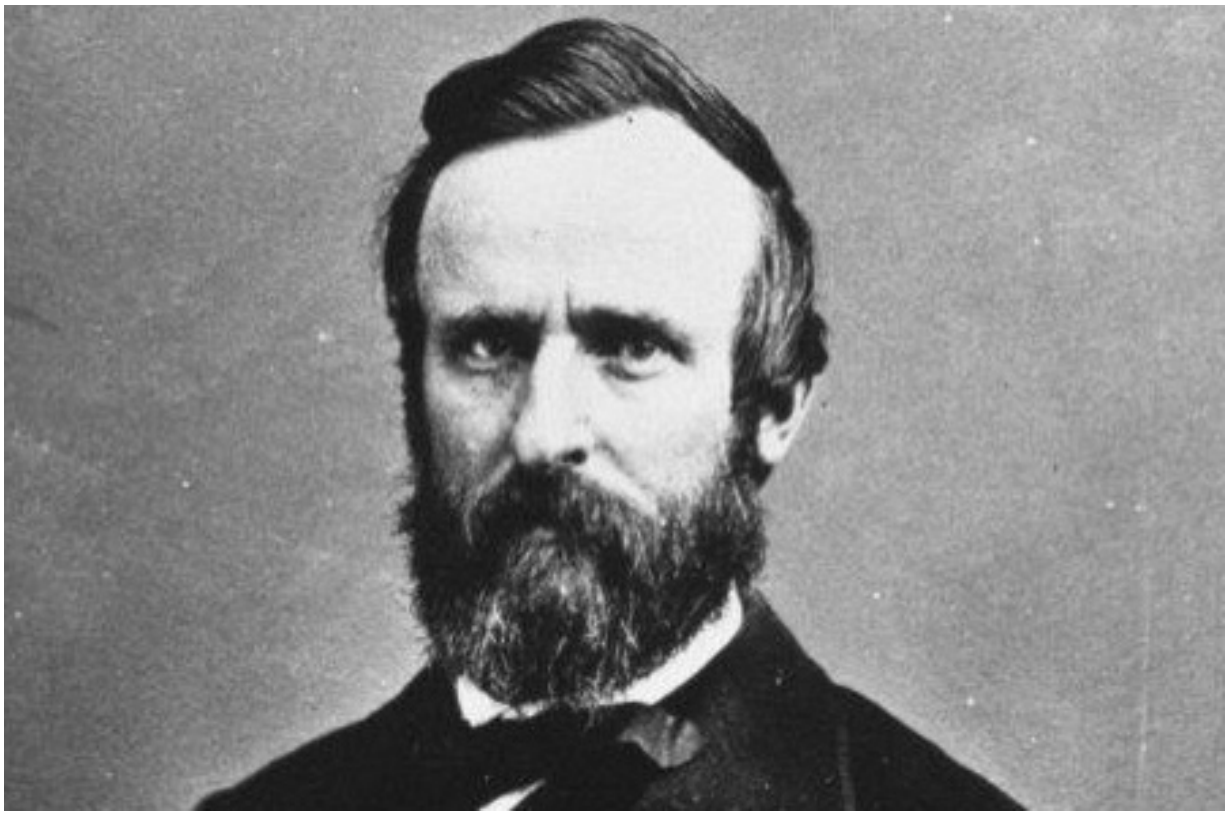
» As a child, Grant was nicknamed "Useless" by his father, apparently because of his ineptitude at everyday tasks.

» Despite an approach to war that often provoked accusations of butchery, Grant had a life-long aversion to the sight of blood.

RUTHERFORD B HAYES

19th

1877-1881



One of the most honest and decent men ever to occupy the White House, Hayes is nonetheless remembered mainly for having "stolen" his election victory.

Only the presidential election of 2000 has rivalled that of 1876 for controversy. Hayes's Democratic opponent, Samuel Tilden, had been widely

expected to win, and did indeed win the popular vote by more than 250,000 votes (at a time when the US population was only 50 million). He also led the electoral votes by 184 to 166. But there were disputes over the results in South Carolina, Louisiana and Florida (and one vote in Oregon), and, although Hayes told a reporter that he thought he had lost the election, his party refused to concede defeat.

After much controversy, Congress appointed a committee to sort out the mess. Eight Republicans and seven Democrats sat on it, and each voted on party lines, allowing Hayes to clinch victory by 185 electoral votes to 184.

Plainly uncomfortable at the manner of his success, and concerned by threats of rebellion from outraged southern Democrats (whose campaign had focused on the corruption of the outgoing Grant administration), Hayes promised to serve only one term and committed himself to a conciliatory, non-partisan presidency.

In the circumstances of the time, this might have been less desirable than it sounds. Although Hayes had pledged protection for the rights of freed slaves in the South, he also advocated the restoration of "wise, honest, and peaceful local self-government" there and, in the informal compromise agreement of 1877, he announced that he would end military occupation of the southern states. This calmed the immediate political storm, but, as troops were withdrawn, the vacuum was filled by the cause of white supremacy.

Given the circumstances of his election, Hayes should probably be considered a successful president. An Ohio-born lawyer, he had fought with distinction during the Civil War, and his presidency was coloured by his obvious integrity. The other notable feature of his administration was his attempt at civil service reform. In June 1877, he issued an executive order barring federal employees from taking part in political activities. He also encouraged the creation of a civil service commission and the introduction of competitive examinations.

He honoured his promise not to stand for re-election and devoted his 12-year retirement to good causes, such as temperance and educational opportunities for former slaves.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"He serves his party best who serves his country best."

"I am not liked as a president by the politicians in office, in the press, or in Congress. But I am content to abide by the judgement - the sober second thought - of the people."

"Fighting battles is like courting girls: those who make the most pretensions and are boldest usually win."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"The great fraud of 1876-77, by which, upon a false count of the electoral votes of two States, the candidate defeated at the polls was declared to be President, and for the first time in American history, the will of the people was set aside under a threat of military violence, struck a deadly blow at our system of representative government." (Democratic Party Platform, 22 June 1880)

MINUTIAE

» Hayes's wife was even more puritanical than he was. She became known as "Lemonade Lucy", for banning alcohol from the White House. In the whole of Hayes's presidency, there was only one state reception at which wine was served. The Hayes family spent their evenings singing hymns.

» As a young man, Hayes was so popular with members of the opposite sex that he invented a non-existent girlfriend - who he said was waiting for him in Columbus - in order to discourage his overly persistent admirers from pursuing him.

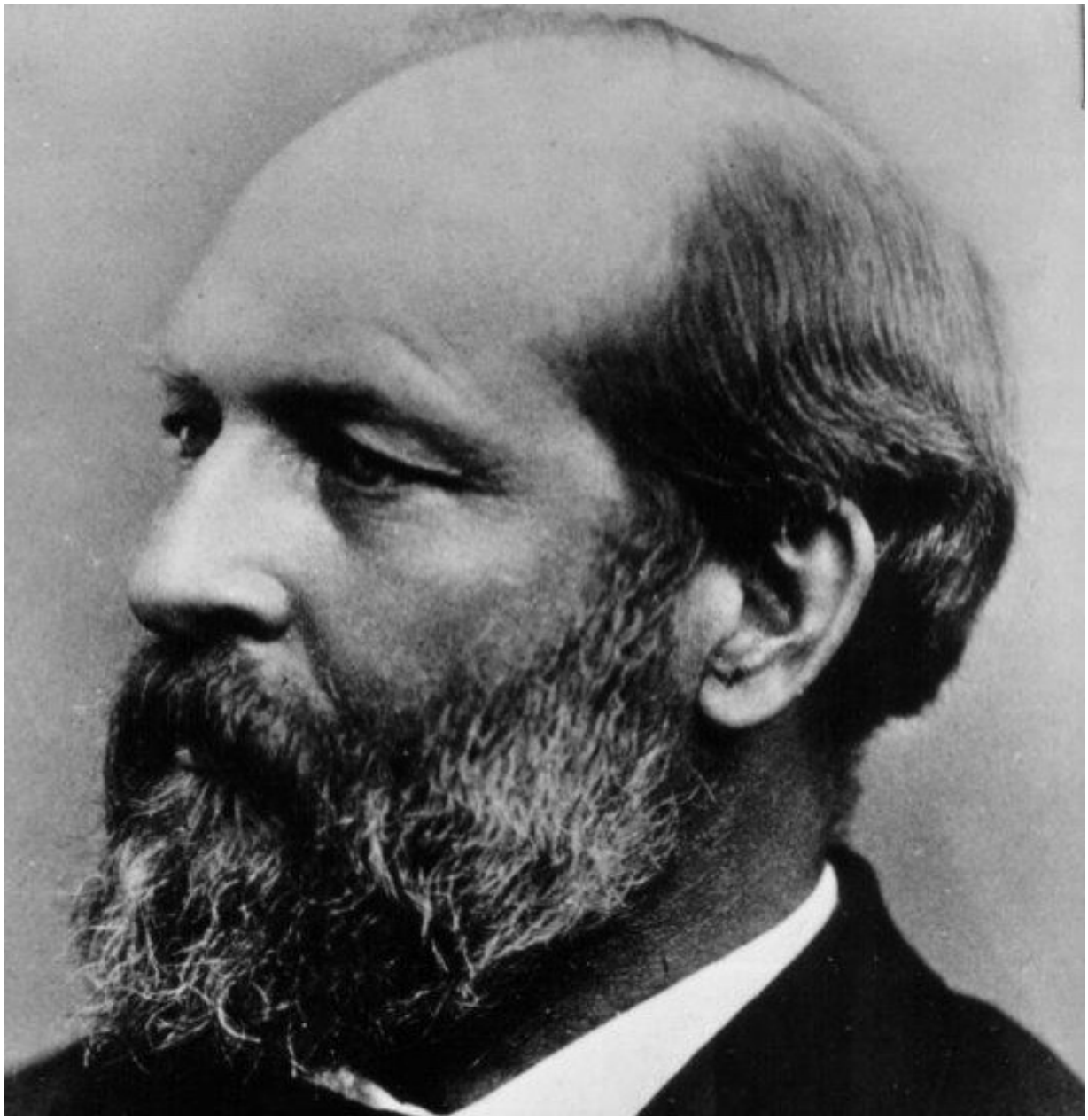
» On his journey from the White House to the estate in Fremont, Ohio where Hayes would be spending his retirement, he was involved in a serious rail crash - but managed to survive the incident unscathed.

» During the Civil War, he had his horse shot from under him on no fewer than four separate occasions.

JAMES A GARFIELD

20th

1881



A dark horse candidate, who won the Republican nomination as a compromise between rival factions supporting Ulysses Grant, John Sherman and James Blaine, Garfield grew up in great poverty - he was the last president to be born in a log cabin - and rose through hard work to the highest office in the land via a successful Civil War, in which he rose to the rank of major-general, and a long spell as a Republican Congressman. He remains the only sitting member of the House of Representatives to have been elected president.

Although Garfield had been mildly implicated in the 1873 Crédit Mobilier scandal, he took an impressively straightforward approached to the presidency, rooting out corruption among Republicans involved in the awarding of mail route contracts ("Go ahead, regardless of where or whom you hit," he told those investigating the scandal; "I direct you not only to probe this ulcer to the bottom, but to cut it out"), and winning a power struggle with the head of the New York Republican party over the appointment of the collector of the Port of New York.

Then, after fewer than four months in office, he was shot at a Washington railroad station by an embittered attorney, Charles J Guiteau, who had been turned down for a diplomatic post. He spent 80 days on his death-bed, watched over by his wife and probed with unsterilised instruments by well-meaning surgeons. He died from infection and internal haemorrhage.

IN HIS WORDS

"A brave man is a man who dares to look the Devil in the face and tell him he is a Devil."

"I would rather believe something and suffer from it, than to slide along into success without opinions."

"The people are responsible for the character of their Congress. If that body be ignorant, reckless, and corrupt, it is because the people tolerate ignorance, recklessness, and corruption."

"My God! What is there in this place [the White House] that a man should ever want to get into it?"

"The elevation of the negro race from slavery to the full rights of citizenship is the most important political change since the adoption of the constitution in 1787." (Inaugural address, 4 March 1881)

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"No man ever started so low that accomplished so much, in all our history." Rutherford Hayes

"Garfield has shown that he is not possessed of the backbone of an angle-worm." Ulysses Grant

MINUTIAE

» Garfield was alarmingly accident-prone. When he was 16, he spent six weeks working on a canal boat between Cleveland and Pittsburgh, and fell overboard 14 times - despite never having learnt to swim.

» While Garfield lay mortally wounded in the White House, Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone, tried unsuccessfully to find the assassin's bullet in his body, using an induction-balance electrical device that he had designed.

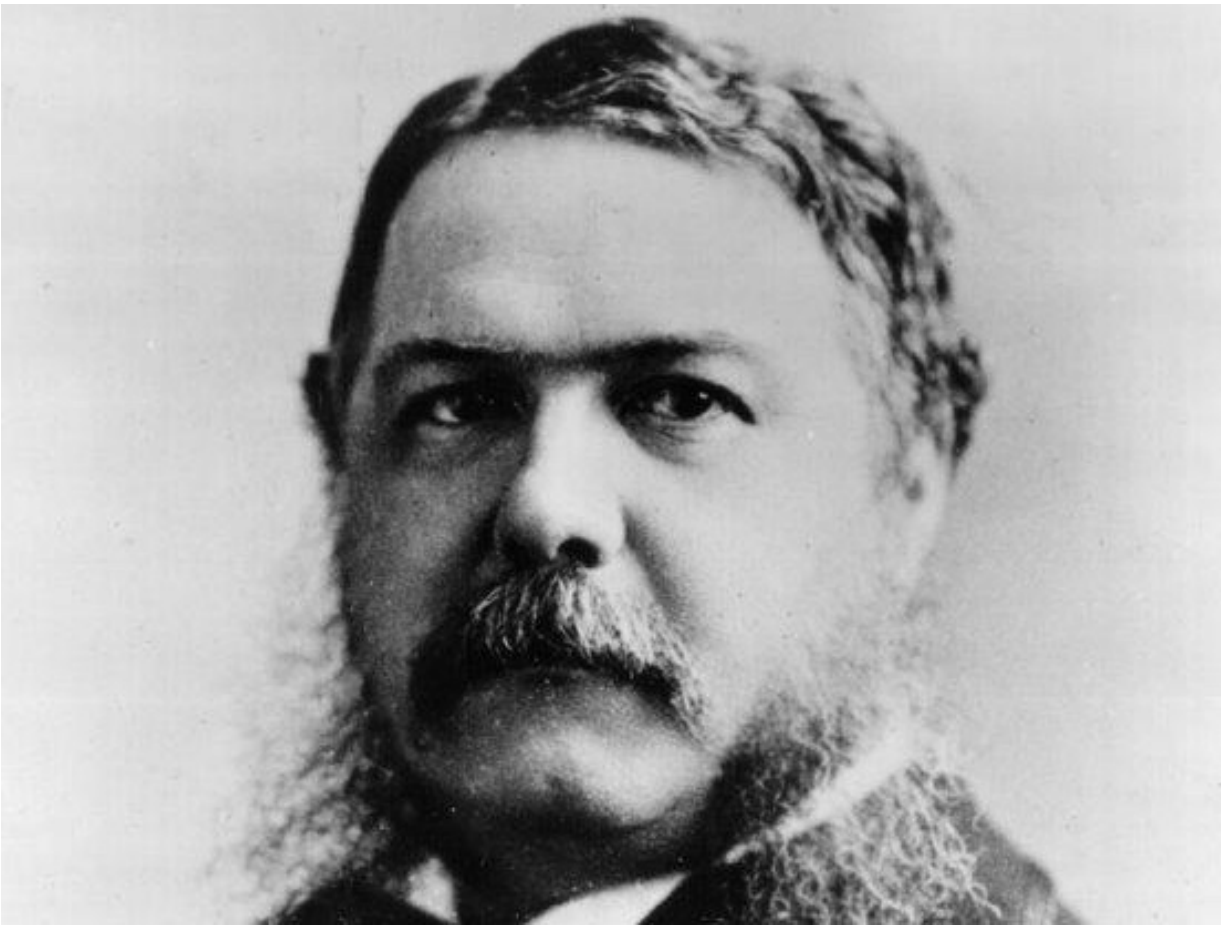
» Garfield liked to entertain friends by writing in Latin and Greek simultaneously - one with each hand.

» He used to exercise by juggling Indian clubs.

CHESTER A ARTHUR

21st

1881-1885



Chester A Arthur arrived in the White House with a reputation as a Party man: an enthusiastic advocate of the shamelessly political patronage that had flourished under Ulysses Grant. He had been nominated to the vice-presidency largely to placate the "stalwart" wing of the Republican party, which approved of such patronage.

As President, however, Arthur broke decisively with his former cronies, to the fury of Republican power brokers such as Roscoe Conkling. Continuing where Garfield and Hayes had left off, he attempted to curb irresponsible "pork barrel" spending and conscientiously pursued the cause of civil service reform. In 1883, he signed into law the Pendleton Act, which established a bipartisan Civil Service Commission, protected employees against removal for political reasons, and made certain Government positions obtainable only through competitive written examinations.

It has subsequently been theorised that his unexpected independence of spirit may have owed something to his knowledge, kept secret since the first year of his presidency, that he was dying of Bright's disease, an incurable kidney disorder. He was not re-nominated in 1884 and, after briefly resuming his career as a lawyer, died in 1886.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"Men may die, but the fabrics of our free institutions remain unshaken. No higher or more reassuring proof could exist of the strength and permanence of popular government than the fact that though the chosen of the people be struck down his constitutional successor is peacefully installed without shock or strain except the sorrow which mourns the bereavement."

"I may be President of the United States, but my private life is nobody's damned business."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"No man ever entered the Presidency so profoundly and widely distrusted, and no one ever retired... more generally respected." Alexander K McClure

"A nonentity with side whiskers." Woodrow Wilson

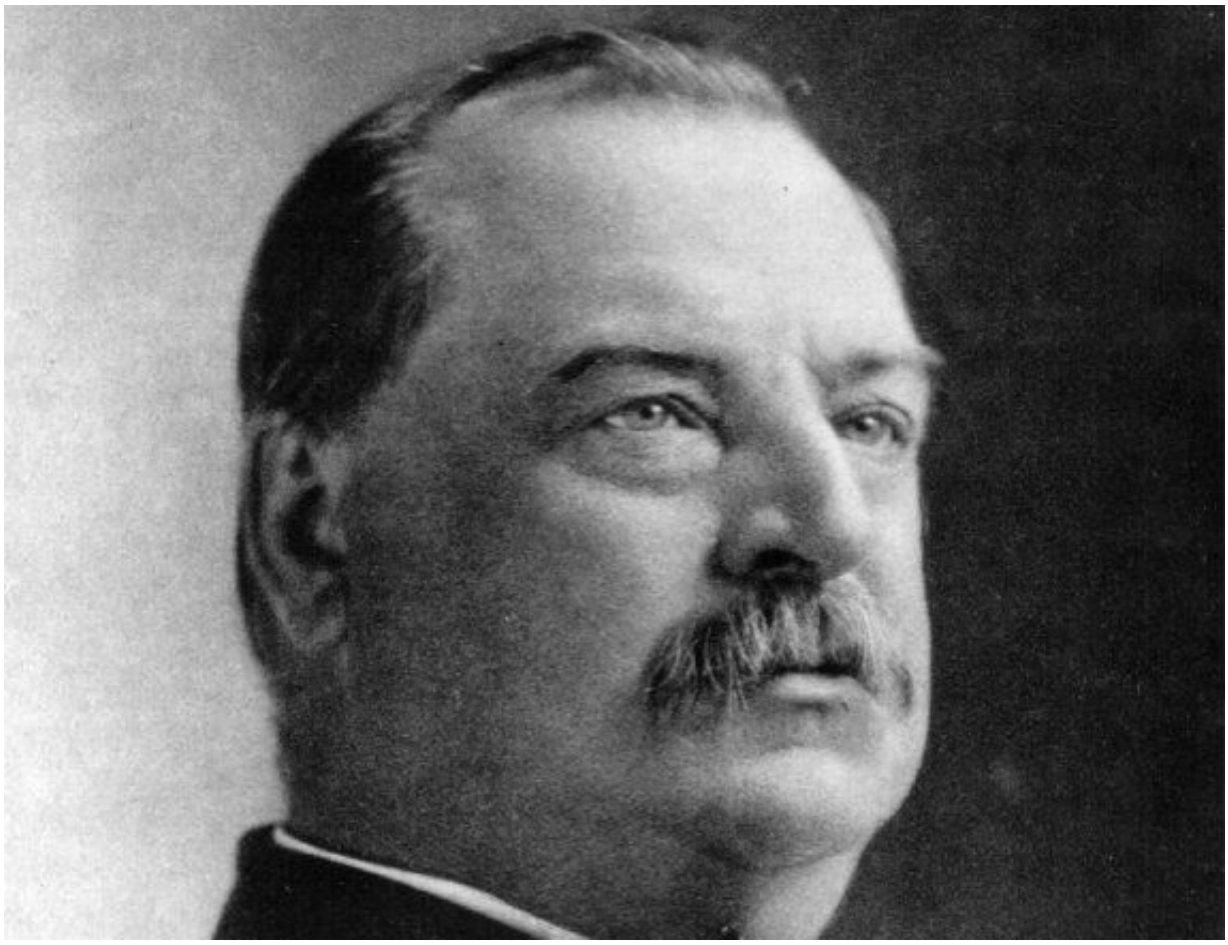
MINUTIAE

» Arthur had a reputation as a dandy and was the first president to employ a full-time valet. It was said that he owned at least 80 pairs of trousers.

» Before moving into the White House, he auctioned off 24 wagon-loads of presidential memorabilia to souvenir-hunters. He used the proceeds to pay for a lavish refurbishment.

GROVER CLEVELAND
22nd & 24th

1885-1889; 1893-1897



The only president to serve two non-consecutive terms - and for that reason generally counted as two presidents rather than one - Cleveland was also the first president to live some of his life in the 20th century. Born in New Jersey, he spent his early years in Buffalo, New York, where, after practising as a lawyer, he held various minor public offices before

becoming governor of New York in 1882. His reputation for fearless honesty helped him to become the first Democrat to be elected to the White House since the Civil War.

As president, he discouraged patronage and barred favours to economic special interest groups. He also vetoed many private pension bills to Civil War veterans with dubious claims. By the end of his second term, he had used the veto more than all his predecessors combined.

Such obstinacy made him enemies. He angered the railroads by ordering an investigation of western lands that they held by Government grant, ultimately forcing them to return 81 million acres. He also signed the first law attempting Federal regulation of the railroads.

In December 1887, he called on Congress to reduce high protective tariffs. Told that this would create political capital for the Republicans, he replied: "What is the use of being elected or re-elected unless you stand for something?"

He was probably not entirely surprised at his defeat in the 1888 election (although he won the popular vote). But his young wife, Frances, whom he had married in the White House in 1886 (after acting as her guardian for a decade), warned staff there to take good care of the furniture, as "we are coming back four years from today."

She was right, but Cleveland's second term was less successful than his first. Shortly after he returned to office, the stock market was struck by the Panic of 1893, and soon the economy was in depression. Cleveland's hands-off approach did little to ease the pain. He dealt directly with the Treasury crisis rather than with business failures, farm mortgage foreclosures and unemployment. He obtained repeal of the mildly inflationary Sherman Silver Purchase Act and, with the aid of Wall Street, maintained the Treasury's gold reserve.

His hardline response to industrial unrest won admirers in some quarters. "If it takes the entire army and navy of the United States to deliver a postcard in Chicago," he said when sending federal troops to break a railroad strike, "that card will be delivered." But, in general, his reaction to the depression and its challenges was unpopular, and by 1896 even his own party had deserted him, nominating William Jennings Bryan instead.

A large, moody, serious man, Cleveland might have been treated more kindly by history had he limited himself to a single term. But his foreign policy was well-thought-of - he forced the UK to accept arbitration of a disputed boundary in Venezuela - while his repeal of the Tenure of Office Act, combined with his fearless use of the veto, did much to re-establish the power and prestige of the presidency.

After leaving the White House, Cleveland lived quietly in retirement in Princeton, New Jersey. He died in 1908. Not until 1917 was it revealed that, in 1893, at the height of the financial panic, Cleveland had secretly

undergone a major operation for cancer of the jaw while on a friend's yacht. Desperate not to see public confidence undermined further, the White House insisted that he had merely had minor dental treatment. It is arguable that this white lie was as important a contribution to the nation's well-being as many of his better-known acts of integrity.

IN HIS WORDS

"The lessons of paternalism ought to be unlearnt and the better lesson taught that, while the people should patriotically and cheerfully support their Government, its functions do not include the support of the people."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"In the midst of the shifting scene Mr Cleveland personally came to seem the only fixed point. He alone stood firm and gave definite utterance to principles intelligible to all." Woodrow Wilson

MINUTIAE

» Cleveland was drafted to fight in the Civil War but paid a 32-year-old Polish immigrant to serve in his place.

» His first bid for the presidency was nearly derailed by a sex scandal. The press discovered that, as a 37-year-old bachelor, he had accepted responsibility for the paternity of a child born out of wedlock. When his aides asked him for a response to the lurid headlines, he said simply: "Tell

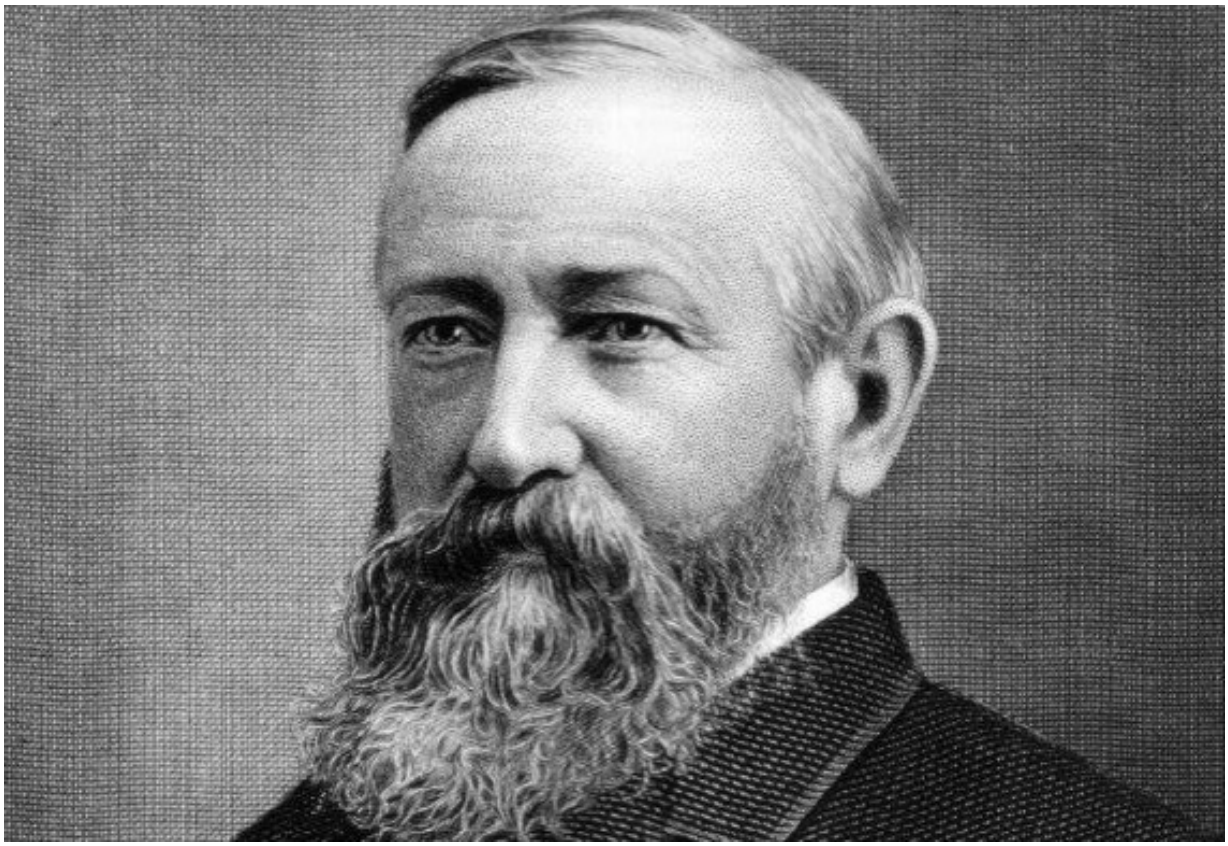
them the truth." The public were impressed with his honesty, and the damage was limited.

» As Sheriff of Eric County, New York, he personally hanged two men, putting the noose round their necks and pulling the trap himself. He believed that this was more honest than paying someone else to perform the deed for him.

BENJAMIN HARRISON

23rd

1889-1893



A great-grandson of the Benjamin Harrison who signed the Declaration of Independence, and a grandson of the William Henry Harrison who served briefly as president in 1841, Benjamin Harrison, a former lawyer from Indianapolis, was more notable for his political pedigree than for his personal charisma. Stiff, formal and intolerant of others' failings, he hated

small-talk and was known as the "human iceberg". But he was a good public speaker, and rose to the political heights with relative ease.

He won the presidency despite winning 100,000 fewer votes than Grover Cleveland, carrying the Electoral College by 233 to 168. The Republican powerbroker Matt Quay later remarked that Harrison had no idea "how close a number of men were compelled to approach the gates of the penitentiary to make him President".

Tied down by pledges that his supporters had given on his behalf, Harrison proved ineffectual in office. He allowed Congress to pass the controversial McKinley Tariff, which set rates higher than ever, and the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, which undermined confidence in the gold standard. Annual federal spending reached $1bn for the first time.

He built up the navy, opened up the Oklahoma Territory to settlers, saw six states (North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and Washington) admitted to the Union and, with the massacre at Wounded Knee, brought the Indian Wars to a brutal end. He also signed the Sherman Anti-Trust Act "to protect trade and commerce against unlawful restraints and monopolies".

But he could not solve the problem of the tariff rate (which at beginning of his tenure was generating an embarrassing Treasury surplus), and Democrat jibes about the "Billion Dollar Congress" fuelled a widespread sense that he was mismanaging the nation's finances. As the Treasury surplus vanished

and economic storm clouds gathered, Harrison lost the confidence of his party leaders and, although he was renominated in 1892, he lost to Grover Cleveland. He did little active campaigning on account of the illness of his wife, who he died two weeks before the election. Harrison retired to Indianapolis, where he re-married, wrote, taught and practised law until his death, from influenza, in 1901.

IN HIS WORDS

"No other people have a government more worthy of their respect and love or a land so magnificent in extent, so pleasant to look upon, and so full of generous suggestion to enterprise and labour."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"A cold-blooded, narrow-minded, prejudiced, obstinate, timid old psalm-singing Indianapolis politician." Theodore Roosevelt

MINUTIAE

» His second wife, Mary, was his first wife's niece and she had formerly worked for his first wife as an assistant in the White House.

» Electric lights were installed in the White House during his term of office. However, he and his wife were afraid to touch the switches, so they would often sleep with the lights on.

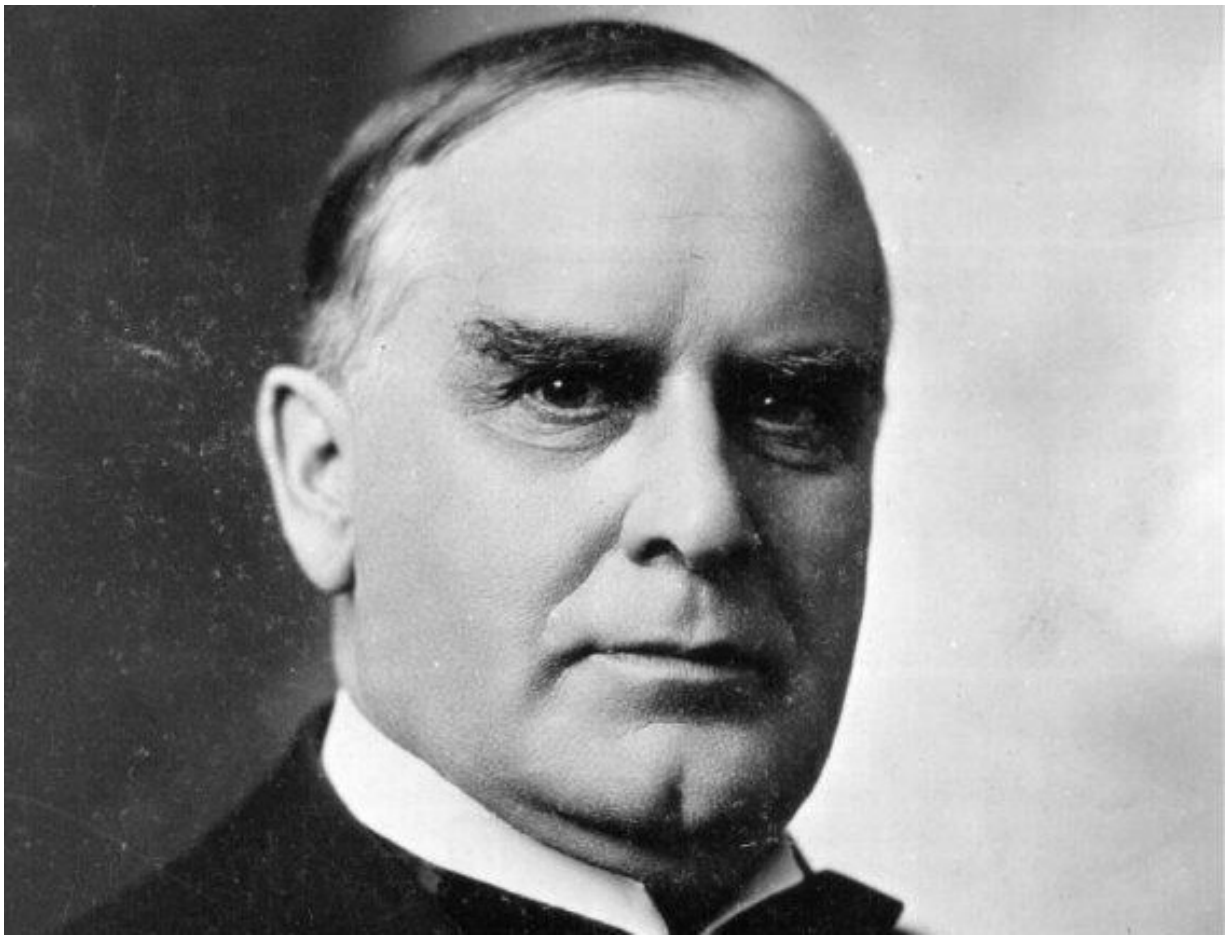
» He was the first President to attend a baseball game. He saw the Cincinnati Reds beat the Washington Senators 7 to 4 on June 6, 1892.

» He was the last US president to have a beard.

» He was the first president to have his voice preserved for posterity: in an 1889 wax phonograph recording.

WILLIAM McKINLEY
25th

1897-1901



When McKinley became President, the 1893 depression had almost run its course. McKinley had opposed the "free and unlimited coinage of both silver and gold" advocated by the Democrats and had the strong financial support of the business community, notably Mark Hanna, the Cincinnati financier. This earned him the largest majority of popular votes since 1872.

Born in Niles, Ohio, in 1843, he had fought in the Civil War, then studied law, married the daughter of an Ohio banker and been elected to Congress at the age of 34. During his 14 years in the House, he had become the leading Republican tariff expert, giving his name to the measure enacted in 1890. Deferring action on the money question, he called Congress into special session to enact the highest tariff in history.

In the business-friendly atmosphere of the McKinley administration, industrial combinations developed at an unprecedented pace. But McKinley did condemn trusts, as "dangerous conspiracies against the public good". He championed the gold standard and the protective tariff, but also advocated reciprocal trade treaties to open up overseas markets.

But it was foreign policy that dominated his administration. "I have been through one war," he said early in his tenure. "I have seen the dead piled up, and I do not want to see another." But when the press began to clamour for war with Spain over Cuba - where revolutionaries were trying to throw off Spanish imperial rule - he was unable to resist the pressure, especially when the US battleship Maine was sunk in a mysterious explosion in Havana harbour. The Spanish-American War of 1898 proved a predictably overwhelming triumph for the US, resulting in the destruction of the Spanish fleet, the liberation of Cuba, and the annexation of the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico. McKinley also authorised the annexation of Hawaii, and provided military assistance to the British in the suppression of the Boxer Rising in China.

McKinley was re-elected comfortably in 1900. But his second term proved tragically short. At the Buffalo Pan-American Exposition in September 1901, he was shot by Leon Czolgosz, a deranged anarchist. He died eight days later.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"Unlike any other nation, here the people rule, and their will is the supreme law. It is sometimes sneeringly said by those who do not like free government, that here we count heads. True, heads are counted, but brains also."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"He had a way of handling men so that they thought their ideas were his own." Elihu Root

"William McKinley has left us a priceless gift in the example of a useful and pure life, in his fidelity to public trusts and in his demonstration of the value of kindly virtues that not only ennoble but lead to success." Grover Cleveland

"McKinley has no more backbone than a chocolate eclair." Theodore Roosevelt

MINUTIAE

» He was the first truly media-conscious president, establishing the White House press-room and encouraging the flow of selected information to journalists.

» He always insisted that his wife, who suffered from epilepsy, sat next to him during state dinners. If she underwent a seizure, he would protect her dignity by covering her face with a napkin or handkerchief.

» Ohio adopted the red carnation as its state symbol in McKinley's honour, who always wore one while campaigning.

» He was the first president to be caught on film.

» After he had been shot, he saw his guards attacking his assassin and cried out: "Don't let them hurt him." He then asked his attendants to be particularly careful of how they broke the news to his wife.

» He was the last president to have fought in the Civil War.

» His two daughters died during infancy.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

26th

1901-1909

Stepping into the shoes of President McKinley shortly before his 43rd birthday, Theodore Roosevelt became the youngest President in US history.

His energy and confidence brought new excitement and power to the presidency, as he led Congress and the American public toward progressive reforms and a strong foreign policy. His support for - and conspicuous

gallantry in - the Spanish-American War had already made him a national hero. He used this prestige to assert the president's right to take any action necessary for the public good unless expressly forbidden by law or the Constitution. "I did not usurp power," he later wrote, "but I did greatly broaden the use of executive power."

Born in New York City in 1858 into a wealthy family, Roosevelt struggled with ill-health as a child and attributed his subsequent robustness to a regime of strenuous exercise. A former governor of New York, he based his presidency on the ideal that the government should be the arbiter of the nation's conflicting economic forces, guaranteeing justice both to capitalists and to workers with his "Square Deal" and dispensing favours to no one. He soon proved himself an effective "trust buster", forcing the dissolution of some 40 monopolies and combinations. He also introduced the regulation of the food and drug industries and achieved notable advances in conservation, adding to the national forests in the West and reserving lands for public use.

His foreign policy was equally assertive. In 1904 he added the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, reserving for the US the sole right to intervene in the affairs of rogue states in Latin America and preventing the establishment of foreign bases in the Caribbean. His mediation in the Russo-Japanese War won him the Nobel Peace Prize. He also ensured the construction of the Panama Canal and wrote numerous books.

Easily re-elected in 1904, he stood by his pledge not to stand for re-election in 1908, but stood again in 1912, as a Progressive. (He had failed to win the

Republican nomination.) This split the Republican vote, handing Woodrow Wilson an easy victory.

He contracted malaria during a seven-month expedition through Brazil in 1913-1914 and never entirely regained his health. He died in 1919.

IN HIS WORDS

"Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far."

"The first requisite of a good citizen in this republic of ours is that he shall be able and willing to pull his weight."

"A man who has never gone to school may steal from a freight car; but if he has a university education, he may steal the whole railroad."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"He is the most dangerous man of the age." Woodrow Wilson

"Men say he is not safe. He is not safe for the men who wish to prosecute selfish schemes to the public detriment." Elihu Root

MINUTIAE

» He wore pince-nez to correct severe short sight. This was partly due to a detached retina he suffered while sparring in the White House with the boxing champion John L Sullivan.

» He had a photographic memory, and could recite lengthy passages from books he had read decades earlier.

» His mother and his first wife both died on the same day in 1884.

» He was nicknamed Teddy after a cartoon depicted him sparing the life of a bear cub while hunting, allegedly on the basis of a real-life incident.

» The cavalry regiment he led during the Spanish-American war consisted largely of football players, polo players and cowboys without military experience. They were known as the "Rough Riders".

» He was the first US president to travel by car, by plane or by submarine, and the first president to leave the country (visiting Panama) while in office.

» Wounded by the bullet of a would-be assassin in 1912, he refused to go to hospital until he had given the hour-long speech that he was due to give.

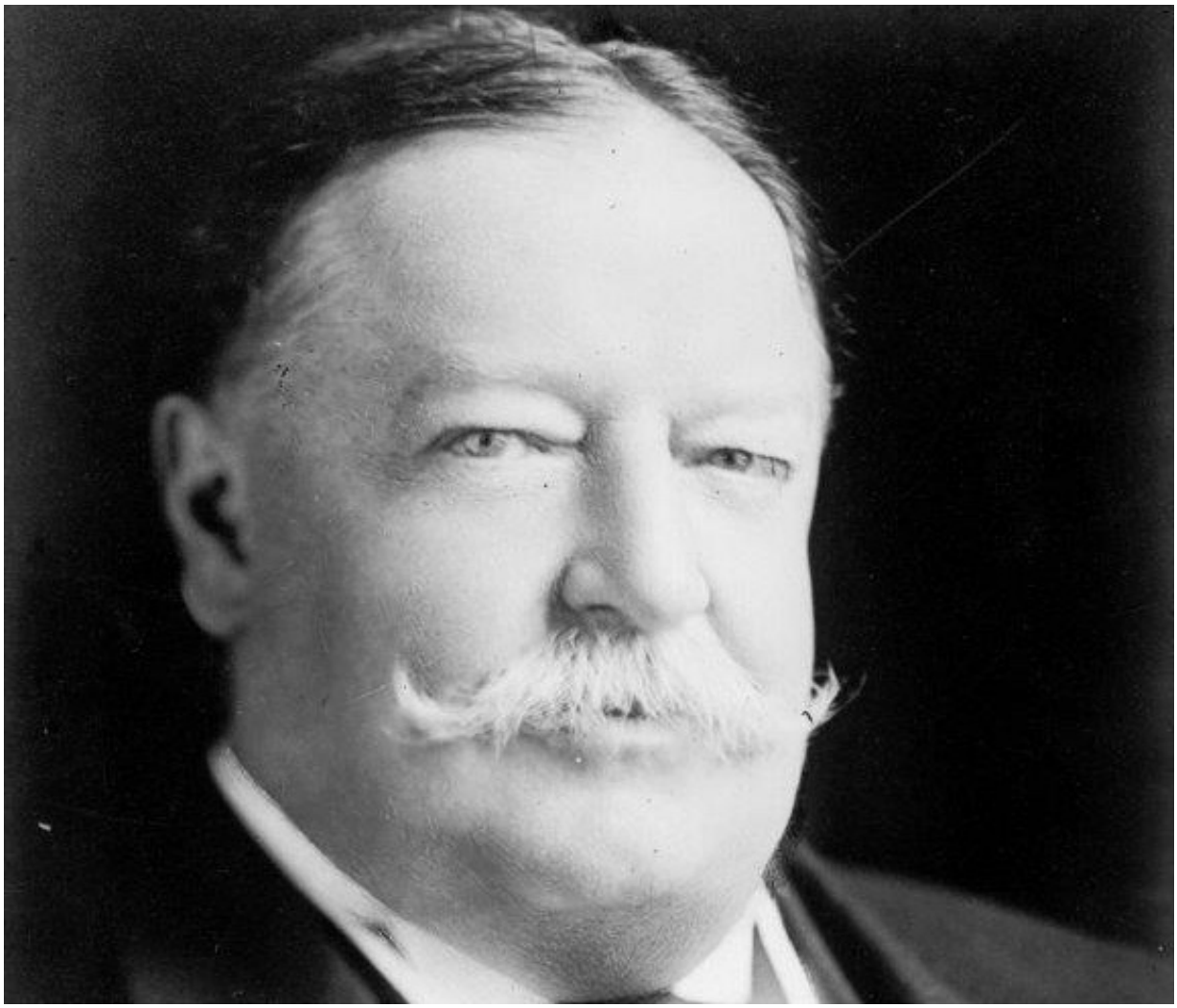
» He would eat up to 12 eggs for breakfast.

» His youngest son, Quentin, died fighting on the Western Front (as a pilot) in 1918.

WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT

27th

1909-1913



The hand-picked successor of Theodore Roosevelt, Taft is remembered as much for his weight - he was the heaviest-ever president - as for his achievements in office.

A former judge who preferred the law to politics, he was admired for his administrative competence both by William McKinley - who made him chief civil administrator in the Philippines - and by Theodore Roosevelt, who made him Secretary for War. But he did not flourish when he emerged from Roosevelt's shadow.

Said by some to have accepted the Republican nomination only on the insistence of his ambitious wife, Taft described the election campaign as "one of the most uncomfortable four months of my life". He won easily, largely on the basis of Roosevelt's popularity, but soon alienated Progressives with his perceived conservatism.

In fact, he proved quietly effective, continuing Roosevelt's anti-trust work (he initiated 80 anti-trust suits), creating a Children's Bureau, conserving public lands, establishing a postal savings system, and initiating a constitutional amendment to permit an income tax. But his defence of the Payne-Aldrich Act, which continued high tariff rates, alienated many liberal Republicans as well as Democrats; the latter's opposition to the tariff helped them to regain control of the House in 1910 elections. Taft further antagonised Progressives - and Roosevelt himself - with his relatively timid approach to conservation.

In 1912, New Mexico and Arizona were admitted to the Union, and so Taft became the first man to be the President of the 48 contiguous states. He was also the first of them to practise what later became known as "dollar

diplomacy" - using diplomatic influence and the veiled threat of military power to promote US business interests abroad.

His re-nomination for the Republicans for 1912 prompted Roosevelt's defection to lead a new Progressive party. Many of his supporters followed him, thus handing Woodrow Wilson an easy victory. Taft polled just 23 per cent of the popular vote - the lowest of any incumbent in US history.

Released from the burdens of the presidency, Taft took up a position serving as professor of law at Yale University, until President Harding made him Chief Justice of the United States in 1921. Taft considered this his highest achievement: "I don't remember that I ever was President," he wrote towards the end of his life. He died in his sleep in 1930.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"What's the use of being president if you can't have a train with a diner on it?"

"Politics makes me sick."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"He is not only absolutely fearless, absolutely disinterested and upright, but he has the widest acquaintance with the nation's needs without and within

and the broadest sympathies with all our citizens." Theodore Roosevelt (1908)

"Dumber than a guinea pig." Theodore Roosevelt (1912)

MINUTIAE

» Taft was the heaviest American president ever. His weight sometimes approached 24 stone, and he got stuck in the White House bath-tub several times. Eventually, he had a larger one installed.

» He was the first president to have a presidential car.

» With his large moustache, he was the last US president to wear facial hair.

» He had a habit of dropping off to sleep in meetings.

» He lost 80lb within a year of leaving the White House and by 1929 was 92lb lighter than his peak weight of 23st 10lb.

» He began the tradition of a presidential "first pitch" of the baseball season. The event took place on 4 April 1910, during an opening day game between the Washington Senators and the Philadelphia Athletics. Every president since - except Jimmy Carter - has performed this ritual at the opening of at least one season.

WOODROW WILSON

28th

1913-1921

Generally numbered among the greater presidents, Woodrow Wilson had the advantage of starting off with a solid Democratic majority in Congress. This allowed him to develop a programme of progressive reform that would command respect even without his better-known activities as a champion of world peace.

The son of a Presbyterian minister, he brought to the presidency an unusual sense of destiny and idealism. He was educated at Princeton and the University of Virginia Law School, earned a doctorate at Johns Hopkins University, then advanced rapidly to become professor of political science and (in 1902) president of Princeton. His reputation as a political thinker caught the attention of conservatives in the Democratic Party, who persuaded him to run for governor of New Jersey in 1910. He surprised them by endorsing a progressive platform, which he pursued with enough success to secure him a presidential nomination in 1912. He received only 42 per cent of the popular vote but, in a three-way election, won an overwhelming electoral majority. He moved quickly to implement his progressive programme.

Initial legislative triumphs included the Underwood Act, which reduced a tariff and provided for a graduated Federal income tax; the Federal Reserve Act, which gave much needed flexibility to the money supply; the Clayton Anti-trust Act, which outlawed various unfair business practices and limited the use of injunctions against trades unions; and the establishment of a Federal Trade Commission. His touch was less sure with foreign policy, with well-intentioned but ill-advised interventions in Mexico, the Dominican Republic and Haiti, but he did avoid getting dragged into the First World War - despite damage to US interests by both sides - and campaigned successfully for re-election in 1916 on the slogan: "He kept us out of the war."

By 1917, US neutrality was no longer tenable, and Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war on Germany that would "make the world safe for democracy". Thereafter, he pursued the cause of Allied victory with ruthless energy. He also defined US war aims with his famous "14 points" - the last of which called for the establishment of "a general association of nations... affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike".

In fact, Wilson never succeeded in creating the enduring peace he envisaged. The Senate refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, while his successor, Warren G Harding, decided that the US should not join the League of Nations. None the less, he won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts.

An austere, reserved man (whose handshake was once compared to "a 10-cent pickled mackerel in brown paper"), Wilson was as likely to alienate people with his idealism as to inspire them. But he was not responsible for Prohibition, which was passed by Congress over his veto in 1919. Nor did his idealism extend to such subjects as racial or sexual equality. He considered suffragettes "disgusting creatures" and wrote with seeming admiration for the Ku Klux Klan. During his presidency, racial segregation appeared in the Department of the Treasury and the post office.

In September 1919, he suffered a stroke from which he never entirely recovered, but he refused to even temporarily relinquish his duties. He relied on his wife to decide which matters were important enough to bring

to his attention. He did not stand for re-election in 1920, but lived in retirement in Washington until his death in 1924. Virtually blind, he described himself shortly before his death as "a broken piece of machinery".

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"If you think too much about being re-elected, it is very difficult to be worth re-electing."

"It is not men that interest or disturb me primarily; it is ideas. Ideas live; men die."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"A clean, learned, honourable and patriotic man." Warren G Harding

"He thinks he is another Jesus Christ come upon the earth to reform men." Georges Clemenceau, president of France.

MINUTIAE

» He was unable to read until he was nine.

» His courtship of his second wife, Edith Galt (a widow), provoked much gossip in the media - and an unfortunate misprint in the Washington Post. The item was supposed to say: "The president spent much of the evening

entertaining Mrs Galt." But the letters "tain" were accidentally omitted. Most copies of the offending issue were recalled and pulped.

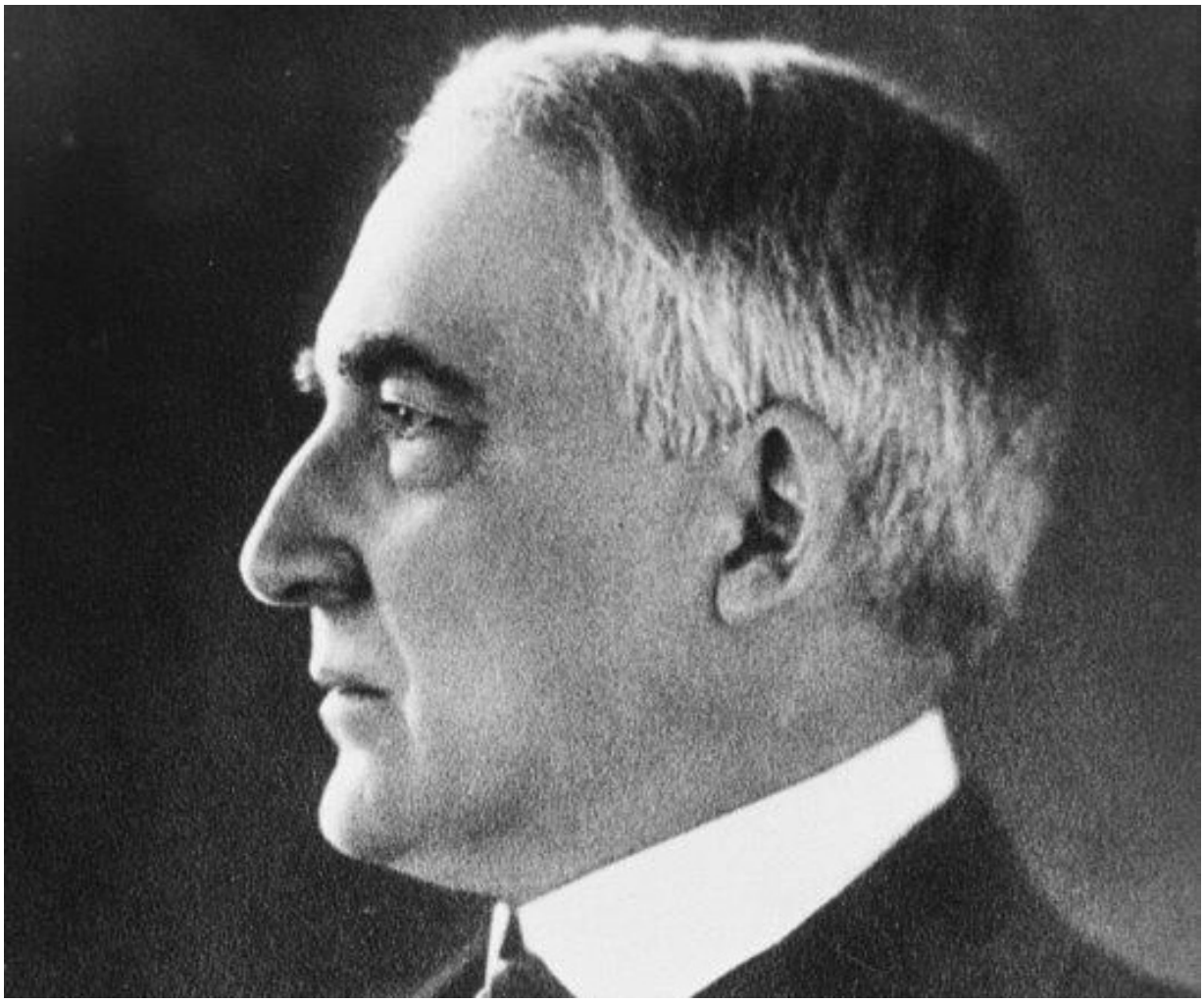
» He was the only president to earn a doctorate, gaining a PhD in political science from Johns Hopkins University in 1886.

» In 1914, he officially declared the first Mother's Day - as "a public expression of our love and reverence for the mothers of our country".

WARREN G HARDING

29th

1921-1923



Usually cited as the worst of all US presidents - at least until the Bush era - Harding was oddly likeable in his ineptitude. A former newspaper publisher, he was nominated by the Republicans as a compromise choice

and campaigned with the promise that he would return the US to "normalcy". He won with an unprecedented 60 per cent of the popular vote.

The tone of his presidency was set by another of his campaign slogans: "Less government in business and more business in government". Following the conservative agenda of those who had nominated him, he approved legislation that eliminated wartime controls, slashed taxes, established a Federal budget system, restored the high protective tariff, and imposed tight limitations upon immigration. He did, however, disappoint the 31 Republicans who had signed a manifesto assuring voters that a vote for Harding was a vote for the League of Nations. In April 1921, he declared against American membership, thereby ensuring its ultimate failure.

Good-looking, charming and out of his depth, Harding happily let Congress set his agenda, and remained popular for most of his presidency. His most pressing problem was that he had surrounded himself with cronies who used their position to enrich themselves. As his term progressed, the scandals mounted up. Two of his friends committed suicide, while his Secretary of the Interior was found to have been selling national oil reserves for personal gain. Lesser officials were caught out in scams ranging from accepting bribes to skimming proceeds from the sale of war surplus goods. The scandal could have brought Harding's administration to its knees, had he not died of a heart attack in 1923 before much of it had become public knowledge.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"I am a man of limited talents from a small town; I don't seem to grasp that I am president."

"I don't know what to do or where to turn in this taxation matter. Somewhere, there must be a book that tells all about it, where I could go to straighten it out in my mind. But I don't know where the book is, and maybe I couldn't read it if I found it."

"I am not fit for the office and should never have been here."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"He was not a man with either the experience or the intellectual quality that the position needed." Herbert Hoover

MINUTIAE

» In a 1962 poll of 75 historians conducted by Arthur M Schlesinger Sr, Harding was ranked worst of all the 31 US presidents to date.

» He had at least two extra-marital affairs. One of them, with the wife of his friend James Phillips, eventually resulted in the Republican National Committee making a monthly payment to Mr and Mrs Phillips in return for their silence. The other, with a so-called "niece" 30 years younger than him,

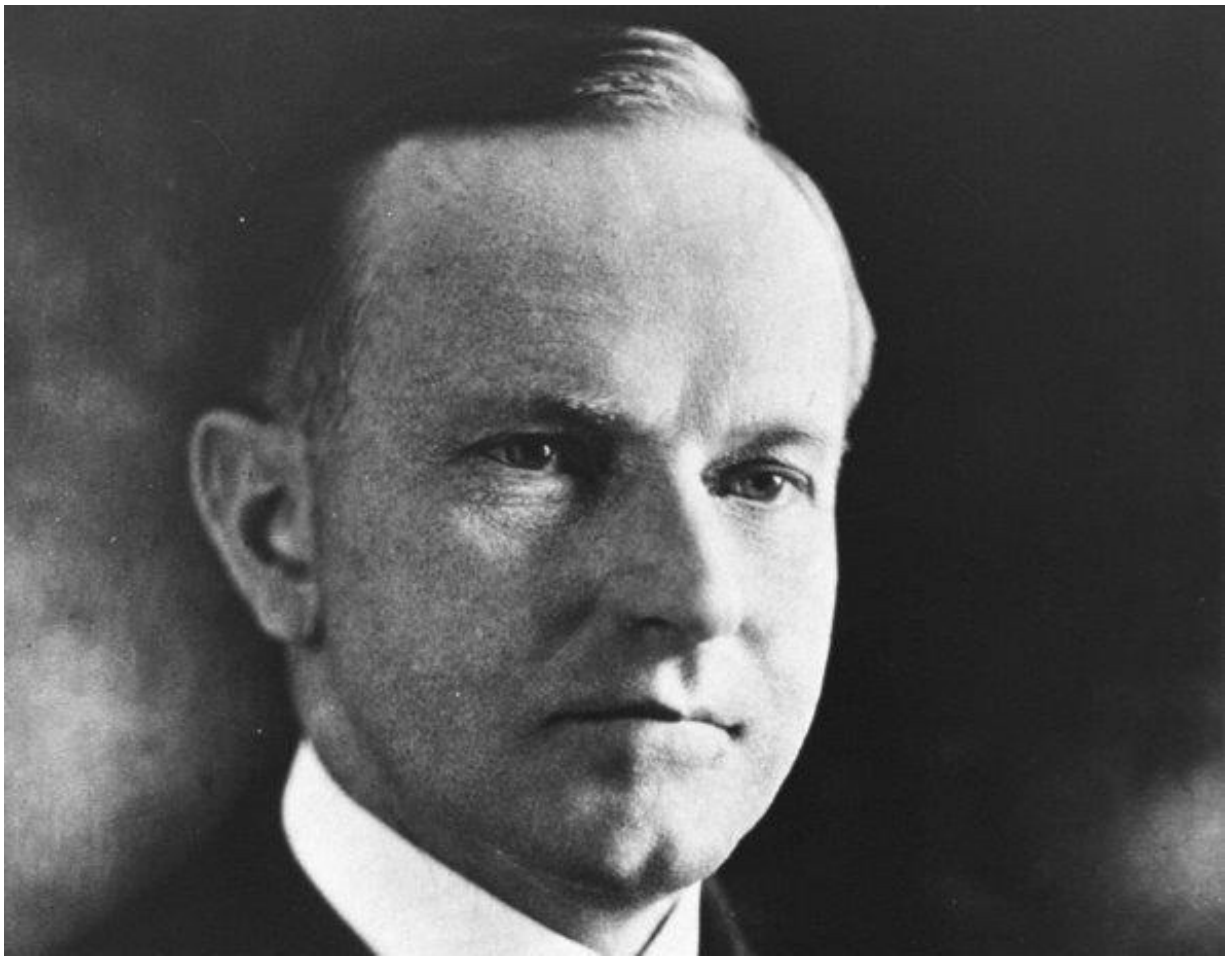
was sometimes pursued in a large cupboard near the president's White House office - and resulted in a daughter whom Harding never saw.

» He was a keen poker player, who once gambled away on a single hand an entire set of White House china dating back to the presidency of Benjamin Harrison.

CALVIN COOLIDGE

30th

1923-1929



The son of a Vermont storekeeper, Coolidge had worked his way up the political ladder from councilman in Northampton to governor of Massachusetts and, later, Vice-President to Warren Harding. As president, he saw himself as a champion of traditional values in a booming economy.

He called to Congress for isolation in foreign policy, and for tax cuts and limited aid to farmers.

The public liked it. In the 1924 election, as the beneficiary of what was becoming known as "Coolidge prosperity", he polled more than 54 per cent of the popular vote. He used his inaugural address to assert that the country had achieved "a state of contentment seldom before seen" and pledged himself to maintain the status quo. In subsequent years he twice vetoed farm relief bills, and killed a plan to produce cheap Federal electric power on the Tennessee River.

Apart from that, he did little, and believed that the surging stock market vindicated his minimalist approach. He showed as little concern for the idea that the boom might be unsustainable as he did for the fact that, during his presidency, membership of the Ku Klux Klan exceeded 4 million. Instead, he developed, and encouraged a reputation for being a man of few words. Commentators approved. "This active inactivity suits the mood and certain of the needs of the country admirably," wrote Walter Lippmann in 1926. No one imagined the economic catastrophe that lay ahead.

In 1927, Coolidge handed reporters a slip of paper on which he had written: "I do not choose to run for President in 1928." He devoted much of his retirement to writing, and died at home in January 1933. When Dorothy Parker was told he was dead, she said: "How could they tell?"

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"The chief business of America is business."

"Four-fifths of all our troubles in this life would disappear if we would only sit down and keep still."

"When a great many people are unable to find work, unemployment results."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"Nero fiddled while Rome burned, but Coolidge only snores." H L Mencken

MINUTIAE

» One of his sons died, aged 16, from playing tennis wearing trainers, but no socks. He developed a blister, which became fatally infected.

» He would sleep for 11 hours a day.

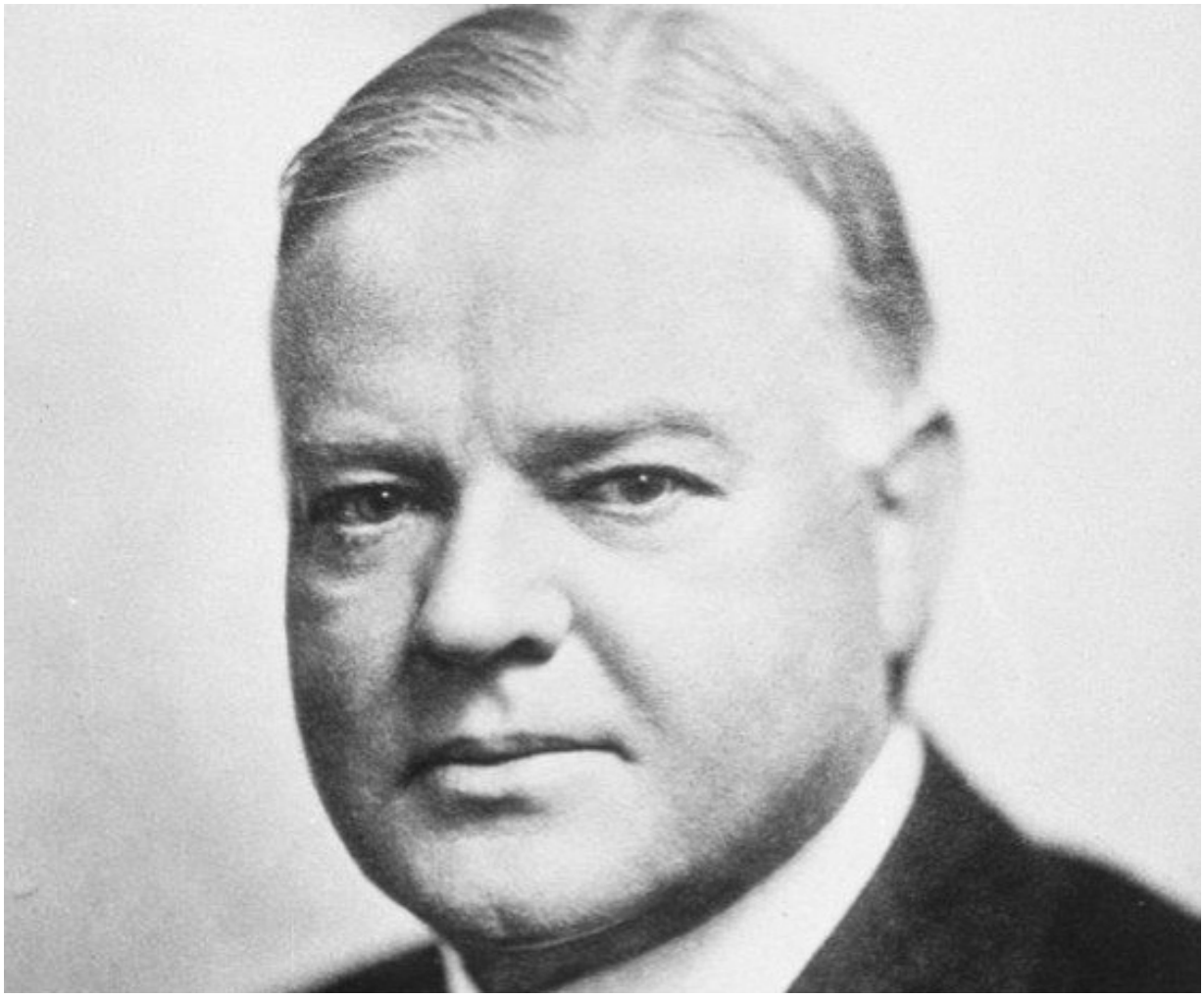
» When a guest at a dinner said: "You must talk to me, Mr President. I made a bet that I could get more than two words out of you." He replied simply: "You lose."

» He had a pet raccoon called Rebecca, which was a gift from Peru. It was meant to be a culinary treat.

HERBERT HOOVER

31st

1929-1933



A brilliant mining engineer and self-made millionaire from Iowa - the orphaned son of a Quaker blacksmith - Herbert Hoover made a name for himself during the First World War for his efficient humanitarian work

evacuating US refugees and distributing food relief in Europe. Thereafter, he wrote: "I was on the slippery road of public life." He was US food administrator from 1917-1918, encouraging the nation to conserve food supplies, then served as economic adviser to Woodrow Wilson at the Versailles Peace Conference before becoming a very active secretary of commerce for both Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge. His philosophy of "associationalism" - voluntary partnerships between government and business - could be seen as foreshadowing the public-private partnerships of today.

A clever and capable administrator, he took office at the worst possible time. The Wall Street bubble burst within eight months of his inauguration, and the economy crashed into what became known as the Great Depression. Hoover responded to the slump with more vigour than is sometimes suggested. He cut taxes and expanded public works spending, although he intended to keep the Federal budget balanced and considered welfare to be primarily a local and voluntary responsibility. As the crisis deepened, he presented to Congress a programme asking for the creation of a Reconstruction Finance Corporation to aid business; additional help for farmers facing mortgage foreclosures; banking reform; a loan to states for feeding the unemployed; and expansion of public works. His eventual successor, Franklin Roosevelt, attacked his "reckless and extravagant" spending.

But nothing Hoover did seemed to make any difference. Unemployment climbed to 25 per cent and, as millions fell into destitution, he, as president,

was blamed. The shanty-towns in which the itinerant unemployed began to live were known as "Hoovervilles"; the newspapers under which the homeless slept were called "Hoover blankets". The hubristic words with which he had accepted the Republican nomination in 1928 - "We in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land" - came back to haunt him.

By 1932, the nation had plainly made Hoover a scapegoat for the Depression. An incident in Washington in May that year, when he let US troops use force against protesting veterans of the First World War, did further damage to his image. He was heckled, and sometimes physically attacked, during his election campaign. No one was surprised by his crushing defeat.

He remained on the fringes of public life, criticising Roosevelt's "New Deal" and toying with the idea of standing again for the presidency in 1936 and 1940. After the Second World War, he was involved in the distribution of aid to war-wrecked Germany, and in 1947 President Truman appointed him to what became known as the Hoover commission, with a brief to reorganise the executive departments. He was appointed chairman of a similar commission by President Eisenhower in 1953. He wrote many articles and books in his retirement. He died in 1964, at the age of 90.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"True liberalism is found not in striving to spread bureaucracy but in striving to set bounds to it."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"In many ways, he was superbly equipped for the presidency. If he had been President in 1921 or 1937 he might have ranked with the great presidents." John Nance Garner

"I have the feeling that he would rather see a good cause fail than succeed if he were not the head of it." Woodrow Wilson

MINUTIAE

» In the White House, Mr and Mrs Hoover sometimes conversed in Chinese, in order to frustrate eavesdroppers.

» He refused to accept a salary for the his term in the presidency.

» He would exercise every morning by playing a special game of his own invention, now known as Hooverball, which involves playing a kind of volleyball with a heavy medicine ball.

» He was born around the stroke of midnight, so there was confusion within his family as to whether his birthday was on 10 or 11 August.

» Although he publicly supported Prohibition, he was fond of martinis. As commerce secretary, he used to stop off at the Belgian Embassy - which was technically foreign soil - for a drink on the way home.

FRANKLIN D ROOSEVELT

32nd - THE MAN WHO CONQUERED FEAR

1933-1945

Americans celebrate Franklin D Roosevelt as the president who led them out of the Great Depression of the 1930s and through the greatest global

conflict in history. He ranks alongside Jefferson, Lincoln and Wilson as an architect of dramatic change in his own society. For all his famous informality of manner, he was perhaps the most regal leader the United States has ever had, revelling in the exercise of executive power.

From his first day in the White House, he showed himself undaunted by any challenge. He pursued a vision of social justice, and of restraint upon the unbridled capitalism of America's previous century, which was perceived as revolutionary, although he never addressed the great evil of racial segregation.

When he took office, nearly a third of America's workforce was unemployed. Many banks were closed and tottering on the brink of collapse. Business confidence was broken, the nation was rudderless. At his death, the US was the richest and most powerful nation on Earth, the position it has held ever since. Few historians doubt that Roosevelt deserves a large part of the credit for this achievement. Although some of his policies remain shrouded in controversy, he mobilised the American genius in a way few of its leaders have matched, either in peace or war.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was born into the hereditary aristocracy of upstate New York, the inheritor of 17th-century Dutch immigrants whose descendants had ever since been growing a fortune based upon land speculation. His father, James, was a 52-year-old widower with one son when he married 26-year-old Sara Delano, whose family had made their own pile in the China trade.

Franklin was born on 30 January 1882 at the Roosevelts' Springwood estate, beside the Hudson river at Hyde Park. He became his mother's adored only child. The family lived the lives of country gentry, surrounded by servants and estate workers. James repeatedly declined offers of public office, or indeed of any employment. He took his son on long summer trips to Europe and at home trained him to inspect herds, cherish trees and confine social exchanges to his own kind. The Roosevelts were famously snobbish.

FDR sitting in his car as he shakes hands with supporters at the Veterans Hospital in Beacon, New York, November 1932

Franklin was tutored at home until he was 14, then taken in his father's private railroad car to enrol at the exclusive Groton school, before moving on to Harvard. The boy had no contact with mainstream America, very little with its cities, and none with hardship. He sailed his own 21ft boat, collected stamps, shot birds that were then stuffed and mounted by a local taxidermist, and read voraciously and retentively. His social life was restricted to a tiny circle of those whom Sara deemed acceptable. In a letter home, he offered consolation for James's distress at losing his butler: "Don't let Papa worry about it, after all there are plenty of good butlers in the world." A lofty observation from a teenager of any social class.

He loved school, became a star debater, and displayed an early inclination towards a political life. He showed a hostility towards imperialism that would stick: "Hurrah for the Boers! I entirely sympathise with them." At university, he edited the Harvard Crimson, and joined all the "right" societies. Though his parents were committed Democrats, as was Franklin himself, his role model was his Republican cousin, Theodore, who became President in 1901. The young student's unfailing geniality made him popular enough, but there were those who found him, in the words of one classmate, "bumptious, cocky, conceited". How could a young man gifted with good looks, wealth and high intelligence be anything else?

On a trip to England in 1903, he flirted enthusiastically with every pretty girl he met at country house parties. Soon after his return to New York, he fell in love with his cousin Eleanor, the orphan niece of Theodore. The couple were married in March 1905, the bride being given away by the President. Sara presented them with a New York City town house, though Franklin was still attending Harvard Law School. On his graduation, he became a clerk with a New York law firm, though it was already plain that his ambitions were focused on political office.

Sara, who had become a widow when James died in 1900, still dominated her son's life and controlled the purse strings, to the deep and enduring resentment of Eleanor. When an upstate Democrat power-broker offered to help the gilded youth to a state senate seat in 1909, the man paused outside the local bank, where the party faithful were gathered to meet him, and said: "The men looking out of that window are waiting for your answer. They won't like to hear that you had to ask your mother." Roosevelt agreed to run.

For the first time in his life, on the campaign stump he began to encounter ordinary Americans. He met a house painter working at his half-brother's house who doffed his cap and said: "How do you do, Mr Roosevelt." The painter was a Democratic committee man. The candidate said: "No, call me Franklin. I'm going to call you Tom." He displayed a gift that he would retain for a semblance of instant intimacy with everybody he met. This masked a dislike for showing his hand, or revealing his real thoughts or intentions. Roosevelt was always a plausible liar, especially about his own and his family's achievements.

4 March 1933: President Franklin Delano Roosevelt takes the oath of office as 32nd president of the USA

In this first election, he stormed home in a traditionally Republican area. As a freshman senator up at the state capital, Albany, instead of learning the ropes he plunged into hostilities with the New York City bosses of Tammany Hall. "There's nothing I love as much as a good fight," he told The New York Times. He lost his first battle with Tammany, as a would-be reformer.

Yet some of his contemporaries thought him a prig and hypocrite. He showed little interest when Frances Perkins, the pioneer campaigner for workers' rights, sought to enlist his aid. As a state senator, the only pitch for which he was later remembered was his fight against logging in local forests - he had a lifelong passion for trees.

Always vulnerable to infections, he was suffering from typhoid when he came up for re-election in 1912. He enlisted the aid of a tough political fixer, Louis Howe, to run his campaign - and won again. A few months later, to the anger of some of his constituents, he abandoned Albany for Washington.

At the age of 30, he was offered the plum post of assistant secretary of the US Navy. He held the post for seven years, among the happiest of his life. His superior, Josephus Daniels, was an ineffectual figure who proved happy to let Roosevelt have his head. His young assistant proved a whirlwind of energy and enthusiasm. "I now find my vocation combined with my avocation in a delightful way," Franklin wrote. His growing reputation survived such embarrassments as an interview given by the incorrigibly grand Eleanor to The New York Times about her contribution to the national food economy campaign, in which she said: "Making the 10 servants help me do my saving has not only been possible, but highly profitable."

Unlike Daniels, Roosevelt was impatient to see the US get into the First World War. When the nation at last entered the conflict in April 1917, he threw himself into enlarging the navy from 197 ships to the 2,003 in commission at the Armistice. Visiting Europe and its battlefields in the summer of 1918, he became so excited by the prospect of martial glory that he returned to Washington bent upon becoming a naval officer. Yet, once again, he succumbed to illness - this time, double pneumonia. He was still ailing when the war ended.

Thereafter, he found himself plunged into a succession of domestic and political crises. First, Eleanor discovered that he was having an affair with her 26-year-old social secretary, Lucy Mercer. Eleanor had never been enthusiastic about sex. Franklin indulged himself wherever he could, though his attachment to Mercer ran deeper than any other. After the revelation of his infidelity, Eleanor plunged herself into social causes and passionate friendships - perhaps unconsummated - with lesbians. She sustained a façade of marriage to her husband's death, but never again had sex with him.

He resigned his office at the Department of the Navy in August 1920, to take another political leap, standing as vice-presidential candidate in the campaign of James M Cox. The Democratic Party was divided, demoralised and unpopular amid the failure of Woodrow Wilson's presidency. Republican Warren Harding romped to the White House. Roosevelt was deemed to have performed poorly on the campaign trail, appearing to be a lofty, conceited East Coast elitist.

His political career was further damaged by revelations the following year about the so-called Newport Navy Scandal. In 1920, after reports of a homosexual ring at the Newport navy base, an officer appointed to investigate took the extraordinary step of ordering undercover enlisted men to offer their sexual services. If Roosevelt did not authorise this action, he certainly knew of it. When the scandal broke in 1921 and Congress investigated, anger focused less upon the accused than on those who subjected sailors to such experiences in order to expose them. Some of the mud stuck.

FDR chats to two Georgia farmers in the year he was elected President of the US

All this paled into insignificance, however, beside the blow which struck Roosevelt in August. Suddenly feeling ill, within days he found himself paralysed. Infantile paralysis (polio), a viral condition affecting the spinal cord that baffled medical science at the time, was diagnosed. This intensely energetic, chronically restless man succumbed to deep depression amid the horror of finding himself immobilised. The power of his legs was gone forever. He could stumble a few steps only with heavy steel braces and so he believed that his political career was over.

The years that followed were dominated by a struggle to come to terms with his condition. He founded a medical resort for polio sufferers at Warm Springs, Georgia, and began a business career on Wall Street, specialising in high-risk investments. He made occasional political speeches, the first in 1924. Roosevelt's closer friends saw a gradual change in his personality. He seemed cooler, more patient, but above all resolute. Once at Hyde Park, a visiting clergyman watched him crawl from his desk across the floor to a shelf, then crawl back, clutching a book in his teeth. Asked why he had subjected himself to such an ordeal, Roosevelt answered: "I felt I had to do it to show that I could."

He seemed more serious. His famous charm was succeeded by a more powerful magnetism. In 1928, he delivered the nominating speech for Al Smith's presidential candidature at the Democratic convention, to

thunderous acclaim. He deliberately addressed himself to a national radio and newspaper-reading audience, rather than to delegates in the hall. He began to believe that his own political life need not be over. That autumn, he allowed himself to be persuaded to run for the governorship of New York. The Evening Post dismissed his candidature as "pathetic and pitiless". Yet he fought a fiercely determined campaign and won, by a majority of just 25,000 out of 4.2 million votes cast.

Roosevelt was a natural ruler, born to authority and wholly unafraid of its responsibilities. He took office as governor in 1929, the year of the Great Crash, and astonished many people by the populist, anti-capitalist spirit that he swiftly displayed. After 47 years spent assuming that bankers and business bosses knew what they were doing, he came to realise that they didn't. The great American myth of self-reliance, a Darwinian faith in allowing the strong to prevail and the weak to go to the wall, was tested to destruction by the crash. Roosevelt's tenure at Albany was characterised by a commitment to show that, contrary to deep-rooted national belief in personal endeavour, only government could solve the greatest problems that afflicted society. He undertook the regulation of utilities and embarked upon public projects designed to help New Yorkers help themselves through bitterly hard times.

Hoover's Republican Party's failure was terribly apparent. When people talked of Roosevelt as a possible Democratic candidate in 1932, he said dismissively: "I have seen so many presidents at close hand in the White House that I have come more and more to the conclusion that the task is the

most trying and most ungrateful of any in America." Yet it was increasingly plain that a Democrat could win in 1932. Roosevelt's conviction that a vigorous government could lift the nation from the slough of despondency found growing support. The senator Henry Ashurst said: "Roosevelt is a man of destiny... He will lead this country out of the Depression and go down in history as one of our greatest Americans."

But plenty of sceptics remained. Some cited his physical infirmity, while others considered him an arrogant, privileged dilettante. The columnist Walter Lippmann wrote that Roosevelt was "without any important qualification for office". He knew nothing of economics and, by March 1932, had yet to devise a plausible platform for his own candidacy. But by the time of the Chicago convention in June, he had recruited a panel of economists to create a programme. He spoke of mobilising money, stopping mortgage foreclosures, making the banking system once more put its faith in "the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid".

During the convention's fourth ballot, the California delegation suddenly renounced its earlier support for rival John Nance Garner, and declared for Roosevelt. The switch was decisive. Roosevelt became presidential candidate, amid wild enthusiasm.

President Roosevelt with his wife Eleanor and their many grandchildren

He was now 50 and a chain-smoker with a huge number of acquaintances, but few people who knew him intimately. For all his irrepressible cheerfulness and bonhomie, scarcely anyone who knew him claimed to know his real thoughts; such was his intense self-control. His family existence was a charade: his children grew up to lead uniformly unsuccessful lives.

After years of cherishing hopes that he might recover use of his legs, now he knew that he could never do more than pose standing for pictures and shuffle a few steps before reverting to his wheelchair. But he possessed a

genius for reaching out to millions of people whose circumstances were utterly remote from his own experience. He conveyed a serenity, optimism and strength that touched hearts. It seemed entirely appropriate that a suffering nation should entrust its fortunes to a man who had also known suffering.

The Republicans made the 1932 election campaign easy for him, by adopting a platform based on laissez-faire capitalism. Roosevelt travelled 9,000 miles across the country on his personal train, preaching a gospel of salvation by government action - though he also sought to calm affrighted businessmen by promising to cut government spending. In Baltimore in October, he denounced the Republicans' "Four Horsemen... Destruction, Delay, Deceit and Despair". Walter Lippmann, whose columns wielded much influence, changed his mind and endorsed the Democratic candidate. Felix Frankfurter, a Harvard Law School professor who would become a celebrated Supreme Court Justice, wrote to Lippmann: "If Roosevelt is elected, I think he will often do the right thing, as it were, on inadequate and not wholly sturdy grounds."

On election day, Roosevelt carried the country by 23 million popular votes to 16 million for the Republican candidate, taking 42 states. It was widely said that he won simply because he was not Herbert Hoover, but such sentiments decide many elections. A fortnight before taking office, he gained a stark insight into the hazards of his new job. Landing in Miami after a yachting holiday, he was approached by the mayor of Chicago, Anton Cernak, who had come to seek a political reconciliation.

An Italian bricklayer, Joseph Zangara, fired five pistol shots from a range of 10 yards, intended for Roosevelt. Yet it was Cernak who fell dying. Roosevelt was not only untouched but, to the amazement of his entourage, almost preternaturally calm in the face of an experience that might have terrified him. Zangara went to the electric chair, Roosevelt to the White House.

His first months of office were characterised by a display of presidential activity unmatched in US history. With his overwhelming national mandate and control of both houses of Congress, he thrust through a stream of revolutionary legislation that was rubber-stamped with scarcely a delay or voice of dissent. "The house is burning down," the congressional minority leader told his fellow-Republicans, "and the President of the United States says this is the way to put out the fire."

Roosevelt had declared in his inauguration speech his commitment to lead the nation out of its valley of woe, in such terms that many of his audience wept, and his aide Ray Moley said to the new labour secretary, Frances Perkins: "Well, he's taken the ship of state and turned it right around." This is exactly what Roosevelt did in his first term of office.

At the heart of the "New Deal", the phrase inseparably identified with his presidency, was a commitment to use government as an engine of economic recovery. He created an Emergency Banking Act, which within weeks enabled the struggling bank system to function again. One of his first

projects was the Civilian Conservation Corps, which put unemployed men to work in forestry under army supervision for a dollar a day - 239,644 people had enrolled by June 1933.

FDR addresses the nation over a national radio hook-up, while Eleanor Roosevelt and the president's mother, Sara, sit watching on the other side of the fireplace

He cut federal employees' salaries and veterans' payments by $100m. To the fury of the army chief of staff, Douglas MacArthur, he slashed defence spending. He took America off the gold standard, and provided relief to

struggling farmers. He created the Tennessee Valley Authority to generate cheap electricity and assist a large poverty-stricken region to regain its feet. He launched a $3.3bn public works programme directed by Harry Hopkins that enlisted the unemployed to build schools, bridges, hospitals - and even commissioned a Hebrew dictionary from workless rabbis. He sought to curb insider share trading by his Securities Act. The administration bore down upon the steel industry, business cartels and Wall Street's fat cats, notably JPMorgan, in a fashion hitherto unknown.

This storm of activity gave Roosevelt extraordinary popularity among the nation's "have-nots". Poor families set his photograph on their living room walls, and revered it as an icon. At the 1934 mid-term elections, the Democrats bucked every historic trend by increasing their support. Yet business leaders were increasingly hostile. They perceived his policies as socialistic, even fascistic. Through his time of office, Roosevelt polarised opinion. Scarcely anyone seemed indifferent to him. He was loved, or hated. Nor were all his policies successful. For all his claims to represent clean politics, he trafficked as much as any predecessor with the city bosses who controlled local party machines. A high-handed attempt to undercut US aviation companies' mail-carrying rates by using US Army Air Corps planes foundered when 12 crashed within a matter of weeks.

He dismayed the Europeans by refusing to join them in pursuing stabilisation measures by pegging currencies. And though Roosevelt was from the outset an opponent of Hitler - he had spent some months in Germany in his boyhood and formed an abiding dislike of German

militarism - he showed a weakness for Mussolini, "the admirable Italian gentleman".

Budget director Lewis Douglas resigned in protest when Roosevelt's policies created a deficit of $6bn, an unheard-of sum. The President remained impenitent. To do something, he believed, even if imperfect, was always preferable to doing nothing. He conducted business with a country gentleman's informality. No minutes were taken even of cabinet meetings. Little was decided in writing. Roosevelt talked, decided, invited one or other trusted aide to implement his wishes, and moved on. Far from pursuing unity of purpose among the members of his administration, he kept every department and its chief in its own box.

Each was told no more than they needed to know for their own part in the business of government and quite literally worked to death in a startling number of cases. Roosevelt raised to an art form the ability to allow any visitor to leave his office feeling warmed, flattered, assured of satisfaction; only to discover later that the President's intentions were quite different from those that they supposed. More than a few close associates deeply admired Roosevelt the President but deplored Roosevelt the man, evasive and often deceitful. Marguerite LeHand, the secretary who became a mistress and adoring confidante, said later that it was impossible for anyone to get close to Franklin Roosevelt. Yet this is, in some degree, true of all great men. And by 1934, many Americans were convinced that their President was a very great man indeed. He had given them hope.

Roosevelt was re-elected in 1936 by the largest popular majority in US history, almost 28 million votes to 16.7 for Alfred Landon, his Republican rival. Yet his second term was notably less successful than his first. He was frustrated by the resistance of conservatives on the US Supreme Court to his policies. Four judges were ex-corporate lawyers, and struck down his legislation to curb big business as if they themselves were still on company payrolls.

1944: FDR and Mayor of New York City, Fiorello La Guardia have a laugh together

The President moved to get rid of them with unaccustomed clumsiness, introducing a bill enabling them to receive full salaries for life in exchange for resignation. The measure rang every alarm bell in a nation deeply wedded to the separation of powers. Roosevelt was successful in that the court became more tractable to his wishes, and he was later able to appoint liberal nominees to the bench, but he forfeited much goodwill, and exhausted himself, in the protracted battle with Congress and his political opponents. The Supreme Court fight was the worst blunder of his peacetime presidency.

He felt bitter that the great efforts and achievements of his first term were so poorly rewarded. Attacks on him became increasingly personal and virulent. It was claimed that he was syphilitic, that he played the dictator and abused US Navy warships for fishing trips. Fighting back, he displayed astonishing vindictiveness to political and media foes, mobilising against them the tax authorities, FBI and even the Secret Service. His deep-rooted faith in alumni of Groton and Harvard was damaged by a scandal when a former classmate, Richard Whitney, was found to have abused his position as president of the New York Stock Exchange to embezzle its pension fund. He was sometimes embarrassed by Eleanor Roosevelt's increasingly strident social campaigning for liberal causes - and by her indifferent housekeeping at the White House.

The New Deal was still forging ahead, with huge programmes of public works, minimum wage and union rights legislation. But in 1937, when he launched an attempt to balance the budget, the economy tipped into

recession, the stock market fell and two million people lost their jobs. The financier Bernard Baruch testified to Congress that the recession was the fault of the New Deal. Roosevelt himself joined speculation that he might not run again in 1940 and that maybe Harry Hopkins could take over his job. He feared that at the next election, a conservative might carry the White House, calling a closure on his great project.

It was the mounting crisis in Europe that revived Roosevelt's flagging energy and enthusiasm for office. America in the late Thirties was deeply isolationist. Cordell Hull was a largely inert presence as Secretary of State. Some senior officials at the Department of State were more hostile to communism than to fascism, and strongly anti-Semitic. The nation instinctively sought to distance itself from fractious, violent, corrupt old Europe. Congress voted in June 1939 to maintain an arms embargo upon all the European powers. A senator, justifying his role in Congress's frustration of Roosevelt's desire for the US to sign up to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, said: "I am a believer in democracy and will have nothing to do with the poisonous European mess."

Roosevelt acknowledged overwhelming public sentiment when he said during his 1936 re-election campaign: "We shun political commitments that might entangle us in foreign wars." That remained his public position three years later, but he was privately convinced that the United States could not quarantine itself from European events. He worked tirelessly to convince opinion-formers that the US must play a part in the crisis.

By a notable irony, Europe's troubles did more to rescue the United States from the Great Depression than all the endeavours of its President. In 1939, the US gross domestic product was still below its 1929 level. The outbreak of the Second World War brought a dramatic surge of foreign investment, as the United Kingdom and France placed huge orders in the US for goods and commodities, then, when Congress relented, for arms. The liquidation of the entire gold and foreign currency reserves of Churchill's nation funded America's surge into wartime economic boom. Only when the British had exhausted their cash reserves did Roosevelt's legendary "Lend-Lease" programme kick in, at the end of 1941, providing the UK by 1945 with loaned arms and supplies worth $27bn.

Roosevelt's desire to assist the UK's survival, and to achieve the destruction of Nazism, was never in doubt. He initiated a private correspondence with Winston Churchill even before his premiership began. Between 1939 and December 1941, however, the President pursued interventionism with notable caution. One of his greatest qualities as America's leader was how he saw himself as the expression of a collective national will. He was by now scarred by many battles with Congress and hostile newspapers, acutely sensitive to the limits of his own power.

He was determined that America's role in the struggle against fascism should not outpace public opinion, in the fashion that had destroyed Woodrow Wilson's presidency back in 1919. As France fell in 1940, Roosevelt claimed to be still doubtful whether to seek a third term. He was

feeling the strain of office. "I can't stand it any longer", he said. "I can't go on with it."

In May, isolationist members of his cabinet blocked arms shipments to the allies. Thereafter, however, as Britain stood beleaguered, he began to engage. He sacked the chief isolationists, replacing both the army and navy secretaries with Republicans committed to providing aid. The faithful Harry Hopkins stage-managed a draft for Roosevelt at the July Democratic convention in Chicago. He agreed to run again, loaned 50 old destroyers to Britain in exchange for US leases on British colonial naval bases, and in October pushed through Congress a $40bn appropriation for a dramatic increase in America's armed forces. On 5 November, he was re-elected by 27.2 million votes to 22.3 for the Republicans' Wendell Willkie. Thereafter, his efforts to aid the UK were assisted by the fact that Willkie supported them.

1941: President Roosevelt presides over the first meeting of the commission of experts appointed to deal with the expenditure of a 'war chest' of over a billion dollars for American rearmament

The Lend-Lease Bill passed Congress in March 1941. Roosevelt slowly but steadily increased the US Navy's assistance to the Royal Navy in convoying supplies across the Atlantic, even when American warships began to skirmish with German U-boats. The hawks in his cabinet, notably Henry Stimson and Harold Ickes, pressed him to move further and faster towards war, but he would not be hurried. "I am not willing to fire the first shot," he told Ickes. "I am waiting to be pushed into the situation." When Russia was attacked by the Germans in June 1941, Roosevelt overcame substantial domestic opposition to start shipping aid to the Soviet Union - very slowly between 1941 and 1942, but in vast quantities between 1943 and 1945. In

August, he met Churchill at a dramatic naval rendezvous in Placentia Bay off Newfoundland. The British Prime Minister hoped to publicly bring the US into the war as a combatant, but was obliged to come away with only warm expressions of presidential goodwill.

Roosevelt was treading a cautious line, having been re-elected on platform of keeping America out of the conflict. He noted bleakly that renewal of the Selective Service Act, the US military draft, passed Congress on 13 August by just one vote. Many Americans were still desperate to avoid committing to a European war. However, they were much more supportive of tough action against the Japanese, who were already occupying half of China, and now plunging into Indochina. The single act that did most to bring the US into the war was Roosevelt's freeze on Japanese funds in July, and embargo on oil shipments to Japan. Contrary to persistent sensationalist myth, the US had no foreknowledge of the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December, which Roosevelt memorably dubbed the "Day of Infamy". But it should not have been hard to anticipate, with the aid of decrypted Japanese signals, that war had become inevitable.

The British were deeply resentful of America's tardy entry, driven by circumstances rather than principle. Churchill almost alone embraced his new allies with the warmth that they deserved. Yet Roosevelt's handling of his people between 1939 and 1941 was masterly and brilliantly judged. Had he made a unilateral decision to fight before Pearl Harbor, he would have led to war a deeply divided nation. As it was, Japanese aggression and Hitler's obliging subsequent declaration of war on the US, ensured that the

American people were united behind their President through the years that followed.

Roosevelt said exuberantly to a friend back in 1918: "It would be wonderful to be a war President of the United States." Though he was never as unguarded as Churchill in displaying enjoyment of his role from 1942 to 1945, there is little doubt that he found it exhilarating. Many, though not all, of his Congressional difficulties vanished overnight. He could direct the mobilisation of the nation's vast resources with a freedom he had not known since 1933, although unlike Churchill, he never led a coalition government. He was obliged to spend far more time than the British Prime Minister managing his legislature.

He relished his title as national commander-in-chief, but never exercised its functions anything like as comprehensively as did Churchill. Roosevelt's most important decisions were made early in the war. First, he endorsed the need to address the most dangerous enemy first, Germany. Second, he threw his full weight behind shipping supplies to Russia, against the opposition of those who deplored communists, and believed that Stalin would anyway be beaten. Third, in the summer of 1942 he allowed himself to be persuaded by Churchill - against the strong wishes of the US chiefs of staff - that a US army should land in French North Africa and fight a campaign in the Mediterranean. This became Operation Torch, launched in November 1942. In 1943, once again in the face of opposition from General George Marshall, then chief of the army, who wanted an early landing in France, the Anglo-American armies pressed on through Sicily into Italy.

1944: A Chicago stadium where Democratic Party delegates from 48 states parade with their Roosevelt placards, following his renomination for a fourth term

Once it became plain that Russia would continue to hold Hitler's armies, and that eventual allied victory was assured, Roosevelt's chief attention was focused upon forging a new post-war settlement. Always a passionate opponent of imperialism, he dismayed Churchill by making plain his desire to prevent the old European nations from reoccupying their Asian empires. He sought to hasten Indian self-government and independence. Roosevelt was assured that the United States would emerge from the war the strongest

and richest power on earth. He sought to use this might to create a new dispensation under a United Nations organisation, its deliberations and decisions dominated by the US, Russia, China and Britain.

Though not quite an Anglophobe, he showed little enthusiasm for British aspirations, nor much concern about her looming bankruptcy. He enjoyed Churchill's company in limited doses, but both men were increasingly prey to jealousy. It has been shrewdly observed that, by 1945, Churchill had grown envious of Roosevelt's power, and Roosevelt of Churchill's genius.

At their two summits with Stalin, at Tehran in November 1943 and Yalta in February 1945, the President brutally disappointed Churchill's hopes of presenting a common Anglo-American front towards the Russians. The President committed to co-operating with or outwitting Stalin, heedless of the Prime Minister's discomfiture. In this, he failed notably. The Soviet leader pursued his own imperial agenda for Eastern Europe with ruthless single-mindedness, exploiting Roosevelt's obvious indifference to, for instance, the fate of Poland.

Roosevelt's relationship with the British Prime Minister was always a friendship of state and never a real intimacy. Although both were patricians, sentimental about the old horse-and-carriage society in which they had grown up, their visions of the future were utterly different. Roosevelt, with his boundless optimism, believed that he could preside at the birth of a better world, while the Prime Minister cared chiefly for victory over Hitler and preservation of the old one. Roosevelt's expectations, for social change

in Britain and the fall of Europe's empires, were fulfilled with astonishing speed after 1945. But Churchill's conviction proved justified, that Soviet ambitions were irreconcilable with European freedoms.

Roosevelt's 1944 re-election was never in doubt, but his health was visibly failing. In the last months of his presidency, more and more of his responsibilities were diverted to cabinet members and subordinates. Though a substantial part of the US business community remained implacably hostile to his presidency, most Americans perceived him as the living embodiment of their national purpose, and now also of their march to victory.

Roosevelt was beloved by a generation who perceived him, in considerable part justly, as having saved their society from poverty and despair, bringing government for the first time into a vast range of activities. He had promoted industrial recovery, bank regulation, reflation, workfare, rural electrification, farm support, workplace reform, utility and infrastructure development, environmental conservation and the repeal of the prohibition on alcohol. If the war had done as much as his policies to create the new wealth and power of the United States, he received credit as the leader who had presided over a national triumph.

Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin pose at the start of the Conference of the Allied powers in Yalta, Crimea, 4 February 1945

Like Churchill, he possessed supreme gifts as a communicator, addressing the nation in his legendary radio "fireside chats" with a confiding assurance that no rival could match. He was, at heart, a cold man of the utmost ruthlessness. Yet he presented a façade of warmth and geniality, which his political artistry enabled him to exploit brilliantly. He made friends with his nation in a manner that he never attempted with any individual.

He was never as liberal as either his allies or enemies supposed. A senator was shocked, to hear the President speak carelessly of "the n***** vote". He showed himself largely indifferent to the plight of Jewish refugees struggling to enter the US. But he saw early and importantly the need to extend social justice among his own people, and to curb the hitherto untrammelled power of the industrial and commercial magnates. The New Deal's programmes were most effective socially. They gave hope to an entire generation of impoverished Americans who perceived themselves dispossessed.

Roosevelt died of a cerebral haemorrhage on 12 April 1945, at the Warm Springs, Georgia, home of Lucy Mercer Rutherfurd, his lifelong intimate. His passing shocked his nation, which he had led for longer than any other president. For days, the reporter Studs Terkel found it hard to keep his tears in check. "I can't stop crying," he said. "Everybody is crying." Roosevelt's state funeral became one of the most emotional occasions in Washington's history. He had wielded greater power than the US has ever conceded to a national leader, or is ever likely to again. Most Americans, and much of the world, remain profoundly grateful for the manner in which he exercised it.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself - nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyses needed efforts to turn retreat into advance."

"When peace has been broken anywhere, the peace of all countries everywhere is in danger."

"I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the good neighbour."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"He was the one person I ever knew, anywhere, who was never afraid." Lyndon B Johnson

"In his capacity as leader of a nation at war... he seemed to me to fulfill all that could possibly be expected of him." Dwight D Eisenhower

MINUTIAE

» Franklin D Roosevelt was related by either blood or marriage to 11 other presidents: John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Ulysses S Grant, William Henry Harrison, Benjamin Harrison, James Madison, Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft, Zachary Taylor, Martin Van Buren, and George Washington.

» His wife, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt - who was the niece of the previous President Theodore Roosevelt - was his fifth cousin once removed.

» He was the first president to appoint a woman to a cabinet position: Frances Perkins, who became Secretary of Labor in 1933.

» He was the only president to serve more than two terms. After his death, the 22nd Amendment (1951) enshrined a two-term limit in the Constitution.

» His victory in the 1936 election came as a surprise to those who had heeded a prominent poll by the 'Literary Digest'. This had confidently predicted a landslide win for his opponent, Alf Landon - who in fact suffered the worst electoral college defeat of modern times. The pollsters had drawn their sample from telephone directories - failing to consider that only the wealthy, Republican-voting classes owned telephones.

By Max Hastings

HARRY S TRUMAN

33rd

1945-1953

When Harry Truman was called to the presidency in April 1945, he had been serving as vice-president for just three months. He had not been briefed about President Roosevelt's escalating difficulties with the Soviet Union, nor about the development of the atomic bomb. "I felt like the moon, the stars, and all the planets had fallen on me," he said.

The only 20th-century president without a college degree, he was expected by some to prove woefully out of his depth. Truman had started out in Missouri as a farmer, book-keeper and clerk before serving as an artillery officer in the First World War and coming back to start an unsuccessful haberdashery business in Kansas. He then became active in the Democratic Party, was in due course appointed a county judge and became a Senator in 1934. During the Second World War he headed the Senate committee investigating waste and corruption, reportedly saving some $15bn - and building a reputation for diligence and honesty which made him, for President Roosevelt, an attractive running-mate for the 1944 election.

Truman accepted the nomination for vice-president with some reluctance - "Tell him to go to hell" was reportedly his first response, and he later described the office as "about as useful as a cow's fifth teat". He had little contact with Roosevelt while serving with him and was understandably shocked at the magnitude of the responsibility that was thrust upon him after 82 days.

Yet the man who coined the phrase "The buck stops here" did not buckle. Within four months he had made two of the biggest decisions ever made by a human being, authorising the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (According to notes that he wrote at the time, he was afraid that he might be bringing about the end of the world.) Japan surrendered shortly afterwards.

Other momentous decisions followed. He led the US in helping to create the United Nations; approved the Marshall Plan (named after his Secretary of State, George C Marshall) for European recovery; played a leading role in the establishment of Nato; and in March 1947 enunciated what became the West's defining creed for the Cold War - the Truman Doctrine. This stated that every nation must choose between two "alternative ways of life": Communism and democracy. "I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures," he stated.

Joseph Stalin , Harry Truman and Winston Churchill at the Potsdam conference, 17 July 1945, Germany

Truman also made the crucial decision to recognise the new state of Israel in 1948, sponsored the 11-month Berlin Airlift (also in 1948), and won a UN mandate to expel the invading North Koreans from South Korea by force in 1950. He also resisted pressure from General MacArthur to declare all-out war on China when the Korean War began to escalate.

At home, he championed the rights of African-Americans, initiated a "loyalty review" programme to root out Communist subversion in federal employees, and presented to Congress a 21-point programme - known as the Fair Deal - that proposed the expansion of social security, a full-employment programme, a permanent Fair Employment Practices Act, and public housing and slum clearance. He claimed that this programme symbolised "my assumption of the office of President in my own right" - but he was unable to get it all through Congress.

The economic difficulties that followed the Second World War made it hard for him to achieve lasting popularity with the electorate - there was widespread surprise when he was re-elected in 1948 - and by 1952 his ratings had reached an all-time low. Progressives saw him as reactionary - especially after he ordered the federal seizure of the nation's steel mills to head off an impending strike - while the increasingly strident McCarthyites (whom he had underestimated) accused him of being "soft" on Communism. He was also plagued by accusations of corruption among senior officials.

He did not seek re-election in 1952 but retired to his home in Independence, Missouri, where he wrote his memoirs, saw his reputation gradually recover, and worked in Democratic affairs until his health began to fail in the Sixties. He died in 1972.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"Within the first few months, I discovered that being a president is like riding a tiger. A man has to keep riding or be swallowed."

"Communism is based on the belief that man is so weak and inadequate that he is unable to govern himself, and therefore requires the rule of strong masters. Democracy is based on the conviction that man has the moral and intellectual capacity, as well as the inalienable right, to govern himself with reason and justice."

"I sit here all day trying to persuade people to do the things they ought to have sense enough to do without my persuading them... That's all the powers of the President amount to."

"The buck stops here."

"I knew what I was doing when I stopped the war [with the atomic bomb]... I have no regrets and, under the same circumstances, I would do it again."

"If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen."

"It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"There never has been a decision made under this man's administration... that has not been made in the best interest of his country. It is not only the courage of these decisions that will live, but the integrity of them." George Marshall

"President Truman is beloved by the American people because of his candour, honesty, frankness and principle. He... represented in the minds of the American citizens the bold principles of the New Deal and the Fair Deal." Hubert Humphrey

"It defies all common sense to send that roughneck ward politician back to the White House." Robert A Taft

MINUTIAE

» His wife, Bess, who lived to be 97, was the longest-lived First Lady.

» Truman met his wife when he was six and she was five. "I only had one sweetheart," he said later.

» He considered himself an art-lover, but preferred equestrian statues to Picasso.

» Truman was a gifted pianist, who often played to relax.

» His middle name, in full, was "S". Truman's parents could not agree whether it should be Solomon (after his mother's father) or Shippe (after his father's father) - so they compromised with a simple letter on the birth certificate.

» When President Roosevelt died, Truman was summoned urgently to the White House, where Eleanor Roosevelt told him: "Harry, the President is dead." Truman said: "Is there anything I can do for you?" Mrs Roosevelt shook her head and said: "Is there anything we can do for you? For you are the one in trouble now."

» His daughter, Marion, was a singer. When the Washington Post published a scathing review of one of her performances, Truman wrote a famous letter to the critic in question: "I have just read your lousy review buried in the back pages. You sound like a frustrated old man who never made a success, an eight-ulcer man on a four-ulcer job and all four ulcers working. I never met you but if I do, you'll need a new nose and a supporter below." He hand-wrote the letter and posted it himself so that his aides would not intercept it.

» Truman's victory in the 1948 election was considered so unlikely that the Chicago Daily Tribune published a famously premature edition with the front-page headline "Dewey defeats Truman".

» David Lilienthal, chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, expressed concern that Truman's explosive temper might set off World War III.

DWIGHT D EISENHOWER

34th

1953-1961

The Supreme Commander who had led the Allied Forces to victory in the Second World War brought to the presidency a military charisma unseen in Washington since the days of Ulysses S Grant. His moderate brand of Republicanism did not represent a spectacular departure from Truman's Democratic regime, but his prestige made him considerably more popular and, arguably, more effective.

His most obvious impact was in foreign affairs. The former head of Nato, he dealt with the growing tensions of the Cold War from a position of perceived strength. He brokered a truce in the Korean War, having visited Korea to revive peace talks before he had even been inaugurated. He also supported the UN, and, following the death of Stalin, initiated a series of East-West summits which yielded, among other things, a treaty confirming the neutrality of Austria.

He refused French requests for military support in Indochina but expressed the famous concern that would later become known as Domino Theory - "You have a row of dominoes set up, and you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly" - and did eventually send military advisers to Vietnam. He also undertook the stockpiling of large quantities of nuclear weapons as a deterrent. And he approved - as Truman had refused to do - the CIA-back coup that re-installed the pro-Western Shah in Iran. The effects of that decision can still be felt today.

In 1957, he proposed - and Congress approved - the Eisenhower Doctrine, which stated that the US would use economic aid and, if necessary, military force to contain the spread of Communism in the Middle East. The following year he sent Marines to support the pro-Western regime in Lebanon.

Domestically, he pursued a middle course, continuing most of the New Deal and Fair Deal programmes while emphasising the need for a balanced

budget. He also deftly - if slowly - brought an end to the witch-hunts of McCarthyism, effectively allowing Joseph McCarthy to bring about his own disgrace.

The economy thrived, and re-election seemed a formality, until, in September 1955, Eisenhower suffered a heart attack in Denver, Colorado. The news wiped $14bn off the stock market. But he was out of hospital within seven weeks, and was comfortably re-elected in 1956.

In 1957, he sent federal troops to protect black students in Little Rock, Arkansas, where the governor was defying a Supreme Court ruling on desegregation. He also ordered the complete desegregation of the Armed Forces. "There must be no second class citizens in this country," he wrote. His image as a war hero was useful in such confrontations, just as it was in 1960, when the downing of a U2 spy-plane in Soviet airspace led to a dramatic face-off with the USSR.

Brought up in poverty in Abilene, Kansas, Eisenhower often said that he would rather have been a professional baseball player than a politician. He had a reputation for inarticulacy and garbled syntax which he may well have exaggerated to put people off their guard. But his charm and his calm, reassuring presence assurance meant that he was widely respected and more than compensated for any perceived lack of sophistication. He left office with the largely justified boast: "America is today the strongest, most influential, and most productive nation in the world."

But he also warned of a danger for which he was in part responsible: the growing power of the "military-industrial complex", and the threat it posed to democracy.

He left office in 1961 and retired to his farm in Gettysburg to write his memoirs and, despite worsening arthritis, to play golf. He died, after a long illness, in 1969.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"The United States never lost a soldier or a foot of ground in my administration. We kept the peace. People ask how it happened - by God, it didn't just happen, I'll tell you that."

"Our arms must be mighty, ready for instant action, so that no potential aggressor may be tempted to risk his own destruction."

"No people can live to itself alone. The unity of those who dwell in freedom is their only sure defence... Not even America's prosperity could long survive if other nations did not prosper."

"We must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence... by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist."

"Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based on the best information available. The troops, the air and the Navy did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt, it is mine alone." (Undelivered speech, prepared on the eve of the D-Day landings and kept in his pocket in case they should miscarry.)

IN OTHERS' WORDS

“The sturdy and enduring virtues - honour, courage,integrity, decency - all found eloquent expression in the life of this good man and noble leader.” Lyndon B Johnson

“He was a far more complex and devious man than most people realised, and in the best sense of those words. Not shackled to a one-track mind, he always applied two, three,or four lines of reasoning to a single problem… His mind was quick and facile.” Richard M Nixon

“Ike didn’t know anything, and all the time he was in office, he didn’t learn a thing... The general doesn’t know any more about politics than a pig knows about Sunday.” Harry S Truman

“One shuddered at the thought of what a great force was in such hands.” Nikita Khrushchev

MINUTIAE

» His five brothers (a sixth died in infancy) were all at one time or another nicknamed “Ike” as well.

» He always carried in his pocket three lucky coins: a silver dollar, a five guinea gold piece and a French franc.

» Eisenhower was the last president to be born in the 19th century.

» He was keen golfer, and had a putting green installed in the White House garden. It was repeatedly damaged by squirrels.

» When he was 15, Truman developed blood poisoning after grazing his knee. The doctor recommended amputation, but Eisenhower refused. In due course he recovered.

» His slogan in the 1952 election was “I like Ike”.

» His mother, a pacifist, wept when he went to West Point military training college.

» His wife, Mamie, suffered from Menière’s disease, which made her unsteady on her feet. This gave rise to unfounded rumours of drunkenness.

» He gave Camp David its current name in honour of his grandson, David - who subsequently married Richard Nixon's daughter, Julie.

» Kay Summersby, the woman who served as his personal driver while Eisenhower was in the UK during the Second World War, later claimed to have had an affair with him.

» His valet used to put his watch on for him, and pull up his underpants, in the morning.

JOHN F KENNEDY
35th - THE GRAND ILLUSIONIST

1961-1963

In strange symmetry with his enemy Che Guevara, John F Kennedy became an icon. He was - at least as we look on these things: earlier generations preferred maturity - the handsomest president ever, and, like Che, he had a tragic, mysterious fate. When he was assassinated in 1963, the date - 22 November - became one of the very few that have sunk into the mass

memory. ("Where were you when Kennedy was killed?") The funeral was a very solemn and tragic affair, as the widow, herself a strikingly good-looking woman, veiled in black, held her three-year-old boy's hand as they walked, with his slightly older sister, towards the funeral service in the Cathedral. The little boy touched the world as he saluted his father's coffin. It is, again, an image that has never quite left the world's retina. But what, in substance, did Kennedy leave?

The great presidents bequeathed concrete achievements that can still be argued about: Roosevelt's New Deal of the Thirties being the most obvious case. Back then, with 25 million unemployed, the USA acquired a social-security framework; the federal government overrode separate states and even the Constitution to set it up. For a generation, Roosevelt then counted as a hero. But - as also happened with the Labour government of 1945 in Britain - the experience of the later Seventies caused some questioning of the welfare-state ("Keynesian") formula; with "stagflation", unemployment and inflation together with economic paralysis and a widening mistrust of government. In the USA, the Roosevelt legacy was challenged, and the Republican Right came to dominate affairs.

Oddly enough, Kennedy's one substantial legacy proved useful to them. He had proposed a cut (passed after his death) in the top rate of tax, from 91 to 70 per cent. By 1965, said the Right, that cut meant the rich did not avoid tax and instead worked more productively: revenue rose. As Reagan told a press conference in October 1981, Kennedy had gone ahead despite advice "that he couldn't do that. But he cut those taxes, and the Government ended

up getting more revenues because of the almost instant stimula (sic) to the economy." The Keynesians said no, no, it was not like that, and the episode is now forgotten. But that is the one concrete Kennedy legacy.

However, there was a huge discrepancy between the whole and the very modest sum of the parts. This was a presidency full of glamour and movement: crisis after crisis (the worst in October 1962 when the world came close to nuclear war) but also Vladimir Horowitz in the White House, and a birthday party in Madison Square, at which Marilyn Monroe, probably a Kennedy girlfriend, sang. In terms of image, there has never been a more interesting presidency. It is of course true that, with Kennedy dead, the hostile biographies got under way.

He had a mistress or two (or three), and that marriage was not the chocolate-box picture of legend. (Jacqueline, after his death, quite soon made a Beauty-and-the-Beast marriage with Aristotle Onassis.) Kennedy got away with things that nearly brought down Clinton, because the media liked him. We can pass over this aspect. Paragons of the minor virtues have not always made very good Presidents: the uxorious Ford, for instance, and still poorer Jimmy Carter, doggedly holding his scrawny sexagenarian wife's hand on this or that ineptly-managed international occasion. How does the Kennedy record hold up?

Young Kennedy and his brother Joseph Patrick Kennedy Jr, surround their father Joseph on 2 July 1938 in Southampton on the deck of French 'Normandy' cruiser liner after their arrival from the US

Chateaubriand remarked of Talleyrand that he was a 19th-century parvenu's idea of an 18th-century grand seigneur, and there was in Kennedy an element of the hairdresser's Harvard. The style was rich Boston: silver spoons all round, Ivy League voice and confidence, yachting, grand connections abroad (one sister-in-law was a Cavendish, another a Radziwill). The reality was not quite what it seemed to be. The background was indeed Boston, but the ancestral boats had arrived two and a half centuries too late. Kennedy was not of ancient Puritan descent: quite the

contrary, he was from a Catholic, Irish background, the grandfathers and cousins being Murphys, Hannans, Hickeys, Fitzgeralds.

There was tension between the Boston Irish and the local ascendancy of Cabot Lodges and Lowells and Winthrops, but, America being America, within a generation or two the Irish immigrants had shot up the ladder. John F's grandfather, "Honey" Fitzgerald, became mayor of Boston. Kennedy senior, Joseph P, went to Harvard and made a great deal of money - some said, by bootlegging liquor during the years of Prohibition, but he was overall a Midas, everything turning into gold. Roosevelt made him ambassador to London, where he made a bad name for himself (of which more in a moment).

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John F Kennedy himself was born in 1917, the second son. The only black spot in an otherwise standard-issue rich Thirties boy existence was a childhood illness, the consequences of which never quite left him (he had a bad back all his life, and put up with it heroically). He had a good war in the Navy. At his father's behest, in 1946, on the Irish Democrat circuit, he went into politics, as a Congressman. There followed a suitable match, to the also rich and beautiful Jacqueline Bouvier, in 1953 and a seat in the Senate (won in 1952 from Henry Cabot Lodge, a sign that the Protestant Boston-Brahmin ascendancy was over). So far, so standard for the United States, and there remains an interesting question, as to why the Irish in America at that time flourished so much more than the Irish in England.

Over this period in Kennedy's life, there is indeed some legitimate muck-raking to be done. Later on, he became the great white hope of American liberals - associated with all of the right causes. That was not how it seemed at the time. Kennedy's father was a grasping monster. He had made himself very helpful to Roosevelt, lining up the Irish vote, and Roosevelt rewarded him (or got him out of the way) by naming him ambassador to the Court of St James in the later Thirties. He was in London during the Blitz, and distinguished himself by cowardice and defeatism; he even managed to say in public that the British were not fighting for democracy, and he also did not disguise his anti-semitism. He was in effect sacked, and relapsed thereafter into querulous political inactivity, but wanted to keep a presence just the same. His oldest son had been killed in the War (the first in an extraordinary set of family disasters, almost as if the gods had settled on a generations-long retribution).

Old Joseph decided that he wanted a son in politics, pushed John F ("Jack") and set about greasing the right palms. One of these belonged to Senator Joe McCarthy, then (c1950) making a name for himself as Grand Inquisitor of un-American Activities. Hollywood and even the State Department had its crypto-Communists, and a witch-hunt ensued (to which even Charlie Chaplin and Graham Greene fell victim). Young Kennedy went along with McCarthy, and his brother, Robert, served on his staff: the deal was that John F would not denounce McCarthy in Boston, and thus got McCarthyite support. (It should be said that Ronald Reagan, as leader of the actors' union at the time, behaved far more scrupulously than Kennedy did). At any rate,

the Catholic constituency was secure, Kennedy won a seat in the Senate, in 1956 put himself forward as presidential candidate for the Democratic Party, and in 1960 won the nomination.

JFK is given a rousing ovation during his presidential campaign

The Democratic Party was a strange amalgam, a strong element in it being Southern, Baptist and - at the time - very keen to preserve States' rights so that it could go on with white supremacy. The Southern vote was secured because Kennedy found the ideal fixer in his future vice-president, Lyndon

Johnson, who had earlier fixed Congress for Roosevelt and who, as a Texan, was in a very good position to fix much else. The third element, relatively new to politics, was Jewish. The American Jews had, by and large, voted for Kennedy. In 1960, he told Ben Gurion that he had been elected "by the Jews" and wondered what he could do in return. Ben Gurion much preferred the support he had had from Europe - the French gave Israel arms - and especially from the Left; he did not want to be treated as "some Jewish Mayor Daley" (in Geoffrey Wheatcroft's words).

The State Department had not been enthusiastic about Israel, had criticised her, and had pressed for some solution to the refugee problem. Now, matters began to change, as Hawk missiles were sold. You can, if you like, see something sinister in this, the rise of the Jewish Lobby, of which there is much talk, the more so as some of the then Kennedy supporters have turned into today's "neo-cons". But there were more important factors in bringing change to the State Department position. It supported Nasser in consort with Moscow and interfered murderously elsewhere (Eisenhower confessed later that his greatest mistake had been to fail to support the British and French over Suez). Iraq had had a foul revolution, and the murderous destabilisation of the Lebanese haven had begun. Israel, in this perspective, became a useful ally. Kennedy himself dismissed any idea of enforcing a return of the Palestinian refugees from the Gaza Strip: "It's like a Negro wanting to go back to Mississippi, isn't it". Not the most sensitive of remarks, but was the gist wrong?

The Democratic amalgam made for a Kennedy victory in the election of 1960, and his opponent was Richard Nixon. The main instrument now coming up in politics was television: 14 million television sets, which senior politicians did not know how to exploit. There was a debate. Nixon's eyes did not focus properly, and he looked unshaven; he would not use make-up; he came across as a stage villain. Not John F Kennedy: the friendly (made-up) face, the gleaming teeth, the air of youth. Nixon somehow made himself hated in media circles, in the end his downfall, and though people who heard the debate on the radio reckoned that he had won, the television spectators were overwhelmingly on Kennedy's side.

Nixon came across as cross-examination-lawyerly, whereas Kennedy charmed: "Do you realise the responsibility I carry? I'm the only person standing between Nixon and the White House." He squeaked into victory. Kennedy won by a tiny majority - 49.7 per cent to 49.5 per cent - and there were suspicions that voting in Illinois (Mayor Daley's Chicago) had been fixed. So, too, had votes in Texas, and here the fixer was Lyndon Johnson, a one-time Roosevelt congressional manager, but he had the grace to concede, and "the New Frontier" was the theme of Kennedy's Inaugural, in January 1961. Joseph Kennedy had remarked, "image is reality", and that was the underlying theme. If politicians use the word "new", beware: they are salesmen.

9 September 1962 in Newport, RI: President Kennedy, second right, and First Lady attend the first America's Cup race

Besides, whatever the deals he had had to make with the Boston Democrats (or for that matter their southern allies) he at least had promise, in the eyes of east-coast liberals, of turning into something different. When, at the Democratic convention of 1960, he made a speech indicating a "New

Frontier", this seemed to mean something. The backdrop was rule by elderly Republicans, especially President Dwight D Eisenhower, genial, golf-playing, and allegedly incapable of getting grammar right; there was apple-cheeked Mamie, offering tea and cookies, and much of the east coast snorted with contempt. Norman Mailer called the Fifties the worst decade in the history of mankind. The USA in this view were simply not using their enormous weight to proper effect. Health was a disaster; the cities were dreadfully badly managed; the race matter was a national disgrace. Under the federal system, separate States could become stagnant, even malignant backwaters. This was most obvious in the case of the southern States and their preposterous White supremacy, but it even affected Kennedy's own backyard. The Catholic control meant that contraceptives were unavailable, and it was local Republican ladies of great respectability who fought that matter through the legal system. (They won, but only after a 15-year battle, and it resulted in the decision, in 1973, to allow not just contraception but abortion on easy terms.)

As seems to happen in American publishing, there was one of those 20-year moments when a small spate of books appears, all with variations on a theme. Looking back, it is not easy to understand quite why such heat was generated; Fifties America had seen an extraordinary miracle of progress, gadgets all around, businesses such as IBM working wonders; as late as 1970, American workers had twice the purchasing power of German ones. But in 1960 there was a widespread notion that the USA were not managing what they should be managing: time for a new New Deal. This coincided with a two-year slow-down in the economy, when it grew by 2 per cent and

unemployment came close to 6 per cent, then thought excessive. These questions gave Kennedy his narrow margin at the end of 1960, and when he took over, early in 1961, "New Frontier" was the watchword.

Ambitious academics advised as to how the challenge was to be met. There were some famous and influential books, and conservatism had a bad time. These new writers analysed problems, and often suggested easy-sounding solutions - one mark of the Sixties. John Kenneth Galbraith's The Affluent Society (1957) noted that private people had money and governments none the less produced squalor: New York gorged with money, yet the roads were potholed and a good part of the population lived in poor conditions. Two decades later governments had a great deal more money and were still producing squalor: what conclusion was to be drawn? That governments should have even more? Or that they just could not help producing squalor? Vance Packard's Status Seekers (1960) described the American business rat-race.

Jane Jacobs, looking at the wreckage caused by the San Francisco freeway-system, wrote The Life and Death of Great American Cities (1961) and foresaw that housing estates for the poor would turn into sinks of hopelessness worse than the slums that they were to replace; she also foresaw that city centres would become empty, inhabited only by tramps. Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (1963) spoke for the bored housewife. Michael Harington discovered that there were many poor Americans: The Other America (1962). David Rieff looked at the wider American rat-race (The Lonely Crowd) and shook his head at the two-

dimensional misery of it all. René Dumont considered international aid, and thought that there should be much more of it; Gunnar Myrdal saw American race-relations in the same light.

Some of this was superficial, but there was at bottom, just the same, an immense and growing problem: race. Kennedy's own vice-president complained that, when he drove in Texas, his negro cook, unable to use public lavatories, squatted by the side of the road. Two small boys, aged seven and nine, kissed a white girl in the playground and were put in prison for years. If you took a black friend to a restaurant in New York, you telephoned the management beforehand to find out if there was a problem. Race was the central and by far the greatest question in American life, poisoning everything around. It destroyed the old Democratic party.

That had been a strange coalition, of Southern Whites standing on states' rights - the "Dixiecrats" - and Catholic machine-politicians, with an element of liberal-minded Protestants, of which Roosevelt had been (in his way) an exemplar. Kennedy had to go very carefully if he was not to shatter this unlikely combination. As President, he allowed the telephone of Martin Luther King himself to be bugged, and Supreme Court appointments went the Southerners' way. In fact, Eisenhower had a better record, as regards both McCarthy and race, than did Kennedy- it was he who enforced school and bus de-segregation (and he also, at the very end, who denounced the "military-industrial complex" for its role in the nuclear arms competition with the Soviet Union).

In fact, Kennedy denounced the Eisenhower regime for letting the USSR overtake America as regards nuclear missiles. Hereby hung a tale or two. The 40th anniversary of the Revolution in 1957 had been triumphalist, with huge thermonuclear tests in the offing, and the fall of the Winter Palace was celebrated by an extraordinary symbol: Sputnik, the first man-made satellite in space. That little spot of light, going round the Earth and making its "bleep", seemed to indicate that the Soviet Union was winning, that Planning under Communism was the way of the future, not disorganised American capitalism.

The 80kg Sputnik seemed to shame the Americans: their kitchen gadgets were no doubt splendid, but they failed lamentably to put even a football-sized satellite into space. Khrushchev beamed: "It is the United States which is now intent on catching up." A 21st Congress of the Communist Party in January 1959 announced that the USSR itself would "catch up" by 1970 and a further one in October 1961 was more precise: five years to catch up, and even, by 1980, "super-abundance".

This was all bogus or utterly misleading. The Americans had not put an effort into ballistic missiles because they concentrated on military aircraft to deliver bombs (and, through the needs of defence, also promoted computers). Besides, Sputnik itself was not what it seemed. In the first place, the equations that shot Sputnik into orbit had been devised by Konstantin Tsiolkovsky in 1903 - the "achievements" of the Soviet Union generally reflected the old Tsarist-Russian educational system, especially in mathematics, rather than Communism, under which many of the best

scientists had been murdered or imprisoned (including Korolev, the chief designer of Sputnik).

Then again, some of the engineering came from captured German rocket scientists, the makers of the V2 that had terrorised London in 1944 and 1945. It was only really Hitler and then the Cold War that caused Moscow's rulers to behave sensibly, and one of the Soviet scientists was eavesdropped by the KGB as saying that the first lives to be saved by nuclear deterrence were those of the Soviet scientists. But in 1960, the Americans were never the less spurred into a great effort to catch up.

John Kennedy Jr. playing in the Oval Office at the White House, October 15, 1963

No one would speak up for Soviet Planning now. But that was not how, in 1960, it looked, and when Kennedy spoke for his New Frontier, the vision he conveyed was of men in white coats offering Progress. Around him, he collected a team of "the best and the brightest", as the title of David Halberstam's famous book (of 1973) ran. (There were no women, as yet, but here again Kennedy struck the tuning-fork for the swelling anthem to come; he set up a commission "on the status of women" in 1961.) McGeorge Bundy (from an old Boston family), Robert McNamara from the Harvard Business School, and Walt Rostow, from MIT - each one of them was versatile and from the very top of academe. Harvard had an enlightened system, by which such brains were supposed (as, at the time, with Research Fellowships at Oxford and Cambridge) not to have to bother with the drudgery of a PhD thesis, a chore for lesser talents ("Mr" was the honourable title), and Bundy was not only firmly "Mr", but the youngest Harvard Dean in history. Rostow was an extremely interesting man who wrote a characteristic book of the age (now seeming rather naive): Stages of Economic Growth. It identified a moment of industrial take-off, when countries saved enough of their GDP to foster investment and thence an industrial revolution, and development economics went ahead, with an assumption that squeezing peasants would mean investment for big industry. Latin America seemed ripe for treatment of this sort.

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New Frontier was the theme of Kennedy's inaugural, in January 1961. A Peace Corps was established, as an alternative to the conscription-draft, by which young Americans were sent all over the globe to help with this or that worthy project. This did good: the present-day professor of Turkish studies at Princeton, Heath Lowry, son of a missionary in India, says that he just opened the Peace Corps booklet at random, hit upon the letter "T", and found himself in an Anatolian village, the rest being (rather good) history. On the same level, Kennedy also promoted "arts in a vital society" - a National Endowment was to follow (after his death). In terms of squaring liberals, so far so good, and John Kenneth Galbraith craggily beamed.

The American intelligentsia had often felt rather inferior when it came to Europe: as Michael Ledeen, representing the CIA in Italy, remarked, the wines, the women, the films were overwhelming. Now, America could compete. No more would a Harold Nicolson do the coast-to-coast lecture circuit, be received in one Peoria after another by ladies in cherried hats offering cookies, announce that the two democracies were standing shoulder to shoulder facing the foe to the east, and then return to London saying that it had been "like a month at a servants' ball".

Still, be it not forgotten that the USA in the Sixties ran into disaster. There was Vietnam. There was (and is) the absurd stand-off with Cuba. Race-relations turned very sour indeed, and a sort of civil war opened up. Finally, there was the end, in 1971, of the fixed-rate international exchanges, collectively known as "Bretton Woods", that had caused an enormous boom in world trade, and given the western world that period of extraordinary

prosperity that the French know as the trente glorieuses. With each and every one, at least the little finger points at John F Kennedy. Did anything that he touched really turn out right? As regards Bretton Woods, the dollar could not be the underpinning of the world's trade if the Americans did not follow the rules. In 1960, there were already more dollars held in Europe than there was gold in Fort Knox to honour the paper, if presented. Kennedy, Galbraith beaming, took the first step into a world of deficits, and thence of inflation, that was to bring Bretton Woods down a decade later, and cause oil prices, in dollars, to multiply by four and then by eight.

Kennedy mis-managed the first crisis, over Cuba. That island made for legend - Che agonizing all over T-shirts - and you could easily run up a Marxist account, of down-trodden peons, rapacious landlords, a "comprador" class of foreign-origin middlemen who did the American trade, plus revolutionary intelligentsia, etc. The Americans used Cuba often enough as an escape from tea and cookies, but the place was better off than almost anywhere else in Latin America, whatever the grubbiness of its banana-republic politicos. The Americans are bad at imperialism, producing naive, conscience-struck State Departmentery at one level and mafia crooks on another. Self-disgust struck some of them, and a New York Times journalist gave encouragement to Fidel Castro, quite misleading him (an admirer of Mussolini, who, as a Russian minder complained, only thought in terms of headlines) into thinking he was a sort of Robin Hood.

The Americans pushed out the grubby dictator, and in January 1959 Castro took over, soon organising public executions and nationalising American

business. Early in 1960, Moscow took an interest, the progressives arrived beardedly from abroad, and Le Corbusier with glee designed a prison. There was also a small flood of refugees, at 2,000 per day on occasion. The CIA wanted to overthrow Castro, and had a plan, of a sort. Preparations went ahead for a landing at the Bay of Pigs; but in Guatemala, where a hundred different Cuban exile-groups were represented, there was an atmosphere of black farce: a brothel was built for them, while the American trainers, arrogant and speaking no Spanish, lived apart and better, while their commander, a colonel, simply said, "I just don't trust any goddam Cuban." A farce followed in 1961, the invasion-force rounded up (and ransomed) as its boats crashed into reefs and its walkie-talkies were swamped in deep water. Kennedy had sanctioned this, but had - characteristically - shrunk from using the air-power that might have made a difference. Would a more understanding President have made some sort of terms with Castro? No one really knows.

At any rate, Cuba then became, as Lawrence said of Balzac, a sort of gigantic dwarf. The initial crisis led to a nuclear confrontation in October 1962 - the moment for which Kennedy will always be remembered. The Russians planted missiles in Cuba, lied about it, were found out. Kennedy decided to impose a blockade, to stop further Soviet missiles from arriving, and a few days' stalemate followed, with alarms on both sides, until finally a deal was done: no Russian rockets on Cuba, American rockets to be withdrawn from Turkey. Kennedy was much-praised for his firmness on this occasion, as also for his willingness to find a way out. How does this record now look?

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The Cuban Crisis needs to be looked at in the Cold War context. The central problem was, as it always had been since 1948, Berlin. Here was an American island - a somewhat artificially prosperous island - in the very middle of Communist East Germany. Post-war agreements meant that there was an open border between East and West Berlin; as West Germany prospered in the trente glorieuses, East Germans walked or took the subway to the West. By 1960, they were doing so at the rate of 2,000 per day. If this went on, East Germany would implode (as was to happen in 1989). How was Moscow to deal with the problem? Stalin had tried force, a blockade, and had been thwarted when the Allies just flew in supplies to keep West Berlin going. Khrushchev tried another method, detente. To Eisenhower, he talked disarmament, and bought American grain. To the Germans, he allowed talk of an Austrian solution - neutrality and unification. De Gaulle in France was only too willing to listen to anyone willing to recognise his country's great-power role, and Harold Macmillan came, on a not very successful visit. Khrushchev and Gromyko easily understood that no one in the West really wanted to fight for West Berlin: let them quarrel among themselves.

As a French expert. Georges-Henri Soutou, says, they were all fighting the Cold War, but they were each fighting their own Cold War. At Geneva, when there was a conference on the subject, that squabbling duly occurred, Germans mistrusting Americans, Americans mistrusting British, and

everyone mistrusting the French. Khrushchev rubbed his fat little hands in glee, and served an ultimatum. He would recognise East Germany, including Berlin as its capital, and the Allies would then have to deal with the East Germans when it came to access over Berlin, not the Russians, whose hands were bound by war-time agreements. Meanwhile, he was taking tricks in the Middle East, and emissaries from all over the world were turning up as supplicants on his Kremlin doorstep - the Shah of Iran, the inevitable Chinese. This went to his head. He humiliated Eisenhower at a Paris conference, banged his shoe on the desk at the United Nations, and graciously agreed to wait and see what the West would offer him over Berlin.

In June 1961, John F Kennedy offered to meet him, in Vienna, to talk things over, and the meeting was not a success - or, rather, Khrushchev looked contemptuously upon this "boy", with his well-meaning platitudes, and thought that he could easily get the better of him.

Kennedy had made the mistake of sending Walt Rostow to Moscow to explain that he had an interest in disarmament - not a matter likely to please his Allies. America had been losing in Cuba and elsewhere. There had also been a widespread notion, since Sputnik, that western capitalism was just too disorganised and self-indulgent to "win", that Cuban revolutions would happen all over the place, at Soviet behest. Khrushchev, for his part, was ebullient. Here was this crude, tubby little man, who owed such education as he had had to a priest, who had taught him the rudiments in exchange for potatoes. The Russian Revolution had swept him to the top. He patronised

Kennedy, and wrote him off. As the Berlin haemorrhage went ahead, he sanctioned the building of a wall to keep the people in their cage. On 13 August 1961, up it went, the ugliest symbol (with severe competition) of Communism. The Americans did nothing.

More than a year later, Kennedy went to see the Wall, in the course of a visit designed to propitiate the alarmed Germans. In the course of a speech he said, famously, " Ich bin ein Berliner", which was not grammatical (the " ein" is redundant, and a Berliner is a sort of doughnut) though everyone knew what he meant. But even there he was misleading his audience: the Americans would not have the Wall pulled down. It suited them well enough to have that demarcation line where it was, and in March 1962 they made this plain enough, when they sent proposals over disarmament that amounted to a Soviet-American condominium in Europe. But Khrushchev was after bigger game. He was now megalomaniacally full of himself, having at last made East Germany a stable place, and fancying that he could at last secure the bullied, neutral Germany that had been a Soviet objective all along. He exploded a monstrous 50-megaton bomb on 30 October, expected to browbeat West Germany into neutrality, and at the same time he would show the adolescent Kennedy who was the master. He would also silence colleagues on the Politburo who hated his denunciations of Stalin and his boat-rocking reforms of the Party. He would place missiles on Cuba, a few dozen miles from Florida.

Cuba, the locus classicus of Third-World revolt, offered a good stage. In 1962, by stealth, Soviet missiles were gradually installed there, Castro

being told that this was cover against a new American invasion attempt. Castro himself, another megalomaniac, preened: recognition at last. To Cuba, the Russians sent much more than was originally thought - 50,000 men, not 10,000, and 85 ships, and there were 80 nuclear weapons of differing range. On 14 October an American spy plane showed that missile bases were being constructed. Khrushchev wanted the secret kept so that Kennedy would not be forced into a public confrontation, but he meant, when he went to the UN in New York in November, to make a grand public announcement.

This was completely to misunderstand Kennedy, the more so as there was an election in the offing, and the Republicans made a great fuss about the arrival of Soviet troops (at which Khrushchev ordered yet more, tactical, missiles to be dispatched). On 18 October, Washington realised that the problem was even more serious than had been thought, and when, that evening, Gromyko called, and straight-forwardly lied in denying the presence of missiles, Kennedy announced (on 20 October) that there would be a blockade of Cuba, that Soviet ships would be stopped. Soviet forces were put on alert, and Khrushchev sent a message that he would not respect the blockade, but American forces were also put on alert (24 October) with many nuclear-armed bombers permanently in the air. Would the USSR try and force the blockade? 25 and 26 October marked the height of the crisis. Khrushchev realised that Kennedy was entirely serious, that he would invade Cuba, and was not bluffing. A letter was then composed. The Soviet missiles would be withdrawn, in return for an American pledge not to invade Cuba; after some more nail-biting, a further and secret condition was

attached, that the Americans would withdraw their own missiles from Turkey. On 28 October, an agreement was announced, and a hotline telephone was installed on the desks of Kennedy and Khrushchev, with a view to avoidance of such problems ever again. Castro was enraged (he broke a mirror) but had the last laugh, when Khrushchev was overthrown by colleagues terrified of his antics. But would he have indulged in them but for the initial clumsiness of Kennedy's approach to him? An open question.

At any rate, the rivalry with Khrushchev prompted Kennedy into a final and fatal step: Vietnam. We can recognise the Vietnam war as one of modern America's great disasters, and Kennedy bears some responsibility for it. America in the Asia had done remarkably well: Japan and Taiwan were considerable success stories, but before then there had been a successful pacification of the Philippines. Vietnam, a French colony, did not seem much different: some American money, a few military advisers, a bit of help as regards "state building", and all would be well. All was not well. A "peasant war" developed, as Communist guerrilleros came in from the North and infiltrated villages that contained peasants discontented with bullying officials and grasping middlemen. The South was run by a clique of Catholics, who had stepped into the shoes of the French, and the complications of the place went on and on (and on). De Gaulle advised against involvement - un pays foutu, he said. But it was Kennedy again who took the wrong turning. Almost unthinkingly, he continued an earlier policy, itself none-too-well thought through.

"Advisers" - some 800 - were already present, and Kennedy put up the numbers, to 16,000; under him, too, came plans for free-fire zones, the use of napalm and defoliants to defeat guerrilleros hiding in the jungle. Under his successor, these things blackened America's reputation. But Kennedy did more: this complicated country could only really be managed by a suitable, if surreal, regime, and Kennedy did not understand that the insufferable Ngo Dinh Diem, by turns stuffy and monomanical, was the only answer. In July 1963, he authorised the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem, who was in the event murdered. South Vietnamese politics then went into a tailspin, and when Kennedy himself was assassinated a few weeks later, his wife received a very barbed letter of condolence from Madame Nhu, Diem's sister-in-law.

JFK and his wife ride with secret agents in an open car motorcade shortly before the president was assassinated in Dallas, Texas

For John F Kennedy himself was murdered. It was a most extraordinary murder, in its way a descant upon the American dream, in the sense that a "loner", Lee Harvey Oswald, product of a (very) broken home, failed volunteer for the military and the CIA and the KGB, acquired a gun, thanks to America's lawlessness in that regard (he got it by mail order), and, his brain full of confusion, thought of murder. Kennedy rode in an open car through Dallas, Texas. Oswald fired, and killed. He was then himself caught, and was shot by a man with mafia connections who himself was

dying of cancer. There is easily stuff here for an Oliver Stone film, and you can understand why so many people could not believe that such a surreal set of events could have been genuine. The same was said about the Reichstag fire of 1933: that such a huge and (for the Nazis) convenient blaze could not have been started by one man alone. But it was, and conspiracy theories have never stood up. Kennedy at least ensured, with his death, that he entered American legend.

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All of the neon enlightenment of the Kennedy moment cast a terrible shadow. In 1961, old Joseph himself had a stroke, which prevented him from speaking and had him in a wheelchair: but he went on and on, not dying for another 20 years, and fully conscious of what was happening. A daughter with depression had a lobotomy that went wrong and made her a vegetable (she too lived on and on). His oldest son had been killed in the War, two others were murdered, and another daughter, Marchioness of Hartington, was killed in a plane crash with her lover, Earl Fitzwilliam.

The last son, Edward Kennedy, has been lucky to avoid a charge of manslaughter, while two of Robert Kennedy's sons died tragically young, one from a cocaine overdose and another in a skiing accident. John F Kennedy's own son, the poor little boy of 1963, was killed while flying an aircraft. Lesser disasters pass unnoticed in this terrible catalogue, which is relieved only by the common-sense daughter, Caroline who has made a solid and independent career for herself.

The death of Kennedy brought the greatest outpouring of breast-beating grief that the world had seen until the death of Diana, Princess of Wales a quarter-century later. A Guardian man said that: "For the first time in my life I think I know how the disciples felt when Jesus was crucified." Terrible doggerel verse from Robert Lowell; sentimental nonsense from Arthur Schlesinger; a preposterous exercise in pre-"Hitler Diary" absurdity from a Hugh Trevor-Roper, apparently convinced that the murder was a conspiracy.

Malcolm Muggeridge, as ever, spoke for common sense with an inspired essay which The New York Review of Books had the courage to publish, noting that Kennedy's remarks had "as many bromides and banalities as any prize essay at a girl's school". Later biographies left nothing standing of the legend, and IF Stone said that Kennedy had been "an optical illusion". Maybe it was, of all people, Lyndon Johnson who had it right: "He never did a thing... It was the goddamnest thing... His growing hold on the American people was a mystery to me". But the ghost has rolled on: Obama was just two in 1963.

Jacqueline Kennedy with her two children Caroline Kennedy and John F. Kennedy Jr and brothers-in law Ted Kennedy (L, back) and Robert Kennedy (R) at the funeral of JFK

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility - I welcome it."

"Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

"It is an unfortunate fact that we can secure peace only by preparing for war."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"A great and good president, the friend of all people of good will; a believer in the dignity and equality of all human beings; a fighter for justice; an apostle of peace." Earl Warren

"There was no trace of meanness in this man. There was only compassion for the frailties of others." Abraham Ribicoff

"He seized on every possible shortcoming and inequity in American life and promised immediate cure-alls." Richard M Nixon

"I sincerely fear for my country if Jack Kennedy should be elected president. The fellow has absolutely no principles. Money and gall are all

the Kennedys have." Barry Goldwater

MINUTIAE

» His right leg was 3/4 in longer than his left.

» He lost his virginity at 17 in a Harlem brothel.

» He was the only president whose father attended his inauguration.

» On his 21st birthday he came into a $1m trust fund established for him by his father.

» As a schoolboy he was nicknamed "rat-face".

» During the 1960 campaign, he allegedly claimed to have received a telegram from his father saying: "Dear Jack, Don’t buy a single vote more than is necessary. I’ll be damned if I’m going to pay for a landslide."

» He kept a dog called Pushinka. A gift from Khrushchev, it was a daughter of Strelka, one of the dogs sent into space on Korabl-Sputnik 2 in 1960. He called its puppies “pupniks".

By Norman Stone

LYNDON B JOHNSON

36th - THE UNCIVIL RIGHTS REFORMER

1963-1969

Lyndon Baines Johnson was a man of many contradictions. Personally rude, overbearing and at times politically unscrupulous, he was nevertheless capable of immense personal charm, particularly when he was lobbying and brokering backstage in the Washington corridors of power.

A fiercely proud Texan, who in the course of his rise to power openly backed reactionary and retrograde legislation on race, union labour and protectionism, he was eventually responsible for establishing some of the most important cornerstones of liberal American legislation, the most significant of which was groundbreaking anti-poverty and civil rights legislation, whose effects can still be felt in the United States today.

I was a student at Cambridge during the years of Johnson's presidency. Many people probably only remember him for being the second American president of the 20th-century to have been precipitated into office by the assassination of his predecessor (in 1901 Theodore Roosevelt succeeded President William McKinley, who was gunned down by an anarchist at the Pan-American Exposition in New York).

Like almost everyone else of my generation, I can remember exactly where I was when I heard that John F Kennedy had been assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on 22 November 1963. I was cycling down King's Parade on my way to an early evening seminar, when I was flagged down by a fellow student whom I had never really liked. At first I simply refused to believe him. Once I had been convinced that the devastating news was true, my own private version of "shooting the messenger" meant that I could never bear to be in that particular student's company thereafter.

Vice-President Lyndon Johnson was sworn in aboard the presidential jet, Air Force One, two hours after Kennedy had been declared dead. In the all-

too familiar photograph of him taking the oath (on JFK's own Catholic missal, because no Bible could be found), Jackie Kennedy stands close at his side still wearing the suit stained with her husband's blood, where she had cradled his head in her lap as the motorcade rushed to hospital.

Left-leaning young people all around the globe experienced the death of Kennedy as an almost personal loss, a cruel blow to their idealistic vision of a better, fairer world led by a charismatic, dynamic and progressive US president. As an active member of the Cambridge University Labour Club in those days, I was a sympathetic bystander to the increasingly violent civil rights protests in the US during the mid-Sixties, and deeply involved with fellow Cambridge students in the growing international opposition to the Vietnam War. Over those years, I was involved in numerous anti-war meetings and protests. In 1965, I remember particularly vividly a student march to Downing Street led on our behalf by the distinguished academic and activist Raymond Williams, to hand in to the then-Prime Minister Harold Wilson a petition against British involvement in the increased bombing.

I did not attend the much larger demonstration outside the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square in 1968, in which violence erupted, close friends were hurt in the crush and Labour Club acquaintances arrested. But this was the period during which I came to believe that if you felt passionately that there were things that needed putting to rights in the world you lived in, then you had to be prepared to take direct action to effect necessary political change. Lyndon Johnson, or "LBJ" as we always

referred to him, loomed large among the things that I was convinced needed changing.

Lyndon B Johnson's presidency, then, was overshadowed by two huge historical events - Kennedy's assassination and the Vietnam War. The first was entirely beyond his control; the second was a foreign policy debacle, responsibility for which can be laid almost entirely at President Johnson's door.

For many of us who grew up in the Sixties, Johnson's decision to escalate the war with North Vietnam was a permanent stain on his own and his administration's judgement. It eventually brought about his political ruin. Those marches and demonstrations against Harold Wilson's British government marked my own political coming of age. At the time, for myself and many thousands of others of the same age in Britain and the United States, Johnson's foreign policy - especially in South-East Asia - represented the blinkered certainties of the old guard against which we felt obliged to struggle for a better, more just and peaceful world.

Today, Lyndon Johnson's record looks very different. It is much more progressive on the domestic side than I was able or inclined to recognise at the time, and it was more lastingly influential in shaping welfare and civil rights legislation. As a result, his disastrous mishandling of the Vietnam War begins to look like a tragic piece of political bungling that, at the time, overshadowed everything else and turned what might otherwise have been seen as one of the great presidencies of the 20th century into a personal

humiliation. More than 100 years after Johnson's birth, his civil rights and anti-poverty legislation is still shaping the American political agenda.

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Born in 1908, Lyndon Baines Johnson grew up in poverty on a farm in a small town in Texas. This early experience of physical and economic hardship would colour his political career. "When I was young, poverty was so common we didn't know it had a name," he later recalled. In his teens he watched as the bottom fell out of the cotton market, his family went broke and were forced to sell the family farm. His father, Samuel Ealy Johnson, went on to serve six terms in the state House of Representatives as an "agrarian liberal" and populist, fighting for the rights of farmers and labourers. His son succeeded in leap-frogging local politics and winning a seat in the Washington House of Representatives in 1937, through a mixture of luck, determination and by assiduously courting those in local positions of power, which was to characterise Johnson's political life from then on.

President Lyndon B Johnson discusses the Voting Rights Act with civil rights campaigner Martin Luther King Jr.

A passionate admirer of Franklin D Roosevelt, Johnson contrived early on in his career to meet the President and leave a lasting impression, closely identifying himself with Roosevelt's "New Deal" programmes for national recovery and regeneration after the Great Depression. To his fellow congressmen, he was a "100 per cent FDR man". With the support of the White House, Johnson threw himself into securing loans and millions of dollars in federal grants for farmers, schools, housing for the poor, roads and public libraries for his Texan constituents. He played a prominent part in the lobbying and dealing that resulted in legislation to build the great dam on the lower Colorado River, bringing cheap power to large areas of

the community and transforming the lives of the rural poor. By 1939, Lyndon Johnson was being called "the best New Dealer from Texas" by some on Capitol Hill.

By the time Johnson entered the Senate in 1948, however, he had moved strategically to the right, in order to secure the support necessary for a ballot-box win in an increasingly conservative Texas. Running against a popular conservative, temporarily abandoning his support for civil rights and the fight against poverty was a price Johnson was prepared to pay in his determination to reach high office. Ronnie Dugger, the founding editor of the Texas Observer newspaper, put his short-term embracing of conservative policies on race and policy entirely down to political opportunism: "Now, what kind of sense does that make to you in terms of who Lyndon really was? None. There's no sense to it except, of course, the absolutely unqualified opportunism of a successful politician of this particular mould. He out-righted the most conservative figure in Texas politics at that time."

Notoriously, in fact, Johnson's success in gaining a Senate seat at this comparatively early stage in his career involved questionable raising and use of campaign funds, and probably last-minute ballot-stuffing to secure a narrow win over his equally unscrupulous rival. As an ironic comment on the outcome of the election and the way it had been won, Johnson was known as "Landslide Lyndon" throughout his first term.

Johnson quickly became known on Capitol Hill for his apparently limitless energy and determination, as an endlessly resourceful networker and lobbyist, and as an indefatigable workaholic. His work habits became legendary. Countless contemporary reports attest to his working 18 to 20 hour days without a significant break, and to the absence of any significant leisure activities in his life. He allegedly never in his entire career read a book all the way through for pleasure, and colleagues invited by him to sporting events testified to the fact that he barely watched the game, instead concentrating on haranguing his guest on the political topic of the moment. He rapidly rose through the Senate, becoming minority leader, and then, after the mid-term elections in 1953, the youngest ever majority leader of the Senate. He was, contemporaries agreed, a consummate politician; although some would describe him as a consummate political operator.

"There was no more powerful majority leader in American history," his biographer Robert Dallek writes. "He understood the way the Senate worked. He understood what senators needed and what they wanted. He had biographies on each of them so that he knew what their tastes and intentions and aims and desires and wishes and hopes were." He manipulated this knowledge to ensure that individual senators were promised precisely what they most desired in return for a vote. Or, if he could not be sure of that vote, he would arrange for a strategically timed trip to Europe or an assignment away from Washington.

Political commentator Doris Kearns Goodwin, another Johnson biographer, puts it even more strongly. Johnson had the temperament and the

personality to master and dominate the Senate: "I think, for Lyndon Johnson's temperament, the Senate could not have been more perfectly suited. He could get up every day and learn what their fears, their desires, their wishes, their wants were and he could then manipulate, dominate, persuade and cajole them. And what really made things work in the Senate were personal relationships and Johnson was just strictly the best at that."

It helped that Johnson was an imposing man at 6ft 4in tall. His way of buttonholing fellow senators and businessmen and persuading them by sheer determination to support a particular measure became known as "the Johnson treatment". As a contemporary recalled it: "It was an incredible blend of badgering, cajolery, reminders of past favours, promises of future favours, predictions of gloom if something doesn't happen. When that man started to work on you, all of a sudden, you just felt that you were standing under a waterfall and the stuff was pouring on you."

He also created for himself and took on as a second skin the persona and trappings of that legendary American figure, the Texas cattle rancher. In his third year in the Senate, he bought a piece of land along the Pedernales river in central Texas, which became the LBJ Ranch. There he was regularly photographed on horseback, lasso in hand, rounding up steers while outfitted in a Stetson hat and cowboy boots. In fact the LBJ ranch was more than a place of relaxation for Johnson - as his wife Lady Bird Johnson explained in many interviews, he almost never actually relaxed. The ranch became part of the figure Johnson created to reinforce his increasingly powerful political position.

Johnson's consummate mastery of the Senate and its complex rules and internal organisation let him drive bills through the legislature in record time it was a reputation he was proud of, and he kept his own running tally of legislative successes. Robert Dallek summarises the approach: "Consent agreements set a time limit on debate; drawn-out quorum calls that replaced traditional brief recesses and were suspended when Johnson was ready to have the Senate resume gave him time to cut deals in the cloakroom; night sessions and stop and go legislation exhausted senators, discouraged prolonged debate, and promoted back-room agreements as the principal device for passing laws."

In 1957, Johnson steered the first ever civil rights legislation through Congress. It is a typical example of the way he liked to work - ruthlessly brokering compromise with supporters and opponents until he had something both sides would support. Once again, contemporaries were sceptical about Johnson's motivation in driving this milestone legislation through against bitter opposition by representatives of the southern states: "One doesn't know whether he was a liberal or a reactionary. Probably he was neither. He probably was just an extraordinarily skilful parliamentarian who was an opportunist and who sensed the wind and then went in that direction."

Announcing the successful passing of the legislation, Johnson emphasised the careful political balancing act it represented: "A compromise has been negotiated. I am pleased that the Bill was passed. It is a great step forward

and a very important and delicate feat." But even if the 1957 law was more symbol than substance, it ensured that effective civil rights legislation was no longer out of reach, and paved the way for Kennedy's reforms in the early Sixties.

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Although he could not have recognised or appreciated it at the time, the turning-point in Johnson's career came in 1960, when he agreed to join the Democratic Party ticket for the presidential election as Kennedy's running-mate. Circumstances seemed far from propitious, and Johnson was not at all sure he had made the right political move. He had stood for and lost the presidential nomination, and had been astonished when the youthful newcomer Kennedy took the nomination on the first ballot ("That kid needs a little grey in his hair," he remarked just before the vote).

Having lost the presidential nomination, Johnson was reluctant to accept the vice-presidential one, and Kennedy's brother Robert was even more opposed to his having it (there was never any love lost between Johnson and Bobby Kennedy). In the end, it is not entirely clear what tipped the balance. When Kennedy was asked later what the true story of the selection was he replied: "Well, you know, I don't think anybody will ever know."

However it came about, after Kennedy's victory at the polls, Johnson became Vice-President with extreme reluctance, openly describing it as a dead-end job. The charisma of the Kennedy family, with their wealth, clan-

allegiance and elite background and education further conspired to push Johnson uncharacteristically into the shadows - where previously the young Kennedy needed to court Johnson as Senate leader, it was now Johnson who had to wait on Kennedy and his "new guard" aides. For their part, the Kennedy administration mistrusted him and made repeated attempts to sideline him. They appreciated the need to avoid alienating him, however. "I can't afford to have my Vice-President, who knows every reporter in Washington, going around saying we're all screwed up, so we're going to keep him happy," Kennedy confided early on to one of his aides.

During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, there was little sign of Johnson playing a part in the knife-edge decision-making taking place. In summer 1963, when the civil rights march on Washington and Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech had polarised the nation and convinced Kennedy that new legislation was urgently needed, his Vice-President was hardly in the picture. There was even talk of replacing Johnson on the Democrat ticket in 1964 for Kennedy's second term.

President Johnson and Vice President Spiro Agnew are among the spectators at the launch of Apollo 11 on 16 July 1969

Everything changed with Kennedy's assassination on 22 November 1963. Five days later, Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress for the first time as President of the United States. An exceptionally experienced Washington politician, he was acutely aware of the expectations riding on any early moves he made. Not usually a particularly inspiring speaker, he managed on this occasion to strike exactly the right note: "My fellow Americans - all I have I would have given gladly not to be standing here today. The greatest leader of our time has been struck down by the foulest

deed of our time. Today, John Fitzgerald Kennedy lives on in the immortal words and works that he left behind."

In this speech, and in his carefully judged pronouncements in the days that followed, Johnson set an authoritative stamp on his first period as President.

He would see that Kennedy's legislative promises entered the statute book. Continuity was vital to the national interest. "I had to convince everyone everywhere that the country would go forward," Johnson later recalled. "The times cried out for leadership." His biographer Dallek's account sees Johnson's identification with Kennedy's unfinished liberal agenda as a synergy between his most deeply held beliefs, which he could now finally afford to allow to surface, and what the new President saw as a political programme necessary for the stability of the whole nation. Certainly, in pressing forward with Kennedy's domestic reforms, from an $11bn tax cut to kick-start a sluggish economy, to his "War on Poverty", Johnson was comfortably on ground he had occupied when representing the poor and dispossessed as the senator for Texas.

Kennedy's death undoubtedly gave Johnson the opportunity to outdo his predecessor in getting landmark legislation through Congress that otherwise would have failed under the pressure of political partisanship - particularly the North-South split on racial issues. At the time of Kennedy's assassination, his civil rights legislation outlawing racial segregation in schools, public places and employment had stalled in its passage through the House of Representatives, blocked by the chairman of the rules

committee, a Democrat from Virginia, who had vowed to impede its progress indefinitely.

In spring 1964, however, taking advantage of the fact that the new Civil Rights Act was specifically seen as a key plank in Kennedy's legislative legacy, Johnson made it his mission to force it through, putting Hubert Humphrey, the man who was to be his running-mate for the 1964 presidential election, in charge of doing so without significant compromise. Success was achieved by a combination of aggressive lobbying, ruthless out-manoeuvring of the considerable remaining opposition, and astute political manipulation of Congressional rules. The Civil Rights Act was signed into law by President Johnson on 2 July 1964. In 1965, he passed a second civil rights bill - the Voting Rights Act - which allowed millions of black citizens to vote for the first time.

In private, Johnson confided to members of his close team that he feared his advocacy for civil rights would permanently alienate the South from the Democrats, and lose him the 1964 presidential election. In fact this turned out to be far from being the case. Helped in part by the Republicans' nomination of the firebrand right-winger Barry Goldwater as their candidate, Johnson swept to victory, finally making good his early, ironic soubriquet of "Landslide Lyndon". He took a larger percentage of the popular vote than any president before him.

But while Johnson was concentrating on the presidential campaign with his attention focused on the domestic agenda, he was failing to factor into his

plans the worsening situation in Vietnam. The United States had been sending military advisors to South Vietnam since the early Fifties, as part of their policy of "containment", to stop the spread of communism, in the form of encroachment on South Vietnam from communist-backed North Vietnam. There were already 16,000 advisors there at the time of Kennedy's death. If the Vietnam War was not of Johnson's making, though, its escalation into outright war most certainly was.

Almost at the very moment when the Civil Right Act was passing into law, news arrived that three North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked an American destroyer, the USS Maddox, in the Gulf of Tonkin. The Maddox responded by firing on the Vietnamese, supported by planes from a neighbouring aircraft carrier, sinking one of their vessels and damaging another. Notified by Robert McNamara that two destroyers were under attack by torpedo boats, Johnson told him that he would give North Vietnam "a real dose". He would, in other words, subject the Vietnamese to the kind of retaliatory bullying that had helped him achieve many political objectives over his years in Congress.

In fact the story of an unprovoked attack on an American ship by the North Vietnamese, exaggerated in order to get authorisation for retaliatory air strikes inside North Vietnam, was probably untrue. It marked the beginning of a "credibility gap" between the Johnson administration's public pronouncements about what was going on in South-east Asia, and the military measures for which he sought Congressional support as a consequence, and the reality of the situation. The beginning of full-scale

war against North Vietnam was based, like the invasion of Iraq 40 years later, on exaggerated reports of Vietnamese aggression, and the blurring of the boundaries of permission granted for hostilities against another sovereign state. In the end, Johnson probably took the United States to war without proper authorisation from Congress.

In his conduct of the Vietnam War, Johnson employed all the tactics which continued to serve him so well in the domestic arena, to disastrous effect. After the Gulf of Tonkin offensive, he rallied Congress and the country behind him with a promise not to abandon South Vietnam - a promise on which he could not deliver. In 1965, he agreed to increased air strikes against North Vietnam (the air strikes for which he tried unsuccessfully to get support from the British government), escalating into a sustained bombing campaign designed to gain public support by bombarding the enemy into submission. When it failed to do so, Johnson became increasingly economical with the truth in his public statements, while further increasing America's military involvement and troop commitment. By March 1966, the number of men deployed there had reached 325,000 and, with no sign of an end in sight, let alone a conclusive victory against the alleged communist threat, domestic opposition was steadily rising.

As far as many in my generation were concerned, from spring 1965 onwards, there was no excuse for the bellicose, bullying behaviour of this American president, and the aggressive behaviour of an overbearing, imperialist America. In a mood swing that resonates with the 9/11 attacks in 2001, international sympathy towards the US following the Kennedy

Assassination turned, over a shockingly short period, to sustained anger. From the moment the most powerful nation on Earth declared war on a small developing world state in South-east Asia, youthful activists turned their backs on Johnson's reforming domestic agenda, ignoring its human rights milestones, to concentrate their campaigning energies on trying to stop the American juggernaut destroying an entire population in the name of "containment". For us, Johnson's failure in Vietnam became America's failure, just as George W Bush's failure in Iraq has done.

Johnson had politically defined himself as someone who could make a difference to the lives of those unable to speak up for themselves - the poor, the discriminated against, the old. The mounting tide of anger against him, the increasingly large and disorderly demonstrations, wrecked his confidence, leaving him a broken man. On 31 March 1968, he unexpectedly withdrew from the nomination process for the presidency, leaving the contest to Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy. Three days later, Ho Chi Minh announced that North Vietnam was ready to enter into peace talks (although the war would in fact go on for a further seven years).

Johnson remained in office for 10 more months, a lame-duck President, watching helplessly as social unrest increased right across the United States. On 4 April, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Two months later, so was Robert Kennedy. In August, police clashed with anti-war demonstrators at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. In November, the Republican Richard Nixon was elected President.

The tirelessly active Lyndon B Johnson retired to his ranch and a life of idleness, self-pity and isolation. He let himself go - taking up smoking and drinking again, although he knew his heart-condition made both inadvisable. On 22 January 1973, at the age of 64, he suffered his third heart attack, which this time was fatal. Had he run for another term in 1968 and won; that would have been almost exactly the date at which he would have finally left office. Five days later, the Vietnam War ended in a peace treaty, signed in Paris, between America and North Vietnam.

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Lyndon B Johnson's reputation today, such as it is, rests upon a number of classic biographies written between 1976 and 1998. Their final assessments of the 36th President of the United States, arrived at as the 20th century was drawing to a close, fall somewhere between apology and regret: apology for Johnson's disastrous involvement of America in a war in South-east Asia that it could not win, with the accompanying enormous loss of life; and regret that the fine ambitions and domestic legislative triumphs of the early years of his presidency gave way to the disillusion and disappointment that led up to his decision not to run again in 1968. That view is well captured in an assessment of Lyndon Johnson by a Civil Rights Activist from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, in a 1991 PBS TV documentary: "There was something about this man - I mean, he had a pretty shoddy career and he'd done some pretty ruthless and awful things, but he knew poverty and he knew racism. And I really think that he decided that this was the way to assure his place in history. This was the way to

really save the nation. And he knew it was not politically expedient, but I think he really knew it was right."

Today our assessment is likely to be somewhat different - less hesitant and more admiring. Johnson was a consummate politician, perfectly attuned to the ways of Capitol Hill, who understood the complex systems underpinning the United States Congress, and how to exploit its rules to achieve clear political goals. His finest work was done behind the scenes and out of sight, in the halls and corridors of the Senate, cajoling and threatening by turns to sway opinions and win crucial votes. The realisation that those tactics were of no conceivable use in foreign policy, especially in South-east Asia, ultimately utterly undermined Johnson's confidence in his own leadership.

Yet his record of getting domestic legislation into statute to help the socially disadvantaged remains impressive. In 1965, building on Roosevelt's social security legislation of the Thirties, Johnson added Medicare - health insurance for those aged 65 and over. His "Great Society" programme produced large amounts of federal funding for public schools, as well as money for urban renewal, crime prevention, and widespread measures to fight poverty. All of which laid the groundwork for socially responsible legislation whose impact can still be felt in the United States today. They were enormously popular at the time they were put in place, and continue to deserve general recognition today as effective and forward-looking measures.

The message we end up taking away from the Johnson presidency is that, while we may rest our hopes on the idealistic presidents, in the end it is the deft political operators, the people who can really deal with Washington in all its complexity, who make policy of lasting importance. In the legislation Johnson undertook to introduce, he based the tactics for achieving his goal on a shrewd assessment of the opposition, key arguments to be countered and won, carefully calculated sums concerning voting numbers and previous voting patterns. When necessary he did not hesitate to amend draft legislation to appease one or more groups of opponents, nor to make promises concerning future legislation, which could be seen as compromising his intended outcomes. Those strategies have earned him the admiration of many political scientists, but send a shudder through the ranks of those who like their heroes to be more idealistic and single-minded.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"I want to be the president... who helped to end hatred among his fellow men and who promoted love among the people of all races and all regions and all parties."

"The battle against Communism must be joined in South-east Asia with strength and determination to achieve success there - or the United States, inevitably, must surrender the Pacific and take up our defences on our own shores."

"I never trust a man unless I've got his pecker in my pocket."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"He hasn't got the depth of mind nor the breadth of vision to carry great responsibility... Johnson is superficial and opportunistic." Dwight Eisenhower

"He tells so many lies that he convinces himself after a while he's telling the truth. He just doesn't recognise truth or falsehood." Robert F Kennedy

"His brilliant leadership on the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 has earned him a place in the history of civil rights alongside Abraham Lincoln." Edward Kennedy

"People said my language was bad, but Jesus, you should have heard LBJ." Richard M Nixon

MINUTIAE

» His parents didn't give him a name until he was three months old.

» It is sometimes pointed out that every member of his immediate family had the same initials: his wife, Lady Bird Johnson; and his two daughters, Lynda Bird Johnson and Luci Baines Johnson. In fact, Lady Bird's real names were Claudia Alta.

» He owned two beagles, called Him and Her. In 1964 he caused an outcry when he was photographed picking up Him by his ears.

» He was notorious for treating his subordinates badly. According to one (possibly apocryphal) story, a Secret Service agent standing next to him at a urinal once realised, to his horror, that the President was urinating on his leg. "That's all right, son," Johnson allegedly said, "it's my prerogative."

» He was an enthusiastically reckless driver, who enjoyed driving guests at 90mph around his Texas ranch in his Lincoln Continental while drinking whiskey from a paper cup. He also had an amphibious car, and liked to frighten passengers by pretending to drive into a lake by accident.

By Lisa Jardine

RICHARD M NIXON

37th

1969-1974

Richard Nixon is synonymous with the Watergate scandal - one of the greatest crises that the presidency has ever faced. Yet in other respects his time in office was not without its achievements.

It was he who eventually disentangled the US from its disastrous involvement in Vietnam - although not before a bloody and much criticised

widening of the conflict into Cambodia and Laos. (Some 20,000 US servicemen, and innumerable South-east Asians, were killed during the Nixon presidency.)

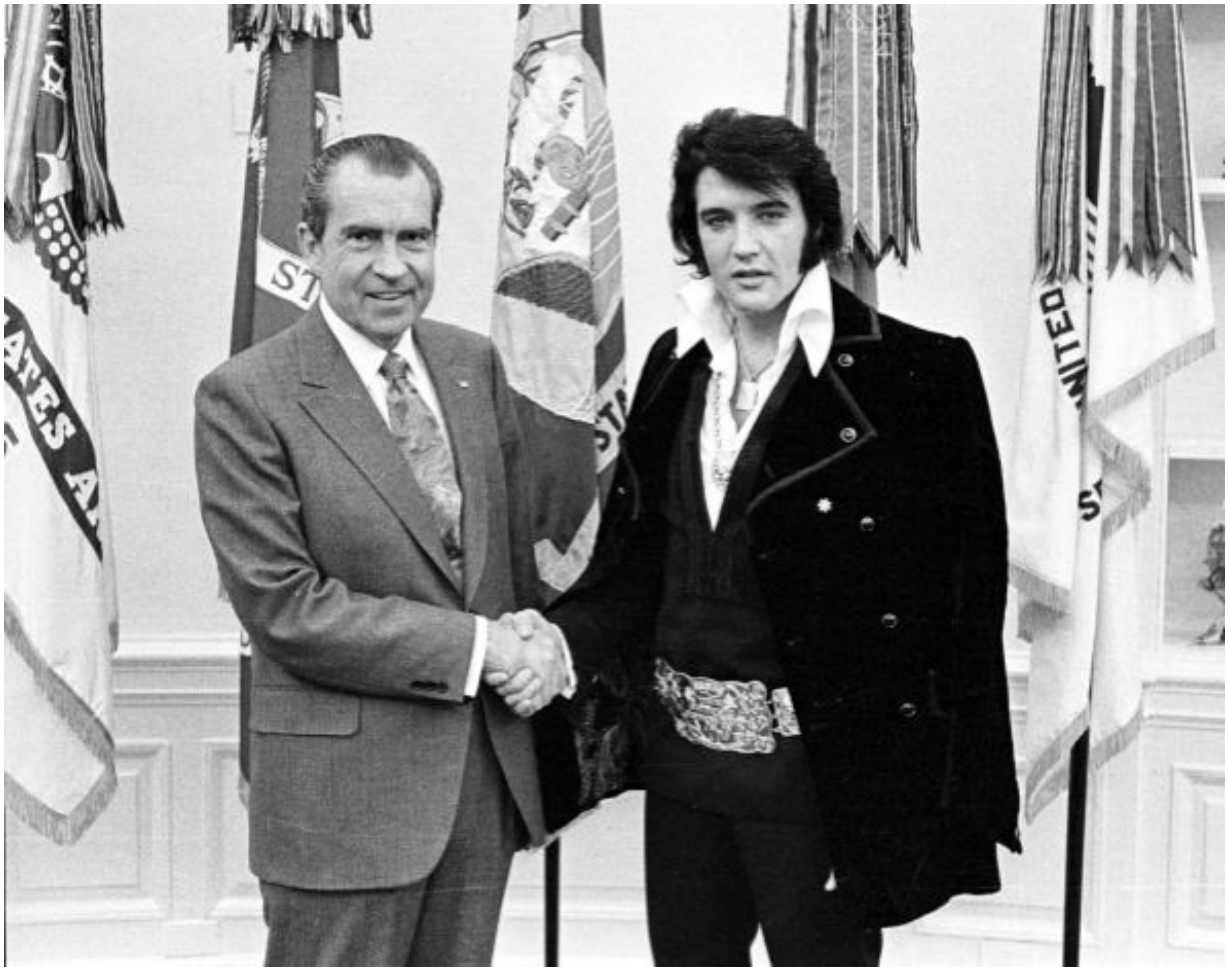
He also contributed significantly to a reduction of tensions with China and the USSR, laying the foundations for diplomatic relations with the former with a visit to Beijing in 1972 and holding a series of summits with Leonid Brezhnev that culminated in the signing of the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. He also encouraged Henry Kissinger, his Secretary of State, to negotiate disengagement agreements between Israel, Egypt and Syria after the Yom Kippur war.

Domestically, he dealt firmly (some would say too firmly) with anti-war protests, and appointed several conservative judges to the Supreme Court, but also undertook what he described as "government reform such as this nation has not witnessed in half a century". He increased social security spending, introduced forms of affirmative action for racial minorities, passed new anti-crime laws and launched a broad environmental programme. He also ended conscription, attempted to put limits on wage and price increases, and took a surprisingly progressive approach to the chronic problems of inflation and unemployment.

His prospects of re-election in 1972 were excellent, and it was surprising that he felt the need for the systematic dirty tricks (carried out by a secret White House team known as "The Plumbers") that led to the Watergate break-in, cover-up and scandal. It has been suggested that he had never got

over his close and controversial defeat in the 1960 election by John F Kennedy, and was determined not to leave anything to chance.

A dark, driven man - a former lawyer who grew up in a strict, working-class Quaker family in southern California - he had been associated with scheming and rule-bending for much of his political career: from his enthusiastic work for the House Committee on Un-American Activities in the late Forties to the time he had to appear on television in 1952 to defend himself against charges of fund-raising irregularities, to the eight years he served as the vice-presidential "bad cop" to the benign President Eisenhower. He believed that the 1960 election had been stolen from him, and he lacked the moral fibre to resist the temptation to steal one back.



President Richard Nixon meets with Elvis Presley on 21 December 1970 at the White House

The denouement is well-known. A bungled burglary at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee headquarters on 17 June 1972 was followed by clumsy attempts by the White House to conceal its involvement, and by the slow, relentless exposure of the cover-up by the Washington Post. Nixon brazened it out until 9 August 1974, when, with impeachment looming, he announced that he would stand down for the good of the nation.

His successor, Gerald Ford (who had only taken over the vice-presidency after the resignation of Spiro Agnew over unrelated corruption charges), issued a presidential pardon for any crimes he might have committed while in office. Twenty other people were eventually convicted of criminal offences relating to Watergate.

Nixon never really seems to have accepted that he had been discredited, and he found a role for himself after his resignation as an expert on foreign affairs. He visited 18 foreign countries in the first decade of his retirement and met with 16 heads of state. He died in 1994.

Opinion remains divided as to whether his was a successful presidency ruined by a single fatal flaw; or whether his resignation actually created a misleadingly positive impression of his achievements, by leaving his successor to sort out the problems that were building up in the economy. The fairest verdict can probably be found in Jimmy Carter's words: "He's disgraced the presidency."

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"America's record in this century has been unparalleled in the world's history for its responsibility, for its generosity, for its creativity and its progress. Let us be proud that our system has produced and provided more freedom and more abundance, more widely shared, than any other in the history of man."

"Once a man has been in politics, once that's been in his life, he will always return if the people want him."

"I played by the rules of politics as I found them."

"When the president does it, that means that it's not illegal."

"A man is not finished when he is defeated. He is finished when he quits."

"I am not a crook."

"What in the [EXPLETIVE DELETED] caused this?"

"I have never been a quitter. To leave office before my term is completed is abhorrent to every instinct in my body. But as President, I must put the interest of America first...

Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow...

By taking this action, I hope that I will have hastened the start of that process of healing which is so desperately needed in America. I regret deeply any injuries that may have been done in the course of the events that led to this decision. I would say only that if some of my judgements were wrong, and some were wrong, they were made in what I believed at the

time to be the best interest of the Nation." (Resignation statement, 9 August 1974)

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"The irony about Nixon is that his pre-Watergate record is a lot better than most liberals realise. It was Nixon, after all, who opened the door to China and who eventually brought the troops home from Vietnam." Thomas P O'Neill

"Richard M Nixon has acted in a manner contrary to his trust as President and subversive of constitutional government, to the great prejudice of the cause of law and justice and to the manifest injury of the people of the United States." House Judiciary Committee, articles of impeachment, 1974

"Richard Nixon is a no-good lying bastard. He can lie out of both sides of his mouth at the same time, and if he ever caught himself telling the truth, he'd lie just to keep his hand in." Harry S Truman

"In 200 years of history, he's the most dishonest president we've ever had. I think he's disgraced the presidency." Jimmy Carter

"It was a Greek tragedy. Nixon was fulfilling his own nature. Once it started it could not end otherwise." Henry A Kissinger

"Nixon's grand mistake was his failure to understand that Americans are forgiving, and if he had admitted error early and apologised to the country, he would have escaped." Bob Woodward

MINUTIAE

» Nixon was the first president to visit all 50 states.

» Accused of financial impropriety while running as Eisenhower's vice-presidential candidate in 1952, he famously defended himself on television, itemising all his assets and explaining that the only one that was a gift was a spaniel puppy called Checkers - which, he tearfully declared, his daughters would keep, come what may. The public loved it.

» On failing to be elected Governor of California in 1962, he seemed to announce his retirement from politics, telling reporters: "You won't have Nixon to kick around any more because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference."

» He was the second Quaker president, after Herbert Hoover. Unlike Hoover - who had observed the Quaker ban on oaths by using the words "I affirm" rather than "I swear" in the presidential - Nixon used the words "I swear".

» As a student, he was known as Gloomy Gus.

» His great-grandfather was killed in the Battle of Gettysburg (and would thus have been among those honoured by Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address).

» In 1970, Elvis Presley visited the White House to talk about drugs - and gave Nixon a gold revolver.

» In his early career as a lawyer, Nixon refused to work on divorce cases, claiming that he was "severely embarrassed by women's confessions of sexual misconduct".

» He was in Dallas on the day that John F Kennedy was shot.

GERALD R FORD

38th

1974-1977

If ever a president deserved a title such as "His Accidency", it was Gerald Ford. A former naval officer and lawyer from Michigan, he had spent the previous 25 years in the House of Representatives (including two terms as Republican Minority Leader) before Richard Nixon called him to the vice-presidency to fill the gap left by Spiro Agnew.

Agnew had resigned over a corruption scandal - involving tax evasion and money-laundering - that had nothing to do with Watergate but came to light, inconveniently, as the same time. When Nixon sought advice from senior Congressional leaders as a to a replacement, Ford's reputation for openness and decency made him an obvious selection. "We gave Nixon no choice but Ford," Carl Albert, the House Speaker, later claimed.

Within 10 months Nixon had resigned as well, and Ford had become the only president never to have been elected to any national office.

He started out with the nation's sympathy - but soon lost it. After a month in office, in the interests of ending the "national nightmare" of Watergate, he granted Richard Nixon a "full, free, and absolute pardon" for any criminal acts he might have committed while president. This decision caused Ford's popularity ratings to plummet: from 72 per cent approval to 49 per cent in a matter of days.

Meanwhile, it was becoming clear that he had inherited a far from healthy economy. Unemployment and inflation were soaring. Ford's response was to call for cuts in government spending. Congress - by then controlled by the Democrats - took the opposite view, calling for increased spending to boost the economy. The result was a conflict that would dominate Ford's administration: in two and a half years in office he vetoed more than 60 major bills.

Abroad, he tried - unsuccessfully - to extend emergency aid to the government of South Vietnam; oversaw the final evacuation of Americans from Vietnam; sent Marines to free the crew of the US merchant ship the Mayaguez when it was seized by the Cambodian regime; helped to bring about the 1975 Sinai Accord - an interim peace agreement between Israel and Egypt; and eased Cold War tensions by signing the 1975 Helsinki Accords, in which the US recognised the Eastern European boundaries established after the Second World War and agreed not to interfere in the internal affairs of Communist bloc nations - and they in turn agreed to respect human rights.

The troubled economy, and continuing revulsion with the Republican party over Watergate, made it unlikely that Ford would be re-elected. Yet, having narrowly beaten Ronald Reagan for the Republican nomination, he made surprising inroads into Jimmy Carter's initially huge lead in the polls. He outperformed Carter in the first of two televised debates, only to blunder in the second, stating that "There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and there never will be under a Ford administration."

Carter won narrowly, and Ford retired for what was to be the longest post-presidency since Herbert Hoover: 29 years and 11 months. He died in 2006. Although he was mocked while in office for his alleged intellectual limitations, it was subsequently widely acknowledged that he had discharged with considerable dignity a great responsibility that he had not sought. If he was not a great president, he is none the less remembered with

honour as an honest man who steadied the presidential ship in one of its darkest hours.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"I assume the presidency under extraordinary circumstances... This is an hour of history that troubles our minds and hurts our hearts."

"A government big enough to give you everything you want is a government big enough to take from you everything you have."

"I believe that truth is the glue that holds government together, not only our government but civilisation itself. That bond, though strained, is unbroken... In all my public and private acts as President, I expect to follow my instincts of openness and candour with full confidence that honesty is always the best policy in the end."

"I'm a Ford, not a Lincoln."

"Our constitution works; our great Republic is a government of laws and not of men."

"Inflation, our public enemy number one, will, unless whipped, destroy our country, our homes, our liberties, our property and finally our national pride as surely as will any well-armed wartime enemy."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"In all the years I sat in the House, I never knew Mr Ford to make a dishonest statement nor a statement part-true and part-false. He never attempted to shade a statement, and I never heard him utter an unkind word." Martha W Griffiths

"For myself and for our Nation, I want to thank my predecessor for all he has done to heal our land." Jimmy Carter

"He's a nice fellow but he spent too much time playing football without a helmet." Lyndon B Johnson

MINUTIAE

» Ford had a reputation for clumsiness, and he never recovered from an incident in 1975 when he tripped over getting out of the presidential jet in Austria.

» He was a talented American football player, who turned down offers to play for the Green Bay Packers and the Chicago Bears.

» He was christened Gerald Rudolf Ford but signed himself Jerry with a “J” and changed the spelling of “Rudolf” to “Rudolph”.

» In April 1942 he appeared on the front cover of Cosmopolitan magazine, posing in his navy uniform with his then girlfriend, the model Phyllis Brown.

» Ford spent much of his retirement playing golf with Bob Hope.

» He married his wife, the former dancer and model Elizabeth “Betty” AnneWarren (nee Bloomer) in 1948. Their two-day honeymoon included watching a football game and attending a Republican rally.

» Betty Ford later became famous for the candour with which she publicly addressed her struggles with breast cancer and alcohol dependency. In 1982 she created the Betty Ford Center for drug and alcohol rehabilitation.

» Lyndon B Johnson is often reported to have said of Ford that “He can’t walk and chew gum at the same time.” What he did say was “He can’t fart and chew gum at the same time.” The US media deliberately misrepresented the remark in the interests of decency.

» Ford was the first vice-president to take office under the 25th Amendment (ratified in 1967), which allows the President to nominate a new Vice-President in the event of a vacancy. Hitherto, the Constitution made no provision for dealing with such eventualities as the resignation or death of a vice-president.

» He and Jimmy Carter eventually became close friends. They agreed that whoever didn’t die first would speak at the other’s funeral - a promise honoured by Jimmy Carter in 2006.

JIMMY CARTER

39th

1977-1981

The main political beneficiary of the Watergate scandal, Carter is widely considered a better man than he was a president. A sincere, well-meaning Southerner - a born-again Christian who had spent much of his life running the family peanut farm in Plains, Georgia - he was already struggling with his public image when he arrived at the White House. Ahead in the polls by

33 points when he received the Democratic nomination, he contrived to be almost neck-and-neck with Gerald Ford by the time of the election. This was attributed to his having alienated conservatives and evangelicals by, for example, admitting to Playboy magazine that "I've committed adultery in my heart many times", or by promising a blanket pardon to Vietnam draft-dodgers.

Anti-Republican feeling left over from Watergate, combined with Ford's own propensity for gaffe-making, allowed Carter to scrape through, but the tone of his presidency had been set. Other presidents could recover from their mistakes (think of Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs debacle); with Carter, everything stuck.

His domestic achievements were modest. (The Republicans later pointed to several hundred campaign promises that, they said, he had not kept.) He pushed through civil service reform to encourage government efficiency, deregulated the trucking and airline industries, and expanded the national park system to protect 103 million acres of Alaskan lands. He also created the Department of Education, bolstered the Social Security system, and appointed record numbers of women, blacks, and Hispanics to Government jobs.

By the end of his administration, he could claim an increase of nearly eight million jobs and a decrease in the budget deficit as a percentage of the GNP. But he failed to prevent inflation and interest rates from reaching near

record highs - and, indeed, caused a short recession when he tried to reduce them.

He also addressed the growing energy crisis, both short-term and long-term. He passed an Energy Bill and created a Department of Energy. But his direct appeal to the American people to reduce their profligate energy consumption fell on deaf ears.

Internationally, Carter angered conservatives by concluding the Panama Canal Treaty - handing control of the canal back to Panama - and in 1978 helped push through the Camp David Accords, which would ultimately lead to a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. He also stood up for human rights in many places, denouncing the trials of Soviet dissidents such as Anatoly Shcharansky, calling for majority rule in Rhodesia, suspending aid to repressive regimes in Argentina, Uruguay and Ethiopia and condemning tyrants such as Fidel Castro and Idi Amin. But the world was left with an impression of well-meaning words that could not be supported by action. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan with impunity; the US could do little beyond tearing up the Salt II arms limitation treaty that Carter had just signed and organising an ill-supported boycott of the Moscow Olympics.

In 1980, he enunciated what became half-heartedly known as the Carter Doctrine, warning the Soviet Union that any attempt "to gain control of the Persian Gulf region" would be repelled with military force. Such words might have sounded more convincing had the US not been so obviously

impotent in the face of the Iranian hostage crisis. Fifty-two US embassy staff had been held hostage in Tehran since 4 November 1979, and neither negotiations nor a disastrous attempt at military rescue in April 1980 had brought their release any nearer.

Ronald Reagan had no difficulty in portraying Carter as an ineffectual leader, and Carter was overwhelmingly defeated in the 1980 election - the first president since 1932 to fail in a bid for re-election. In fact, negotiations for the hostages' release did ultimately succeed. As a final humiliation, however, the Iranian leader, the Ayatollah Khomeini, did not let them go until the day that Carter left office.

In his retirement Carter devoted himself to restoring the fortunes of his peanut farm and, increasingly, to charitable works. He established, and took an active role in, the Carter Presidential Centre in Atlanta, which promotes democracy and human rights around the world, as well as working for the eradication of a wide range of diseases, including Guinea worm disease, river blindness, malaria and trachoma. (Thanks to this work, Guinea worm disease - which blighted more than 3.5 million lives in 1986 - has been all but eradicated.)

Carter has also helped with the building of homes in New York slums through Habitat for Humanity, as well as writing and speaking extensively and lucidly on causes relating to global peace and justice. In 2002 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Few ex-presidents have contributed so much to the world; it was a pity that he was unable to achieve comparable greatness as president.

IN HIS WORDS

"In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns."

"Our American values are not luxuries, but necessities- not the salt in our bread, but the bread itself."

"Let us create together a new national spirit of unity and trust. Your strength can compensate for my weakness."

"We have the heaviest concentration of lawyers on Earth... We have more litigation, but I am not sure that we have more justice."

"War may sometimes be a necessary evil. But no matter how necessary, it is always an evil, never a good. We will not learn how to live together in peace by killing each other's children."

"I've looked on many women with lust."

"The Republican party is a party with a narrow vision, a party that is afraid of the future."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"The Carter administration has managed the extraordinary feat of having, at one and the same time, the worst relations with our allies, the worst relations with our adversaries, and the most serious upheavals in the developing world since the Second World War." Henry Kissinger

"President Carter has simply failed to lead the nation in the direction it must go, and, as a result, America is in dire jeopardy." Gerald Ford

"When it came to understanding the issues of the day, Jimmy Carter was the smartest public official I've ever known." Thomas P O'Neill

MINUTIAE

» Although his full name is James Earl Carter, "Jimmy" is the name under which he was sworn into the presidency.

» When his mother was told that Carter was running for president, her first response was "president of what?"

» He once claimed to have seen a UFO - in 1969, in Georgia - and reported the sighting to the International UFO Bureau.

» One of his fingers was permanently bent as a result of a peanut-farming accident when he was young.

» When he was a student at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis he was often punished by being beaten on the bottom with a serving spoon. His most frequent offence was failing to "wipe that smile off your face", but he was also punished once for refusing to sing "Marching through Georgia" - the anti-Confederate Civil War song.

» He is exceptionally good at speed-reading, and can allegedly read 2,000 words per minute.

RONALD REAGAN

40th

1981-1989

Derided by the intelligentsia while he was in office, Ronald Reagan has subsequently come to be seen, by many, as one of the greater presidents - although opinion remains divided. A former Hollywood actor, he seemed at times to symbolise the worst of modern American politics: as a plausible

mouthpiece whose most solid asset was his on-screen charm. But it turned out that he also possessed other, more traditional presidential virtues, applying a plain man's common sense to the intractable problems of the day.

Born and raised in Illinois, he studied economics and sociology; worked briefly as a radio sports announcer; moved to California (in 1937); and forged a successful acting career. He appeared in 53 films in 20 years - mostly B-movies but including some that were well-reviewed. Initially a liberal, he was active in (and later became president of) the Screen Actors Guild, crossed swords with the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and by the early Sixties had become a supporter of the Republican Party. He had also divorced (in 1949) and (in 1952) remarried, to the actress Nancy Davis.

He campaigned for presidential nominee Barry Goldwater in 1964 and made such a name for himself in doing so that he was urged to stand for the governorship of California. He did, and served as Governor from 1967 to 1975. He narrowly failed to win the Republican nomination for the 1976 presidential election and finally made his successful challenge for the presidency in 1980.

Actor Ronald Reagan and his wife Nancy in 1952

In power, he moved quickly to focus on his declared objective of reducing the influence of the state in everyday life. Dealing skillfully with Congress, he obtained legislation to stimulate economic growth, curb inflation and increase employment. He also embarked upon a course of cutting taxes, especially for the middle classes, while spending heavily to strengthen the military. This led to a large deficit.

An assassination attempt just 69 days into his presidency - which he reacted to with grace and courage - provided a huge boost to his popularity, and probably reduced opposition to his "Reagan revolution". He recovered quickly, although the bullet had passed less than an inch from the 70-year-old's heart.

His supply-side "Reaganomics" led to recession and high unemployment in 1982, followed by a marked and sustained recovery. Inflation, unemployment and federal taxes all fell, and a sense of prosperity returned to the nation. Critics pointed to the growing deficit as the flaw in Reagan's "miracle", but in the short-term the electorate were happy to ignore that. (In the long-term, the US went during the Reagan years from being the largest creditor nation to being the largest debtor nation.) Even when he controversially dismissed striking air traffic controllers who were federal employees, he seemed immune to any lasting political backlash.

It helped that he was perceived to be standing up for America on the international stage. Although he eventually withdrew US Marines from Lebanon, he did authorise the shooting down of "threatening" Libyan fighter planes off the coast of Libya in 1981; sent troops to "liberate" Grenada from its left-wing regime in 1983; offered moral support to the anti-Communist Solidarity movement in Poland; ordered naval escorts into the Persian Gulf to protect the flow of oil during the Iran-Iraq War; upped the stakes in the arms race by introducing the Strategic Defense Initiative; and adopted increasingly strident anti-Soviet rhetoric.

Easily re-elected in 1984, he continued these themes in his second term, authorising the bombing of Libya in 1986, supporting the Contra Resistance in Nicaragua, and describing the Soviet Union as an "evil empire". His interest in Nicaragua backfired, as the Iran-Contra scandal revealed that, with Reagan's approval, US officials had been selling arms to Iran to

encourage the release of US hostages in Lebanon. Some of the proceeds were diverted to anti-Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua. Characteristically, however, Reagan was able to shrug off the scandal.

Meanwhile, his robust approach to détente yielded dividends. After a series of dramatic meetings with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, a treaty was negotiated that would eliminate intermediate-range nuclear missiles. Perhaps no less importantly, the personal relationship he established with Gorbachev made the mutual incomprehension and mistrust of, for example, Khrushchev and Kennedy seem a distant memory. Reagan increased US defence spending by 35 per cent during his two terms, in pursuit of "peace through strength". Many liberals were horrified by this approach, but it seems, in the end, to have worked.

Ronald Reagan talking to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev during a two-day summit between the superpowers in Geneva, November 1985

Other features of the Reagan presidency included a reduction in non-military spending on such projects as Medicaid, food stamps and federal education; a tightening of the rules on social security for the disabled; and an overhaul of the income tax code which eliminated many deductions and exempted millions of people with low incomes. Reagan also poured billions of dollars - to no obvious effect - into the war on drugs that Richard M Nixon had initiated in 1971.

By the end of his administration, Reagan's popularity ratings were still high, and the US was enjoying - by conventional measures - its longest recorded period of peacetime prosperity. He was the first president since Dwight D Eisenhower to serve two full terms in office, and the election of his vice-president as his successor may be taken as the electorate's expression of approval.

He was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1994 and died at home in Bel-Air, California, 10 years later. His body was taken to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, where over a three-day period more than 100,000 people came to see his coffin; a further 100,000 viewed it when it was taken to Washington. His state funeral - the first for a US president for more than 30 years - was packed with world leaders. Rightly or wrongly, he was seen as an American hero.

IN HIS WORDS

"The defence policy of the United States is based on a simple premise: the United States does not start fights. We will never be an aggressor."

"Politics is supposed to be the second oldest profession. I have come to realise that it bears a very close resemblance to the first."

"Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction."

"I am not worried about the deficit. It is big enough to take care of itself."

"Honey, I forgot to duck." (After being shot)

"My fellow Americans, I'm pleased to tell you today that I've signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes." (Joking during a microphone check)

"It's true hard work never killed anyone, but I figure, why take the chance?"

"What I'd really like to do is go down in history as the president who made Americans believe in themselves again."

"I do not believe in a fate that will fall on us no matter what we do. I believe in a fate that will fall on us if we do nothing."

"General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalisation: come here to this gate. Mr Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

"As soon as I get home to California, I plan to lean back, kick up my feet and take a long nap. Come to think of it, things won't be that different at all."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"Let us above all thank President Reagan for ending the West's retreat from world responsibility, for restoring the pride and leadership of the United States, and for giving the West back its confidence. He has left America stronger, prouder, greater than ever before." Margaret Thatcher

"Reaganites say that Reagan has lifted our 'spirits' - correct if they mean he led the nation in a drunken world-record spending binge while leaving millions of American workers, consumers and pollution victims defenceless." Ralph Nader

"A madman, an imbecile and a bum." Fidel Castro

"A triumph of the embalmer's art." Gore Vidal

MINUTIAE

» He and his wife, Nancy, appeared in the 1957 film, Hellcats of the Navy.

» He was the only president to be divorced, the only president to be knighted (he received an honorary knighthood from the Queen in 1989), and the only president to have appeared in a shirt advertisement or worked as a stand-up comic. He did the latter briefly in Las Vegas in 1954.

» He was the oldest man to be elected president, taking office at the age of 69. He was also the first president to die in the 21st century, and the first president elected in a year ending in zero not to die in office.

» In 1940 he was voted "Most Nearly Perfect Male Figure" by the University of California.

» He submitted the first trillion dollar budget to Congress.

» After the assassination attempt of 1981, Nancy Reagan hired an astrologer, Joan Quigley, to help her to plan her husband's schedule.

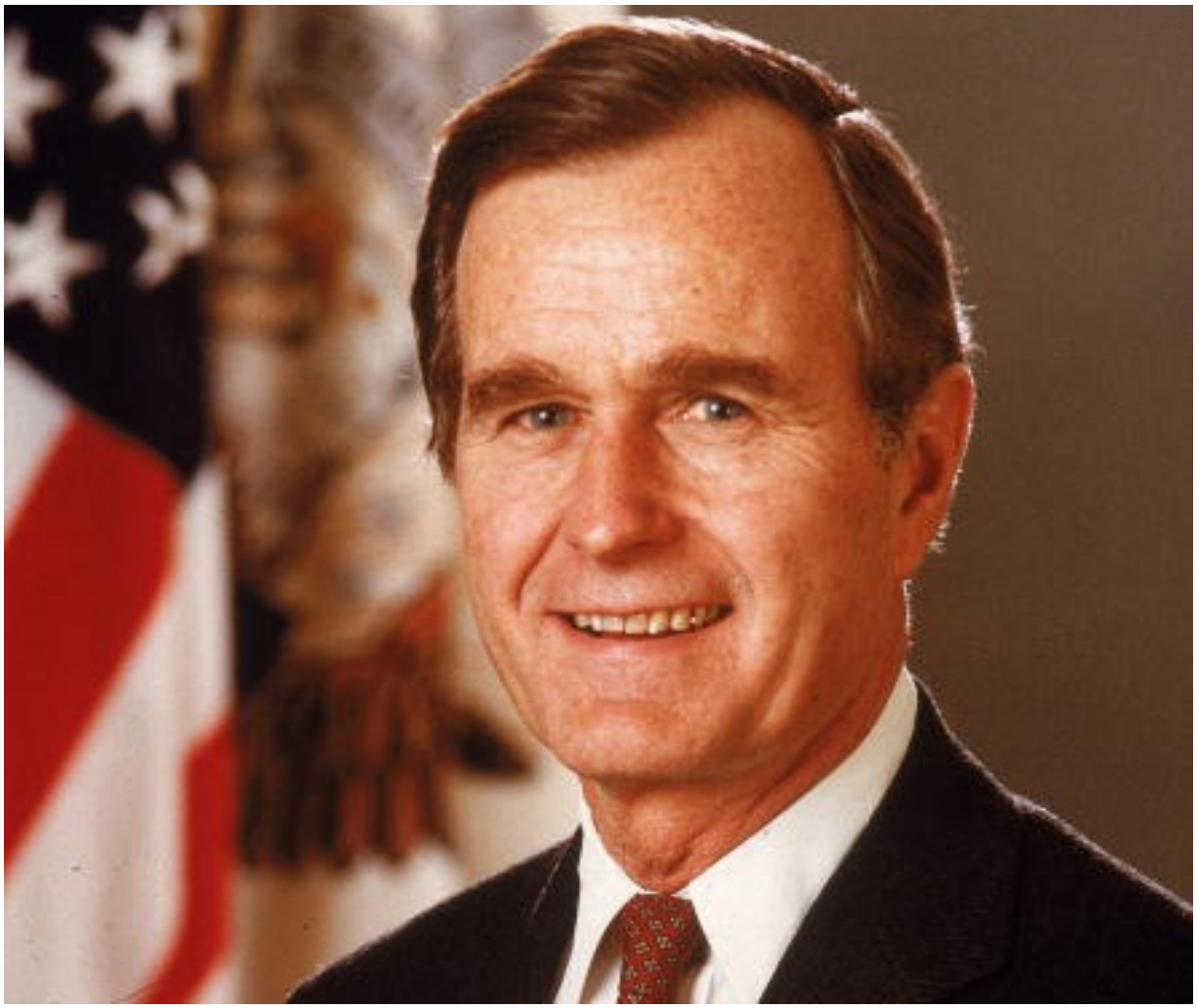
» He used to call Nancy "Mommy".

» Poor eyesight prevented him from fighting in the Second World War, so he made Army films instead. One of these can be seen in the 1999 film, American Beauty, being watched by the Fitts family.

GEORGE H W BUSH

41st

1989-1993



The four years of George Herbert Walker Bush's presidency were among the most momentous of the 20th century, including the fall of the Eastern Bloc and the Berlin Wall, the unification of Germany, the first Gulf War,

and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Bush may have helped usher the Cold War to an end, but he was largely viewed as a pragmatic caretaker president - a safe pair of hands - and he ultimately lacked the vision required to build a new world order in place of the old. He himself disarmingly confessed to having a problem with what he called "the vision thing" in 1988. The sad thing was, he was right.

Born in Massachusetts in 1924 and brought up in Connecticut, Bush began a life of privilege and comfort as the son of financier and Republican senator Prescott Bush. He was schooled at the Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, which groomed him for Yale, but the Second World War set him on a different course. At 18, he became the youngest pilot in the US navy, flying 58 combat missions against the Japanese, and received the Distinguished Flying Cross for bravery. On his return in 1945 he married Barbara Pierce (who shared her ancestry with the 14th president, Franklin Pierce). They produced six children, George W, Pauline Robinson ("Robin", who died of leukaemia in 1953), Jeb, Neil, Marvin and Dorothy.

After the war, Bush Sr took up his place at Yale, where he was elected president of his fraternity, captained the Yale baseball team, and like his father, was initiated into the Skull and Bones secret society. He graduated in economics in 1948, and moved to Texas to make his fortune as an oil man. His long career in public life included service as a congressman; ambassador to the United Nations; chairman of the Republican National Committee; US envoy to China; and director of the CIA.

The Bush family in front of their house in Kennebunkport, Maine, 1986

Bush first sought the Republican nomination for president in 1980, but when that campaign failed he became Ronald Reagan's running-mate and then vice-president. When he ran again in 1988, no sitting vice-president had been voted into the White House since Martin Van Buren in 1837. Reagan's popularity was high; the economy appeared to be in good shape (although "Reaganomics" had spawned sizeable deficits which would in due course come home to roost), employment was high and, with Reagan's blessing, Bush ran with ease against the liberal Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis.

In his inauguration speech, he spoke of making the US a "kinder and gentler nation", adding: "in man's heart, if not in fact, the day of the dictator is over." Happy to maintain the status quo on the domestic front ("Read my lips: no new taxes", he had said in 1988 - a promise he was later to break), Bush concentrated on foreign policy, namely dismantling the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe and overthrowing Panama's corrupt leader, Manuel Noriega.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin and George Bush listening to US National Security Advisor Brent Scowcrof during a boat trip down the Severn River in Maryland, June 1992

When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990, fears that Iraqi forces would push on into Saudi Arabia, the world's largest oil producer,

drove Bush to demonstrate the full extent of his diplomatic and military clout by organising an unprecedented coalition for a counter offensive, backed by the United Nations. In 1991, he sent in 425,000 American troops, joined by 118,000 troops from allied nations, and, after weeks of air and missile bombardment, the land operation dubbed Operation Desert Storm routed Iraq's million-man army in little more than 100 hours.

Northern Kurdish leaders took heart from American statements that the US would support an uprising, and began fighting in the hope of toppling Saddam once and for all. But Bush decided he did not want to get bogged down in conquering and then governing Iraq, and withdrew his troops. The day of the dictator was not, in this instance, over. Saddam Hussein remained in power to wreak murderous revenge on the Kurdish fighters, and Bush's inauguration speech began to ring hollow.

At home, the US had slipped into recession, and in 1990 Bush was forced to break his campaign promise and raise taxes. The decision alienated conservative Republicans, and, come the 1992 election, many other voters began to wonder if the Democratic candidate Bill Clinton might be better placed to restore prosperity.

George H.W. Bush throws out the ceremonial first pitch to Jed Lowrie of the Houston Astros, Texas 2015

The end of the Cold War meant that foreign policy, which had been Bush's strength, was no longer so important. His domestic record was thin: aside from pushing the Clean Air Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act - an important piece of civil liberties legislation - through Congress, Bush had failed to initiate many new laws. He ran a lacklustre campaign in 1992 (hampered by a strong third-party candidate, Ross Perot), and the younger, more energetic Bill Clinton romped to victory.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"I'm a conservative, but I'm not a nut about it."

"Read my lips: no new taxes."

"I stand for anti-bigotry, anti-Semitism, and anti-racism."

"A new breeze is blowing, and a world refreshed by freedom seems reborn; for in man's heart, if not in fact, the day of the dictator is over. The totalitarian era is passing, its old ideas blown away like leaves from an ancient, lifeless tree."

"Iraq must withdraw from Kuwait completely, immediately, and without condition. Kuwait's legitimate government must be restored. The security and stability of the Persian Gulf must be assured. And American citizens abroad must be protected. Out of these troubled times, our fifth objective - a new world order - can emerge: a new era - freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace."

"Remember Lincoln, going to his knees in times of trial and the Civil War and all that stuff. You can't be. And we're blessed. So don't feel sorry for - don't cry for me, Argentina." (Attempting to describe his "New England Values" during a 1992 speech).

"The day will come - and it is not far off - when the legacy of Lincoln will finally be fulfilled at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, when a black man or

woman will sit in the Oval Office. When that day comes, the most remarkable thing about it will be how naturally it occurs."

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"If ignorance ever goes to $40 a barrel, I want the drilling rights on George Bush's head." Jim Hightower, agricultural commissioner of Texas

"The President saw a chance to take on the two central problems of our age - the struggle for freedom and the threat of nuclear war - and he seized it. No apologies for that." James Baker

"George is a damn good guy, but he doesn't come through well. It's a case of choking. It takes 11 hours to get George ready for an off-the-cuff remark." Robert Strauss

"For all the credit that President Bush deserves for his magnificent leadership after the Iraqi invasion, the truth is that his administration not only resisted imposing sanctions on Iraq before 2 August, but, by giving Mr Hussein the impression he could invade his defenceless neighbour with impunity, made the aggression more likely." Stephen J Solarz

MINUTIAE

» George Bush threw up into the lap of Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa in the middle of a state dinner in Japan in 1992, then slid off his

chair. To this day, the word " Bushusuru" (to "do the Bush thing") is slang for vomiting in Japanese.

» He was the first incumbent vice-president to be elected as president since Martin van Buren in 1837.

» He is the only president to have been director of the CIA.

» After losing the 1992 election, Bush retired to Texas and - to prove that "old guys can still do stuff" - undertook a number of parachute jumps, well into his seventies. He had first jumped during the Second World War, when his bomber was hit by anti-aircraft fire south of Japan. Bush managed to bail out of his burning plane but his two crewmen were killed.

» He was the youngest pilot in the US navy during the Second World War.

» When he headed west to make his fortune in oil, he moved into an apartment in Odessa, Texas with his wife and young son George W, where they shared a bathroom with a mother-daughter prostitute duo.

BILL CLINTON
42nd - THE GREAT SEDUCER

1993-2001

Inconveniently, historical eras do not exactly follow the calendar. In reality, the 20th century ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, while the 21st century did not truly begin until two hijacked planes smashed into the World Trade Center on 11 September, 2001. In the intervening years, still mostly untroubled by the "war on terror", America moved from

superpower victorious in the Cold War to unchallenged hyper-puissance, in the phrase of a French Foreign Minister.

A political scientist named Francis Fukuyama wrote a book entitled The End of History and the Last Man about the unfolding global triumph of US-inspired liberal market democracy, and not a few believed him. And for most of that in-between decade, William Jefferson Clinton was President of the United States.

Bill Clinton was the third youngest President in American history, and the first baby boomer. For many, he embodied the characteristics of that pampered generation: the spoiled child's sense of entitlement, a self-centredness verging on narcissism, a proneness to moral relativism, and a habit of blaming others for his own failings. His formative experiences were not the hardships and sacrifices of the Great Depression or the Second World War, but the rebellious Sixties and the bitterly contested war in Vietnam.

Clinton was the first Democrat to serve two full terms in the White House since Franklin D Roosevelt. He was among the founders of the New Democrats, who shifted the party to the centre after the liberal tilt that had made it virtually unelectable for much of the Seventies and Eighties. Along with Tony Blair in Britain, who in some ways resembled him, Clinton was a leading proponent of the "Third Way", blending the discipline of capitalism with the safety-net of social democracy. His two administrations were marked by notable legislative achievements. They were a time of peace and

prosperity, culminating in the first federal budget surplus in over 30 years - and, of course, lurid scandal.

But in another sense they were no more than a parenthesis, an eight-year interlude in a long period of conservative domination of American politics. For better or worse, the final quarter of the 20th century and the start of the 21st will probably be remembered as the age of Ronald Reagan. Nothing in 2008 stung Clinton as much as Barack Obama's remark during his battle with Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination, that Reagan had been the most "consequential" of recent US presidents. Bill Clinton never liked to yield centre stage to anyone.

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The 42nd President of the United States entered the world as William Jefferson Blythe III, in a small southern Arkansas town called Hope. His father, a travelling salesman, was killed in a car accident three months before he was born. His mother, Virginia Blythe, remarried, and at the age of six young Billy moved with the family and his stepfather, a car dealer named Roger Clinton, to Hot Springs. Later on Hope would provide a perfect point of departure in the emerging Bill Clinton political narrative. But it was Hot Springs an hour away to the north, the louche and racy holiday resort and gambling town where he grew up, whose character better reflected his own.

The young Clinton not only excelled at school: he seemed to be at the centre of everything; in the words of an old classmate, "he just took over the place."

Democratic vice-presidential and presidential candidates Al Gore and Bill Clinton, with their wives, Tipper and Hillary, say goodbye to supporters on 17 July 1992 before boarding a bus in New York

In 1963 he was picked as one of Arkansas's two representatives to Boys Nation, an annual civic training event for the most promising high-schoolers, whose summer programme included a visit to meet President Kennedy at the White House. A photo catches the moment when the young man not quite 17, awe-struck but grinning, shoulders his way to the front

and shakes the hand of the President as he's leaving. The picture speaks volumes about Clinton: his determination to squeeze the utmost out of every opportunity, the ambition he wore on his sleeve, and of course his intended destination. From that moment he wanted to be president, and to his friends he was not shy about the fact.

That was why he applied only to Georgetown University, close to the political action in Washington DC. When he left Georgetown in 1968, the future politician was already emerging. Clinton was a relentless networker, starting to put in place that impressive network of acquaintances later known simply as FoBs (Friends of Bill). He was gregarious, intelligent and funny, and women seemed to adore him. It was no surprise when he was selected to be a Rhodes Scholar, nor that this pushy but charming student with the pronounced Arkansas drawl became a focal point of the group.

Strobe Talbott, a well connected graduate of Yale and a Russian specialist, said later that he first realised his colleague's "raw political talent" during the five-day crossing to Europe in October 1968 on the SS United States. Talbott would room with Clinton at Oxford, and become an FoB of the innermost circle, serving decades later as Clinton's deputy Secretary of State. However a dark cloud hung over those two years abroad - the likelihood that Clinton, and most of the others, would be sent to fight in Vietnam, a war he bitterly opposed. Clinton managed to avoid the draft, by pulling strings to secure a place in a reserve officer training programme, that he eventually never took up. Technically, the manoeuvrings were legal.

But they would return to haunt him at a critical moment in his political career.

In 1970, Clinton left Oxford a year early, departing the university where, in the immortal words of the New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd, "he didn't inhale, didn't get drafted, and didn't get a degree." By then he had won a place at Yale Law School, where he did take a degree in 1973. Even more important, it was at Yale that he met a female student one year ahead of him named Hillary Rodham. In 1975 the couple married, and five years later their only child, Chelsea, was born.

Clinton's political ascent was rapid, helped by the fact that instead of taking a well-paid job in the highly competitive environment of the East Coast, he returned to the comparative backwater of Arkansas. After an unsuccessful Congressional run in 1974, he was elected attorney general of Arkansas in 1976, and two years later won the governorship. At 32, he was the youngest state governor in the US. Unfortunately, he would soon be the youngest ex-governor.

A row over a motor vehicle tax did not help, nor did anger over the rioting and escape of Cuban refugees who were being housed at Fort Chaffee in north western Arkansas. Nor did the conservative local population appreciate Hillary's insistence on using her maiden name in business. In 1980 Clinton was defeated in his bid for a second two-year term. It was the last election he would ever lose. In 1982 he won back the governorship, this time for good, until he left for higher things in Washington in January 1993.

During the Eighties, Clinton became increasingly well known in the Democratic party nationally, as an effective governor (and no less effective a self-promoter). But he also developed a reputation for womanising and a tendency to hang around with over-colourful people - among them Jim McDougal, a local entrepreneur and hustler who in 1978 persuaded the Clintons to join him in a property venture called Whitewater.

Whitewater would return to bedevil the couple when Bill became President. Of more immediate concern however was his proneness to stray from the marital bed. That the governor had a "zipper problem" was an open secret in Little Rock and beyond, and it was the fear of "bimbo eruptions" that led Clinton to drop plans for a Presidential run in 1988. Instead he was chosen to deliver the prestigious keynote address at the Democratic convention in Atlanta which nominated his fellow governor, Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts. In one of the few truly awful speeches Clinton gave, he droned on for what seemed hours, eliciting ironic cheers when he finally said "in conclusion...". But, as always, he bounced back. Using the centrist Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) as his vehicle, Clinton became a leader of the party's moderate wing, and in 1992 he took the presidential plunge.

At first his candidacy seemed a long shot, given the popularity of George HW Bush, the Republican incumbent, in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. But Clinton soon emerged as the class of the Democratic field. Then, as he campaigned for the crucial New Hampshire primary, double disaster struck.

First a Little Rock nightclub singer named Gennifer Flowers produced tapes showing she had had an affair with the governor; then The Wall Street Journal published letters and documents chronicling his machinations to escape the Vietnam draft. His bid for the White House seemed doomed. But in a remarkable effort, of sheer will as much as anything else, he climbed back from the abyss. When the results came in, Clinton finished a respectable second to Paul Tsongas. The legend of "the Comeback Kid" was born.

In the end he won the nomination comfortably, and his choice of Al Gore, a young fellow southerner, as his running mate created a real excitement at the New York convention that summer. But Clinton owed at least as much to the third party candidacy of Ross Perot, the Texan billionaire businessman, in his ultimate victory over the elder Bush. The electoral college margin was a convincing 370 to 168, but in the popular vote Clinton prevailed over Bush only by 43 per cent to 37 per cent. Under America's winner-take-all system, Perot won 19 per cent of the popular vote but not a single delegate to the electoral college.

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The new administration got off to a shambolic start. As always Clinton left key decisions - in this case his choice of top White House staffers and cabinet appointees - to the last moment. He allowed his first few weeks in office to be dominated by a needless controversy over gays in the military,

depriving him of the traditional honeymoon enjoyed by incoming presidents.

The arcane Whitewater affair more than a decade earlier was also a growing distraction. No matter that the Clintons lost money on the land deal. Never, it might be said, has so much been written about what amounted to so little. But the special prosecutor's investigation into Whitewater set in motion a chain of events that would almost cost Clinton the presidency. "Travelgate" was another scandal, this one when Hillary Clinton fired several long-term staffers at the White House travel office, allegedly to provide work for Clinton cronies from Arkansas. No blow, however, was heavier than the tragic suicide in July 1993 of Vince Foster, the President's boyhood friend and deputy White House counsel. Foster, who also handled the Whitewater paperwork, had become clinically depressed by the brutal rough and tumble of Washington politics. His death therefore was not only a bitter personal loss for the Clintons and the rest of the tight-knit Arkansas group who had moved with them to the capital. It was also grist to the mill of conspiracy theorists, who depicted the couple as a modern Lord and Lady Macbeth, ready to use intimidation, drug money profits, even murder, to seize and consolidate power.

The accusations were nonsensical - but also a measure of how polarising the Clintons were; how they could drive otherwise sane people to irrational fury. Alas, they helped keep in business a string of special prosecutors, the last and most notorious of them Kenneth Starr, whose probe into Whitewater gradually expanded to Clinton's private life - and ultimately led

to the exposure of his trysts with Monica Lewinsky. It was hard to disagree with Hillary Clinton when she complained of a "vast right-wing conspiracy" against her husband, orchestrated by political enemies, funded by a few conservative multi-millionaires, and propagated by hostile media outlets - in Britain as well as the US.

Given the media battering and the rolling inquisition by prosecutors, it was remarkable that any governing was done at all. But Clinton's first two years were reasonably productive, producing a handgun control bill, the NAFTA trade agreement, a bill obliging employers to allow workers unpaid leave for family or medical reasons. Most importantly he secured passage, without a single Republican vote, for an economic package curbing government spending and raising taxes on the very rich. Many accused Clinton and his economic team of being in thrall to the bond market. But the measure worked, helping create a virtuous cycle of declining budget deficits, lower interest rates and faster growth, and the longest period of sustained expansion enjoyed by the US since the Second World War.

In foreign affairs too, the new administration overcame early missteps, most notably the collapse of the US mission in Somalia. Clinton's granting of a visa to the Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams in January 1994 enraged the British, but it would prove a key moment on the long path to a settlement in Northern Ireland. After a shaky start, the US took a more assertive line to halt the bloodshed in the former Yugoslavia, eventually brokering the 1995 Dayton Accords that ended the Bosnian war.

But these achievements could not prevent disaster at the 1994 mid-term elections, the low point of his eight years in office. That summer an ambitious, and grossly over-complicated, health care reform plan elaborated in secrecy by a working group headed by the First Lady met an ignominious end on Capitol Hill. Meanwhile the Democrats who had long held control of both Houses were plagued by scandals. In November the Republicans, led by Newt Gingrich, seized control of Congress, in the House alone making an astounding net gain of 54 seats. The presidency was "still relevant," a crestfallen Clinton told the press. And he had learnt his lesson. Big government was out and "triangulation" - in plain language, stealing policies from his opponents when it suited him - was in. The shift was sealed in August 1996 when the President signed into law a reform act that jettisoned many of the left's articles of faith about welfare, and in his words "ending welfare as we know it."

Long before that, however, Clinton had once again proved himself the Comeback Kid. The process began with his response to the May 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, committed by home-grown terrorists, in which 168 people died. His speeches were a reminder of his uncanny ability to empathise, and produce the words, and deeds, to fit a moment of national grief and trauma. But the Republicans gave him more than passing help. Not for the last time, the impetuous and egotistical Gingrich overplayed his hand, allowing himself to be lured into a showdown over the budget. The result was a partial government shutdown in late 1995 for which the Republican leadership in Congress was blamed.

Clinton was also fortunate in having a weak opponent when he sought a second term in 1996. Bob Dole was a war hero and a lion of the Senate, but he was a poor campaigner and at 73 would have been the oldest first-elected president in history. The outcome was a foregone conclusion, but again, Perot's presence on the ballot denied Clinton the mandate of an outright majority he coveted. In the electoral college he won by 379-159, a virtually identical margin to his victory in 1992. But Perot's 8 per cent of the popular vote meant Clinton fell just short of 50 per cent.

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Unbeknown to anyone at the time, the budget shutdown also coincided with events that would bring Clinton into personal disgrace and to the brink of political disaster. On November 15 and 17, during the shutdown's first phase, the President engaged in his first sexual trysts with a 22-year-old White House intern named Monica Lewinsky. There were nine such encounters in all, the last of them in March 1997. The crisis however only exploded in January 1998 when it emerged that Lewinsky had told a confidante named Linda Tripp about her relationship, and that Tripp had secretly recorded their conversations.

Of the many allegations of sexual misconduct against Bill Clinton, the most persistent and troublesome were those of a 1991 encounter with Paula Jones, an Arkansas state employee, in which she said the then Governor had exposed himself. Lewinsky's name surfaced during legal proceedings when Jones's lawyers sought corroborating evidence of Clinton's conduct. In

January 1998, after Lewinsky had submitted an affidavit in the Jones case denying any physical relationship with Clinton, Tripp gave the tapes to the prosecutor Kenneth Starr, who then widened his Whitewater investigation to include possible perjury by Lewinsky and Clinton in the Jones case. She also persuaded Lewinsky not to have dry cleaned the notorious blue dress that was stained, as DNA tests would prove, with presidential semen.

Thus, when Clinton denied under oath that he had had sex with Lewinsky, and then told a nationally televised press conference that "I did not have sexual relations with that woman," he was trapped. Both he and Lewinsky went before a grand jury. She became a national celebrity, while Clintonian evasions like "it depends what the meaning of 'is' is" became global catch-phrases. The Clinton marriage was once again under excruciating public scrutiny, and most serious of all, the Republican Congress voted to impeach him for perjury and obstruction of justice.

The attempt was the first at a presidential impeachment since Andrew Johnson in 1868. There was never much chance that the Republicans would secure the two-thirds majority in the Senate required to convict; in the event, after a five-week trial presided over by William Rehnquist, the chief justice, Clinton was acquitted in February 1999 on both counts. But as a result of the Jones/Lewinsky affair he suffered the further indignity of having his Arkansas law licence suspended for five years, and of being barred for life from pleading cases before the Supreme Court.

President Clinton briefs reporters on the NATO bombings in Kososvo, 5 April 1999

Astonishingly, Clinton once more emerged from a potential disaster, if anything, strengthened. By pressing impeachment his opponents had again overreached, misjudging public sympathy for the president. Democrats actually gained seats in the 1998 mid-term elections, and his popularity held firm at over 60 per cent. On the foreign front, the US led Nato in an air war to drive Yugoslav forces from Kosovo, while the president tried to build on the 1993 Oslo agreement to secure a final Middle East peace. This most intense and ambitious push by a US president for a Palestinian/Israeli deal continued until almost the last day of Clinton's second term. Though it failed, for reasons still disputed, it was the closest the two sides have ever come to a settlement. In November 2000, he became the first president to

visit Vietnam since the end of the war in which, three decades earlier, he had managed not to fight.

His most impressive legacy of all was the economy. Even though by the end of his second term the dotcom bubble had burst, Clinton left the country much better off than he found it. Its finances above all were immeasurably stronger, with the first federal budget surplus since Richard Nixon's time. But then true to form, he gratuitously spoiled everything with his final act in office, as he pardoned the fugitive financier (and hefty Democratic donor) Marc Rich, to near universal outcry. Until the very end, Bill Clinton was a baffling, maddening mix of talent and tackiness.

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Not for nothing have TV pundits, eminent authors and bar-room bores alike psychoanalysed the 42nd president more thoroughly and relentlessly than any of his predecessors, living or dead. He is a fascinating subject, a man of giant appetites in every department - not just sexual, but in terms of physical and mental nourishment as well. Tales of the younger Clinton's devouring of fast food are legion. But few other presidents too have consumed ideas, facts and issues as voraciously. His intellectual curiosity is enormous.

Sometimes he seems to seek risk, as if bored by what is commonplace, predictable and safe. On the Edge is the title of an excellent biography of the man, which captures the recklessness in him that could be self-

destructive. Clinton was a politician who could make difficult things simple, yet turn a routine task into an ordeal. Yet he survived, helped by an astonishing ability to compartmentalise. One side of his brain might be working out a legal defence strategy, while the other fine-tuned a bombing onslaught against Saddam Hussein.

Greasing this remarkable human machine was a charm to which very few were impervious. When he entered a room, the magnetism was tangible. Talk to him, and he made his interlocutor feel the most important person in the world, whose ideas were the only ones that mattered. That is why, after meeting him, many people thought they had persuaded him of their case, only to be disappointed later. Thus his reputation as a master manipulator. "Bill Clinton would rather climb a tree to tell a lie than stand on the ground to tell the truth," an Arkansas official once said. A union leader who dealt with him made the point more crudely, that he could "shake your hand and piss down your leg at the same time."

But these same qualities made him a dazzling campaigner in his prime. Before a large gathering his ear for the audience's mood was unfailing. As a retail politician he was if anything better still, as anyone who has watched him work a rope line can testify.

By ordinary standards, Clinton the politician was grossly undisciplined. Punctuality might be the courtesy of kings, but not of Bill Clinton. Most things he did tended to happen at the last moment - or later. On one occasion he finished a State of the Union message in his limousine in the

way to the Capitol. On another, the wrong speech was fed into the teleprompter, but Clinton simply adlibbed until the right text was found. No one noticed, of course. The cleverest boy in the class could talk himself out of any jam. There was, and remains, a shamelessness about him too. A majority of Americans thought the impeachment proceedings were ridiculous - that lying to conceal personal sexual misbehaviour was not remotely comparable with lying about the Watergate break-in (or, for that matter, about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq). But a fair number also thought he should have resigned of his own accord, recognising the disgrace he had brought upon himself.

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History's verdict on Bill Clinton is hard to predict. Presidential reputations are notoriously fickle. Today, he is generally placed in the middle of the pack: by no means unsuccessful, but not a truly important figure to rank alongside Washington, Lincoln, FDR, Harry Truman or even Reagan in the presidential pantheon. Great leaders are forged by great crises: where would Churchill be without Hitler and the Second World War? Clinton's fortune, or misfortune, was to be America's president in a comparatively crisis-free era, when the Soviet Union, its ideological and military rival, was no more, and terrorism was still regarded as a criminal, not a political, threat.

In fact Clinton's record against terrorism was not bad. After the World Trade Center bombing of 1993, and especially the African embassy bombings five years later, he was alive to the danger - certainly more alive

than Bush in the months before 9/11. On at least one occasion, he ordered missile strikes against targets in Afghanistan that with a bit of luck might have killed Osama bin Laden.

How would a President Clinton have reacted to the attacks against New York and Washington? Like his successor, he would surely have gone to war against the Taliban when they refused to hand bin Laden over. But it is all but inconceivable that he would have attacked Iraq in March 2003. True, he had bombed Saddam in December 1998 in Operation Desert Storm (which some considered a "Wag The Dog" attempt to divert public attention from impeachment) and also that year signed into law a bill calling for regime change in Iraq.

But Clinton's approach to foreign policy was usually cautious and incremental. His long effort to secure an Israeli/Palestinian peace had taught him the hideous complexities of the Middle East that Bush and the neo-conservatives could never understand. And if vice-presidents are figured into the equation, Al Gore - a passionate opponent of the war - was as far from Hobbesian Dick Cheney as could be imagined. Indeed, Clinton's consistent popularity abroad in part reflects a belief that had he still been in the White House, the Iraq debacle would not have happened. It also suggests that the surge in anti-Americanism during the Bush years was ad hominem, and not a fundamental rejection of the country and the ideals it stood for. The joyous reaction in Europe and the Muslim world to Obama's election only underlines the point.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the Lewinsky affair, he was highly popular when he left office, with an approval rating of over 60 per cent. His reputation only improved in the light of what came after, as the Bush presidency crumbled, disaster followed disaster, and the number of Americans who believed the US was "on the wrong track" reached unprecedented levels. Increasingly, the Clinton era appears a happy, almost carefree time of well-being. A decade on, the Lewinsky affair seems less a disgrace than a harmless divertissement for the nation. If only Bush's crises had been about sex.

Of late, however, his stock has weakened slightly. It has become clear that the seeds of today's financial and economic crisis were planted during the Clinton administration, by the latter's determination to expand home ownership come what may, and its refusal to impose tighter regulation on new-fangled and, it now emerges, extremely destabilising financial instruments. Clinton may have inherited his Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan, but the Treasury Secretaries Robert Rubin and Larry Summers, who believed markets should be given their head, were his own appointments. Presidents are quick to claim credit for economic success on their watch. They must therefore also take some of the blame when things go wrong.

Nor did Clinton distinguish himself during the long struggle between his wife and Obama for the 2008 nomination. The man once described as America's "first black president" indulged in some cheap shots against Obama, and by the end the "Bill Factor" was probably a contributor to

Hillary Clinton's defeat. She made mistakes of her own, notably her neglect of the caucus states where Obama scooped up delegates, and she had the misfortune to find herself up against one of the best-run campaigns of the modern era.

In the background, though, the shadow of her husband always loomed. He might joke about becoming the "First Laddie", but that prospect surely disturbed some voters, and not just Republican voters. Bill's exact role in a Hillary administration was unclear, but no one expected that he would quietly fade away. At the very least, the soap opera-cum-psychodrama of the Clinton marriage would once again be all over the front pages. And finally, did Americans really want to make over their republican government to rival, quasi-monarchical dynasties? Had Hillary won and served two terms, a Bush or a Clinton would have occupied the White House for 28 straight years (with Bush's younger brother, Jeb, waiting in the wings for 2016). This fear, too, one suspects, played a part in Obama's victory.

President Clinton speaks with Palestinian Chairman Yasser Arafat during summit meetings at Camp David, MD, July 2000

In the longer run, perhaps that victory was as well for Clinton. His performance in the White House will now more easily be judged on its merits - and they are numerous. The buoyant economy of course, his record in the Balkans, his part in the Irish peace process - but also his place in the recent history of the Democratic party. If 2008 does indeed go down as a watershed election, marking and end of the Reagan era and inaugurating a long period of Democratic dominance, then Bill Clinton may be remembered as the enabler. He might have declared that the age of "big government" was over, but he believed in government none the less, above all a government which worked.

Today his presidency still arouses mixed feelings: of disappointment at a promise ultimately never quite fulfilled, and of disgust at the sleaze, but also of recognition of a job on the whole well done. Polls at the time showed that people would be glad to see the back of him, but would miss him nonetheless. "You can't trust him, he's got weak morals and ethics - and he's done a heck of a good job," was how an ABC News analysis in January 2001 summed up the national view of the departing Bill Clinton.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"When I was in England, I experimented with marijuana a time or two, and I didn't like it. I didn't inhale and never tried it again."

"White racism may be the black people's burden, but it is the white people's problem. We must clean our house."

"There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America."

"I want to say one thing to the American people. I want you to listen to me. I'm going to say this again: I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky."

"It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is." (during his 1998 grand jury testimony).

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"He has been through the hottest fire American politics has ever had to test somebody. And he's come out like fine-tempered Pennsylvania steel." Senator Harris Wofford

"He needs to get a hard slap of reality in the face every once in a while. He has an arrogant side." Robert Savage, political scientist

"Perjury and acts that obstruct justice are profoundly serious matters. When such acts are committed by the President of the United States, we believe those acts may constitute grounds for an impeachment." Kenneth Starr

"I warn my colleagues that you will reap the bitter harvest of the unfair partisan seeds that you sow today. Monica Lewinsky is not Watergate. Let he who has no sin in this chamber cast the first vote." Bob Menendez, Democrat

"He was kissing me in the doorway between the back study, or the office, and the hallway, and I sort of opened my eyes and he was looking out the window with his eyes wide open while he was kissing me and then I got mad because it wasn't very romantic." Monica Lewinsky

MINUTIAE

» On his inauguration day, Clinton was 27 minutes late for his customary courtesy call on George and Barbara Bush.

» Clinton's sloppy time-keeping was a hallmark of his presidency: Air Force One once held up air traffic at LAX while the president had a $200 hair cut.

» He is the only president to play the saxophone. After playing on the Arsenio Hall show, religious conservatives dubbed him "the MTV president".

» He appointed more women to cabinet positions than any other president.

» In 2007, Forbes Magazine estimated his earnings for the year at $7m.

» He was the first president ever to send an email while in office.

» In 2004, he won a Grammy (along with Mikhail Gorbachev and Sophia Loren) for Best Spoken Word Album for Children for the Russian National Orchestra's Peter and the Wolf: Wolf Tracks - on which they were narrators.

» He is allergic to many things, including dust, mould, pollen, beef and cats.

» Clinton is the only president to be elected twice without ever receiving 50 per cent of the popular vote. He polled 43 per cent in 1992 and 49 per cent in 1996.

» When he was eight, he was attacked by a sheep. He later described this as "the awfullest beating I ever took.”

By Rupert Cornwell

GEORGE W BUSH

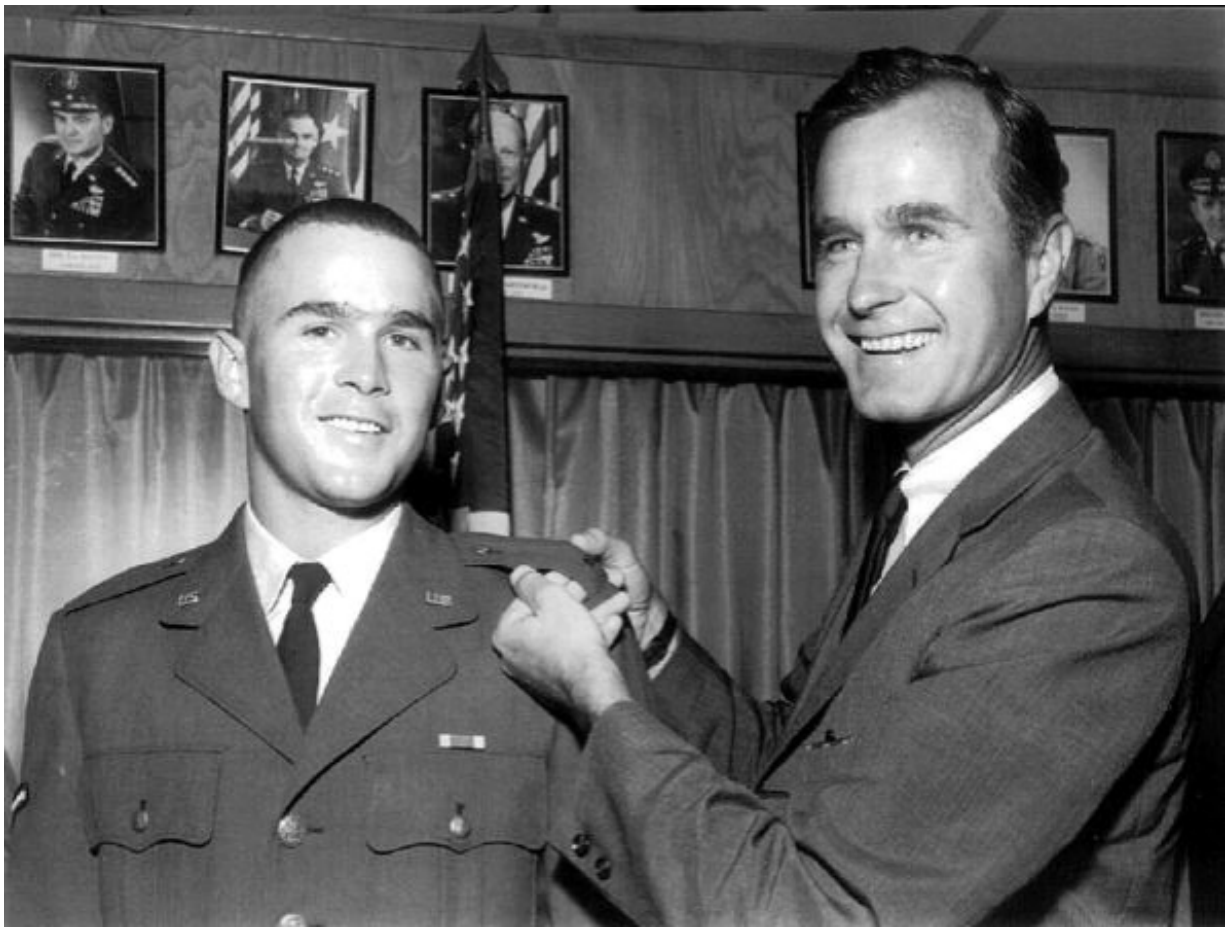
43rd

2001-2009

The famously privileged George W Bush took office with fulsome advantages. Bill Clinton had bequeathed him a more or less decent economy, his party controlled both houses of Congress, and Karl Rove, the wily political consultant who had helped him become Governor of Texas six years before, was just down the corridor - a more trusty servant than even Barney the First Dog.

He tried to forget the pesky circumstances of his election: the hanging chad debacle in Florida, the recount drama and his ensuing "victory" over Al Gore ordained by the Supreme Court. Bush had actually lost the popular vote. Thus, at least half the voters didn't much care for the Texan cowboy who couldn't pronounce "nuclear".

Domestic policy initiatives, including a package of unprecedented tax cuts for the rich and an education reform bill called "No Child Left Behind", might have been the focus of his first term but for the events of 11 September 2001. Bush was in a Florida classroom when the terrorists struck, then spent several hours circling in Air Force One contemplating the crisis. But when he stepped on to the rubble at Ground Zero three days later he captured America's attention declaring, "I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you. And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon."



George Bush, Sr. proudly displays the officer's bar of 2nd Lt. George W. Bush from the Texas Air National Guard, 1968

The attacks altered everything. Bush declared a "War on Terror" that was to dominate both his terms in office. Within weeks, the US military helped to topple the Taliban in Afghanistan and expel al-Qa'ida, though its leader, Osama bin Laden, was not captured. In his 2002 State of the Union address, Bush invoked the "Axis of Evil", made up of Iraq, North Korea and Iran, sowing the seeds of the Bush Doctrine in foreign policy justifying pre-emptive war to safeguard America.

Bush's popularity ratings soared to record levels, from where they would later tumble. Domestically, some critics grew alarmed as the Bush administration introduced the Patriot Act, diluting privacy laws and civil rights in the name of national security. Abroad, many traditional allies, already dismayed by Bush's refusal to sign the Kyoto Treaty on climate change, worried about his growing fixation on Iraq and Saddam Hussein. Hundreds of thousands protested worldwide in the days before the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, when America led the mostly fictional "coalition of the willing" into Baghdad. Bush was later to admit that it was a mistake to celebrate the removal of Saddam with victorious pageantry - aboard an aircraft carrier - in front of a banner declaring "Mission Accomplished".

President George W. Bush being informed by his chief of staff Andrew Card of the attacks on the World Trade Center

No weapons of mass destruction, which had been used to justify the invasion, were found, and Iraq was soon to be gripped by sectarian violence that pushed it close to civil war. The 2004 Republican Convention in New York was marred by loud anti-war protests, but in November Bush won a

second term after painting his Democratic challenger, Senator John Kerry, as a flip-flopper (not least on the Iraq war) and a Massachusetts elitist who liked to windsurf.

Soon after re-election Bush signed a costly bill to help seniors with prescription medicine costs, regarded by its critics as the largest expansion of the welfare safety-net in years. Other initiatives fared less well. He proposed the partial privatisation of the near-bankrupt Social Security system, embarking on a 60-day tour to sell it. The Democrats balked and so did the public. His efforts to push immigration reforms - notably aimed at offering a path to citizenship for the millions in the country illegally - fell foul of conservative fury.

Then the unexpected struck again: a hurricane called Katrina. The perceived bungling of the Government's response, combined with escalating violence in Iraq, began to have a grave impact on Bush's popularity. In the 2006 mid-term election, control of both houses of Congress shifted to the Democrats, killing what was left of Bush's domestic legislative agenda. Meanwhile, Bush was facing growing challenges to aspects of his war on terror, notably the use of Guantanamo Bay in Cuba to house so-called "enemy combatants" and his government's refusal to give them traditional trials or even habeas corpus rights.

Internationally, a reputation severely dented by America's flawed war in Iraq was hardly improving, even though Bush could claim that his decision

in early 2007 to send more troops to that country - known as the surge - had contributed to a steep decline in violence there.


MISSION ACCOMPLISHED
SEAL OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES
214

George W. Bush addressing the nation on Iraq beneath a banner reading 'Mission Accomplished' aboard the nuclear aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, 1 May 2003

Beyond Iraq, Bush and his second Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, had little to show for their attempts at mediating Middle East peace, a record of failure that became even more vivid in the last weeks of Bush's second term when Israel opened a vicious offensive against Gaza. The US and Europe remained in a dangerous stand-off with Iran over its nuclear ambitions, meanwhile, with little indication of how it could be ended. Nor was it clear that US-led efforts to cajole North Korea into ending its nuclear programmes were working. Bush could claim, however, to have dramatically increased US involvement in the fight against HIV-Aids internationally and in Africa especially, where the US was to become responsible for providing treatment to two-thirds of the 3 million people on the continent who were being treated for the disease.

On the home front, however, it was the economy that was beginning to bite Bush. By the beginning of 2008, the US was diving into a deep recession, triggered in part by the failure of regulators to recognise a huge overhang of bad debt in the financial system.

The so-called credit crisis forced Bush and his Treasury team into direct intervention, notably guiding a $700bn package through Congress to buy mortgage instruments that had gone sour and to prop up Wall Street institutions. Thus Bush found himself presiding over a process of

nationalisation that contradicted some of the most basic tenets of his party and even of capitalism itself.

In November 2008, Barack Obama, a Democrat, won the presidency and polls showed Bush breaking all records in both approval (rock bottom) and disapproval (sky high) ratings.

In his own words

"Our enemies are innovative and resourceful, and so are we. They never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we."

"Families is where our nation finds hope, where wings take dream."

"I can press when there needs to be pressed; I can hold hands when there needs to be - hold hands."

"I know the human being and fish can coexist peacefully."

"My plan reduces the national debt, and fast. So fast, in fact, that economists worry that we're going to run out of debt to retire."

"It's clearly a budget. It's got a lot of numbers in it."

"If this were a dictatorship, it'd be a heck of a lot easier, just so long as I'm the dictator."

"Well, I think if you say you're going to do something and don't do it, that's trustworthiness."

"More and more of our imports come from overseas."

"The vast majority of Iraqis want to live in a peaceful, free world. And we will find these people and we will bring them to justice."

"They [the Taliban] have no disregard for human life."

"One of the great things about books is sometimes there are some fantastic pictures."

"I don't particularly like it when people put words in my mouth, either, by the way, unless I say it."

"You know, one of the hardest parts of my job is to connect Iraq to the war on terror."

"I know how hard it is for you to put food on your family."

"I'll be long gone before some smart person ever figures out what happened inside this Oval Office."

"Sometimes you misunderestimated me."

In others' words

"Bush is to the left of me now. Comrade Bush announced he will buy shares in private banks." Venezuela's socialist President Hugo Chavez

"By the time this administration is finished, there won't be any money left." Gore Vidal

"While President Bush likes to project an image of strength and courage, the real truth is that in the presence of his large financial contributors he is a moral coward, so weak that he seldom, if ever, says 'no' to them on anything, no matter what the public interest might mandate." Al Gore

"He has destroyed... what it took two centuries to build up. He has taken us from a prosperous nation at peace to a dead-broke nation at war." Hunter S Thompson

"In England, he wouldn't be trusted with a pair of scissors." Russell Brand

Minutiae

» During his eight years as Governor of Texas, he authorised the execution of 152 people - more than any other governor in US history.

» The Bush Administration turned a $236bn surplus into a $1trn deficit.

» Bush was the first US president to visit Albania.

» In preparation for a visit by Queen Elizabeth to the White House in 1991, during his father's presidency, a young George W Bush had a pair of new cowboy boots made emblazoned with the phrase "God Save the Queen".

» In January 2002, Bush fainted after choking on a pretzel in the White House.

» In 1976, he was fined $150 for driving while under the influence of alcohol and had his driving licence suspended for two years. He finally gave up drinking in 1986.

» Between 1988 and 1998 he was a major shareholder in the Texas Rangers baseball franchise. He sold his shareholding for around $15m.

» Bush was head cheerleader at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts.

By David Usborne

BARACK OBAMA

44th

2009-2017

The story of Barack Hussein Obama is one of impossible expectations. The very fact that he became America's 44th president was a miracle in itself. Obama was an African-American in the most literal sense: the son of a white woman from Kansas and a Kenyan studying at the University of Hawaii.

There, on the remote Pacific fringes of the United States proper, Obama's parents met and married. Their son was born in 1961; three years later they were divorced. His mother remarried, this time to an Indonesian man, and the future president spent part of his childhood in Jakarta. These multicultural experiences gave Obama an instinctive understanding unmatched by any his predecessors, that the world was a complex and variegated place. In it America was only one - albeit arguably the most important one - of a myriad moving parts.

Add to this his youth (he was the fifth youngest man to enter the Oval Office), his eloquence, good looks and handsome family, not to mention the literary talent on display in his exquisitely written memoir 'Dreams From My Father.' Small wonder he captured the public imagination, at home and abroad, as no incoming US president since that earlier mould-breaking Democrat, John F. Kennedy.

This, it seemed, was a leader who not only understood the world, but could change the world. By dint of his colour he would finally purge America of its original sins of slavery and racism. Nor was that the only feelgood factor. From the outset, Obama had opposed the misguided 2003 Iraq war from the outset. Here was a leader who would restore the international image of the US after the damage wrought by George W. Bush. Thanks to this wondrous stroke of fate, both America and the planet would be a better place.

Barack Obama is sworn in by Chief Justice John Roberts as the 44th president of the United States, 20 January 2009

Or so it seemed on that enchanted night of November 4, 2008, as Obama delivered his victory speech in Grant Park, Chicago. “Yes We Can, Yes We Can” chanted hundreds of thousands gathered in the city where he had been a community organiser amid the bleak South Side projects, a law professor at the prestigious University of Chicago and a civil rights litigator, before embarking on a meteoric political ascent.

In 1996, he was elected to the Illinois state senate, where he served eight years. Undeterred by a 2000 primary loss in his bid for a Congressional seat

from Chicago (his only defeat at the ballot box) Obama announced his candidacy for the US Senate seat in Illinois that became open in 2004.

This time a sweeping primary victory had Democratic insiders sensing that a real star was in the making. And at the 2004 party convention that nominated John Kerry, that suspicion was confirmed - and some. Obama delivered an electrifying keynote address that had a national audience convinced they were listening to a future president. The only surprise was how soon they would be proved right.

Obama won the Senate seat in a landslide. On Capitol Hill, he was treated like a rock star, and the 2008 presidential buzz only intensified. On a glacial February 2007 day in Illinois' state capital Springfield, he made it official. At that point Obama was an outsider in a race that Hillary Clinton looked set to win. Clinton was bidding to make history of her own, as America's first female president. But in comparison with her young and eloquent opponent she came to seem a stale and shopworn creature of Washington. And of course she bore the albatross of her vote authorising the Iraq war.

Obama's campaign was as nimble and well-executed as hers was clumsy and inept. The battle was close and protracted, but in June 2008, a Clinton victory became mathematically impossible, and she conceded. The rest was a simpler matter. Thanks to Bush, the Republican brand was in tatters and the electorate craved change. In the general election Obama soundly defeated Senator John McCain of Arizona, winning 28 of the 50 states as

well as the District of Columbia, and the electoral college by 365 votes to 173.

By any reasonable yardstick he achieved a good deal, domestically at least. But those impossible expectations were not met - in part thanks to his own shortcomings, in part because of an especially difficult environment, both at home and abroad.

The America bequeathed to him by Bush was, not to put too fine a point upon it, a mess. At home, the economy was suffering the worst recession since the 1930s while after the Lehman Brothers collapse, the banking system had been only been kept afloat by a highly unpopular $700bn bailout. Abroad, the country was still embroiled in two no less unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, that had consumed 5,000 American lives and trillions of dollars.

President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and members of the national security team receive an update on the mission against Osama bin Laden in the Situation Room of the White House, 1 May 2011

Obama moreover was denied the political honeymoon a convincing election victory normally provides. The Democrats in January 2009 may have controlled both the House of Representatives and the Senate, but Obama faced a Republican opposition that from the day he took office sought to block his every move, exploiting the countless opportunities afforded by a legislative system built upon checks and balances.

Nor did Republican hostility end there. Many in the party challenged Obama's very legitimacy, denouncing him as a crypto-Muslim, claiming that he was not, as the Constitution demands, a "natural born" American. Even in 2015, despite the release of citizenship and other documents debunking such nonsense, die-hard "birthers" persisted.

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Against this backdrop, the achievements of Obama's first two years were considerable. Within weeks, and without a single Republican vote in the House, and only three in the Senate, Congress passed an $800bn stimulus bill which may have prevented the Great Recession from becoming a second Great Depression. Under Obama, 8.5m new jobs were created by December 2015.

The following year Congress passed legislation to rein in Wall Street, introducing financial safeguards designed to make sure a 2008-style crash could not happen again. The Dodd-Frank bill, as it is known after its two main sponsors, was enacted once more with virtually no Republican support. For critics, the measure either goes too far or not far enough. Either way, it represents America's farthest reaching financial reform since the 1930s. Again, not bad for a rookie president.

But the domestic centrepiece of his first term, and probably of his entire presidency, was health care reform. The failure of the US - alone among advanced industrial countries - to provide coverage for all its citizens,

despite spending far more on health care per capita than its peers, has long been a national embarrassment.

Oddly, the topic did not feature prominently in his primary campaign; Hillary Clinton was much more outspoken on the subject. But once elected, Obama made it his top priority. His strategic approach also gave early clues about his style of governing: his instinctive caution and pragmatism, his preference for the incremental, and his aversion to grandiose gestures.

Many on the left urged him to go the whole hog and create a single-payer, government-run system along British or Canadian lines, in effect extending the existing Medicare programme for the elderly to everyone. But Obama demurred. The Affordable Care Act (ACA), or 'Obamacare' as it was quickly dubbed, was built around the existing structure of primarily employer-based coverage, and for-profit insurance companies. It did little to curb the powers of the drug companies and hospital groups.

The idea of a government-run insurance scheme, a so-called "public option," was denounced by opponents as the thin end of a single payer wedge and soon discarded. Though the ACA sharply reduces the number of those uncovered, it does not provide universal coverage. Its central provision, obliging those who do not have health care to buy it, was even based on a Republican idea.

Alas, such considerations did not stop Republicans from fighting the bill tooth and nail. Despite their majorities, Democrats had to resort to a

procedural device to secure passage. Not a single Republican voted for it, nor did the party offer proposals of its own. And even final passage did not end the war.

Soon however the obstructionism in Congress would grow yet worse. The Democrats suffered a shattering defeat at the 2010 midterms, losing control of the House as Republicans gained 63 seats. The Tea Party march had begun, and Obama and Washington had to cope with a new breed of intransigent Republicans, intent on making the entire system unworkable.

The only consolation for the White House was that the newcomers were as much trouble to the Republican leadership as to the Democratic president. But the story of the second half of Obama's first term is one of bitter and unnecessary fights over budgets, potential government shutdowns and federal debt defaults.

At times it seemed Obama himself had lost his appetite for the fight. He became an increasingly aloof figure, deriving his pleasure from his family, and the golf and pick-up basketball games he played with a coterie of friends. In part Republicans were to blame for this estrangement. But so too was Obama himself.

At times, he did not bother to conceal his contempt for Congress, where he had spent only four years - in practice just two, before devoting himself full-time to his presidential bid. Increasingly he came across as aloof and

arrogant. His calm and professorial style, once a refreshing change from Bush's garbled syntax and act-first, think-later mentality, began to grate.

Nor did Obama have much taste for the personal side of politics. For him, governing often seemed a purely intellectual exercise. Some people pined for another Lyndon Johnson - although that wish rested on the dubious premise that LBJ, schmoozer and arm-twister extraordinaire, could himself have got much change from the early 21st century Republican party, in which even the sainted Ronald Reagan would today be seen as a soft-headed centrist.

At times, you wondered if Obama even wanted a second term. But he did share one attribute with most successful politicians: a ferocious competitiveness. On November 6, 2012, helped by an electoral college map with an inbuilt advantage for Democrats, he defeated the former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney to secure a second term. The margin of victory was slightly less than in 2008, but clear-cut nonetheless. Obama carried 26 states and the District. He was the first Democrat since Franklin Roosevelt to twice win a majority of the popular vote.

Angela Merkel and Barack Obama outside the Elmau Castle after a working session of a G7 summit near Garmisch-Partenkirchen, 2015

Once again there was no honeymoon. Six weeks after his re-election, shortly before Christmas, a gunman walked into an elementary school in Sandy Hook, Connecticut and killed 20 young children, six teachers and himself. After every such rampage, Obama pleaded for steps to tighten America's absurdly lax gun laws. Yet even then, after a massacre etched on America's consciousness as no other, Congress could not be persuaded.

Obama was not to blame for that failure, nor for Congress' refusal to shut down the infamous Guantanamo Bay prison for terrorist suspects and its inability to pass sorely needed immigration reform. But the botched on-line

rollout of Obamacare in late 2013 was very much his fault, and played into the argument of conservatives that government was simply incompetent.

Thus the stage was set for another mid-term disaster as the Republicans recaptured the Senate in November 2014 and strengthened their grip on the House. Conventional wisdom declared him a lame duck. Once again however, Obama defied the rules.

Instead he chalked up a string of notable successes, including Supreme Court rulings making gay marriage the law of the land and upholding Obamacare. Stymied by Congress, he turned to presidential executive orders to strengthen clean air regulations and provide a path to citizenship for some of the estimated 11m illegal immigrants in the US.

The Republican civil war on Capitol Hill was also an unanticipated boon, leading to the resignation of John Boehner and his replacement as Speaker by Romney's 2012 running mate Paul Ryan. Implored to take the job by his colleagues, Ryan demanded an end to the public infighting and for a while at least, he had his way.

In December 2015, Congress managed to pass a long term highway financing bill. It was also close to enacting bipartisan criminal justice reform that would reduce sentences for non-violent federal offenders, particularly drug offenders, and make a dent in America's huge prison population, bloated by a disproportionate number of African-Americans

behind bars. Could there be a more fitting achievement to crown the era of Barack Obama, America's first black president?

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Nowhere were hopes higher, and the subsequent disillusion greater than in the foreign policy arena, where presidents have a far freer hand than in domestic matters. The ridiculously premature award to Obama of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize did not help, based as it was on little more than a ballyhoo-ed speech in Cairo promising a new beginning of US relations with the Muslim world, his pledge to end the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a Scandinavian abhorrence of George Bush and all his works.

To be sure, Obama has had his foreign policy moments, when his cool, logical approach has paid off: the restoration of diplomatic ties with Cuba; improved relations with India, soon to become the world's populous country; the much contested nuclear deal with Iran; the success of the climate change conference in Paris; and of course the hunting down and killing of Osama bin Laden.

He did extricate US ground forces from Iraq, but 10,000 remain in Afghanistan. But US relations with the Muslim world, despite those rousing words in Cairo, have not notably improved. The Middle East - some would say the world - is meanwhile in unprecedented disorder.

Obama could not be blamed for the turmoil unleashed by the Arab spring, nor for the complete of the "peace process" between Israel and the Palestinians. But his uncertain trumpet did nothing to reduce the region's instability. In Egypt, a key US ally, the administration abandoned Hosni Mubarak, only to end up with an equally repressive military strongman in the person of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

In Libya, he took part in the Nato-enabled ouster of Moammar Ghadaffi, but stood by as the country degenerated into chaos. The messy outcome allowed ISIS, the deadliest Islamist radical terrorist group yet, to gain a foothold in a country just 300 miles south of Italy. Undoubtedly the messy outcome made a cautious president even more reluctant to get seriously involved in Syria, despite the urgings of Hillary Clinton, her successor as Secretary of State John Kerry, and his first two Secretaries of Defense, Robert Gates and Leon Panetta. For Obama, the Vietnam syndrome had been replaced by an Iraq 2003 syndrome.

Ever analytic and ever cautious, he explained his foreign policy doctrine on the grounds that America could not solve every problem of the planet. He defined it with the baseball metaphor of hitting single and doubles, rather than trying for spectacular home runs. Or as he put it privately, "Don't do stupid shit." The trouble was, he broke his own rules.

Most damaging was his warning in 2013 to the Syrian regime in Damascus that it would cross "a red line" if it used chemical weapons against its own citizens. It did, and Obama did nothing. In the end it was Russia, the Assad

regime’s protector, who clinched a deal for the destruction of Syria’s weapons. Whether they actually were destroyed in their entirety is disputable.

President Barack Obama sings "Amazing Grace" as he delivers the eulogy for South Carolina state senator and Rev. Clementa Pinckney, 26 June 2015, Charleston

Obama instead was increasingly coming across as a leader of fine words, but no follow-through. Traditional allies in the region like Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and Egypt, wondered whether, if push came to shove, Washington really would come to their help. Rival powers like Russia and

Iran were no longer scared of the US, reinforcing the image of an America in decline. By late 2015, after the ISIS-inspired massacre in San Bernardino California, Americans disapproved Obama's foreign policy by a 60-40 margin. The presidential comparison was no longer with the adored JFK, but with the unlamented and much derided Jimmy Carter.

Normally a president of the United States is automatically accorded the title of most powerful person in the world. No longer. In 2014 and 2015 Forbes magazine put Russia's Vladimir Putin at the top of the list. For 2015, Obama was even bumped out of second place by Germany's Angela Merkel. A triviality perhaps - but Forbes is an American magazine.

Obama struck up something of a friendship with the former Russian president, Vadim Medvedev, while he was president, but his relations with Putin after his return to power in 2012 have been rocky in the extreme. The best hope of improvement is that Moscow and Washington broker an international deal to bring peace to Syria.

Vainly attempting to free himself from the tentacles of the Middle East, Obama spoke of a "pivot to Asia," and the development of a better ties with China, the other half of the world's most important bilateral relationship. Instead with Beijing aggressively expanding its regional influence, the US found itself aligned with smaller countries like Vietnam and the Philippines alarmed at China's new assertiveness.

As usual with Obama, his policies made logical sense. The last thing America needs is another ground war in the Middle East, while the splintered groups leading the moderate opposition to an Assad strengthened by direct Russian military support offered scant foundation on which to build. Nothing would stabilise the region more than a more co-operative Iran (already a de facto if unspoken ally in the campaign against ISIS. - so why not a deal curbing Tehran's nuclear ambitions in return for an end to sanctions)

Ultimately however Obama's place in history will be judged by posterity, usually a kinder jury than the columnists and pundits of the day. He will go down as a pretty decent president, not one of America's greatest but far from its worst. Possibly his most controversial policies will be vindicated.

And whatever else Obama is a man of principle and propriety. Astonishingly he has faced no major scandal, giving his Republican foes on Capitol Hill no opportunity to do damage. No Whitewater, no Monica Lewinskys, no Iran-Contra. The closest was the deadly 2012 attack on the US embassy in Benghazi, Libya, for which Hillary Clinton, his former Secretary of State, was the main target of critics. But right now, disappointment dominates. How much more might he have done, we ask. But then again, we set the bar absurdly high.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek."

"Americans... still believe in an America where anything's possible - they just don't think their leaders do."

"Hope - Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope! In the end, that is God's greatest gift to us, the bedrock of this nation. A belief in things not seen. A belief that there are better days ahead."

"Focusing your life solely on making a buck shows a poverty of ambition. It asks too little of yourself. And it will leave you unfulfilled."

"If you're walking down the right path and you're willing to keep walking, eventually you'll make progress."

"I am not opposed to all wars. I'm opposed to dumb wars."

“For if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well.”

“Cynicism is a choice, and hope is a better choice.”

“Religious freedom doesn't mean you can force others to live by your own beliefs.”

“The best anti-poverty program is a world-class education.”

IN OTHERS' WORDS

"Your victory has demonstrated that no person anywhere in the world should not dare to dream of wanting to change the world for a better place." Nelson Mandela

"Your extraordinary journey to the White House will inspire people not only in your country but also around the world." Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India

"By choosing you, the American people have chosen change, openness and optimism." Nicolas Sarkozy, President of France

MINUTIAE

» As a teenager he took drugs including marijuana and cocaine. He inhaled the marijuana: "That was the point."

» He has read all of J K Rowling's Harry Potter books.

» The name Barack means "one who is blessed" in Swahili (and, loosely, in Arabic).

» He finished repaying his student loan in 2004.

» He collects Spider-Man and Conan the Barbarian comics

» The Secret Service objected to his Blackberry habit, claiming that it was too easy to hack into.

» At high school he was known as "O'Bomber", because of his skill at basketball. He was also known for a while as "Barry", but dislikes the name.

» While he was studying at Harvard, he put himself forward as a possible model for a black pin-up calendar - but was rejected by the all-female selection committee.

» As a teenager, he worked in a Baskin-Robbins ice cream shop. He now hates ice cream.

By Rupert Cornwell

DONALD J TRUMP

45th

2017-current

Donald John Trump, his signature overcoat unbuttoned on a cool and overcast day in Washington, strode to the lectern to address the country he had mere minutes earlier been sworn to lead. What followed was an inaugural address that led former President George W Bush, beating a hasty

exit from the Capitol, to assess the speech this way when asked for just that by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton: “That was some weird s**t.”

Trump had just told the country and the world that “January 20, 2017 will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again,” Trump said. “The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer.” He then set the tone for his term with a line that foreshadowed many of his hardline policies: “This American carnage stops right here and stops right now.”

The line offered a clear line of sight into the 45th president’s view of the country he had just inherited from its 44th, Barack Obama, the first black US chief executive. The memorable line had followed this one: “Crime and gangs and drugs … have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealised potential.” Much effort had been made, like with any incoming president, to pinpoint Trump’s exact ideology and worldview. On that grey day in the nation’s capital, he described it in his own one-of-a-kind way, crystal clear on paper but opaque in the mind’s eye.

Trump vowed his “total allegiance to the United States of America” and declared his election should be assigned a “special meaning” because it marked the “transferring [of] power from Washington, DC, and giving it back to you, the people”.

He claimed a “small group in our nation’s capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the costs.” He had established an

ideology and governing philosophy that was, all at once, a hodgepodge. Like during his inauguration speech, the rest of his term was a kaleidoscope of isolationism ramming into realism, mercantilism intersecting with the pursuit of global trade deals, dovish isolationism at war with tough-talking realism.

Each word should have allowed official Washington, his countrymen and countrywomen – especially Democrats – to understand exactly what was ahead. Instead, almost four years later, his allies and critics alike remain shocked not just that Trump is president but that Donald Trump, on an almost daily basis, roars and bluffs and threatens and insults like no other US leader in the modern era. The entire world has been upended by his willingness to rattle global markets, insult people of colour, obliterate political and societal norms, and even threaten a longtime American adversary (North Korea) with nuclear annihilation.

But to understand the man, and his presidency, one must spend a moment at the start of it all. No, the start wasn't on his Inauguration Day. It wasn't that June 2015 day when he and his wife, Melania, rode a gold escalator – ironically and unintentionally socially distanced – to the lobby of Trump Tower in Manhattan to announce his candidacy for the Republican Party's presidential nomination. The start was an April night in 2011, at the annual White House Correspondents Dinner. Then-president Barack Obama, smarting from Trump's leadership of the "birther movement" that forced him to release his long form birth certificate to prove his US citizenship,

was the keynote speaker. He unleashed an unrelenting volley against the then-New York businessman and reality television personality.

Anyone else might have retreated from the political realm, too embarrassed to again challenge a sitting president. Anyone else, at 64, might have determined they were simply too old to learn a new trade — especially one as cut-throat, complicated and unforgiving as national politics. Donald John Trump is not anyone else. His father and mentor, Fred Trump, and his long time attorney and vice-mentor, Roy Cohn, instilled one thing in young Donald: Always fight back. His future campaign chief and then White House strategist Steve Bannon later referred to Trump as a political "streetfighter." Trump's instincts, as he has shown time and again as president, is to punch back harder when punched at.

Obama's attacks were meant to shrink both the man and his political ambitions. Instead, as the New York Times described it in a March 2016 editorial: "That evening of public abasement, rather than sending Trump away, accelerated his ferocious efforts to gain stature in the political world." Conflict fuels Trump. So does any public criticism or slight. How the man believes others perceive him is as central to any worldview he might have as what previous presidents learned at Harvard or Yale.

Fast forwardnearly a decade from that night in the Washington Hilton's palatial basement ballroom. Trump, reeling from self-inflicted wounds resulting from a denial that the coronavirus outbreak was a serious matter and a racial awakening stemming from the death of George Floyd, a black

man, under the knee of a white police officer. Both crises needed Trump to finally grow into the role of a president with a sense of duty to lead an entire country – not simply his core political supporters, almost exclusively white conservatives.

The twin domestic crises, to use an American baseball analogy, took ample velocity off the president's fastball during the late spring and summer months of 2020. In fact, he is heading into the homestretch of his re-election campaign without a reliable pitch in his arsenal beyond stoking racial tensions and lobbing grade-school insults at his Democratic general election opponents. His 2020 campaign message, amid putrid poll numbers and with three months to convince voters they shouldn't give former vice-president Joe Biden a turn at steering the USS America, is as schizophrenic as it is void of many new ideas to help voters or rebuild the economy once – or if – the country moves beyond the coronavirus pandemic after Election Day.

The clearly frustrated Trump veers wildly from making bold – and possibly unconstitutional – claims about undoing Congress' will on tax policy in a second term to publicly suggesting all that "winning" he promised back in 2016 could come to a sudden end on 3 November. "If I win the election, I will have a deal with Iran within 30 days," he said about 14 hours later in the Oval Office in announcing a peace agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates. "If I win." It is hard, for those of us who have hung on this president's every word and mood since before he was sworn in, to reconcile President Trump having said them. But alas, he did.

To be sure, by August 2020 gone was the swashbuckling commander in chief who issued daily screeds about crushing Biden in the fall – perhaps even in a landslide decision. Trump, once a brazen chief executive who walked and talked with an alpha male presence, practically oozed a lack of confidence by mid-August of the final year of his (first?) term. To be sure, the twin crises of 2020 stole his "I am the 'Chosen One'" swagger. During one particularly morose coronavirus briefing away from the sweltering summer humidity outside, the president appeared depressed and vulnerable.

Stunningly, he turned the virus briefing, a near-nightly ritual revived in a rather desperate attempt to show voters he was the man in charge of battling a virus he calls the "invisible enemy," into a made-for-television therapy session. "And yet, they're highly thought of. But nobody likes me," he said, bemoaning the high approval ratings for White House coronavirus task force members Anthony Fauci and Deborah Birx. Then came what sounded like his self-loathing conclusion why: "It can only be my personality."

What happened between that misty January 2017 day and the summer of 2020 can feel like a blur, an exhausting and often-contradictory and hardline and chaotic whizzing by of Trump statements, insults, lies, threats, decisions, reversals, firings, tell-all books, scandals, blame-shifting and legal battles. In that way, the man's presidency mirrored his entire adult life. His term featured blatant efforts to ban just about all Muslims from entering the country, end runs around Congress that were of dubious legality, allegations of campaign finance violations, the firings of independent

watchdogs across the federal government, presidential intervention in Justice Department matters, and a plot to dismantle the United States Postal Service amid his war on mail-in voting.

And so many more surreal moments that took logic, the Constitution, truth and political norms to their respective breaking points. Amid all the chaos, a word Trump and his aides deplore even as it runs their lives, he found time to get impeached by the House, becoming only the third sitting president to be so besmirched by the lower chamber.

His Senate trial was little more than an extended theatre show. That's because it, in such an overt and telling manner, encapsulated such an important part of his presidency. Such a tight grip on most Republican voters did Trump have that it left most Republican senators unwilling, even while admitting his guilt, to vote for his removal. Most Republican senators during the trial acknowledged the commander in chief had used a congressionally-mandated and taxpayer-funded military aid package as leverage in a scheme to compel a foreign government to discredit a top domestic political rival.

But, as this correspondent wrote for The Independent in a January 2020 column: "So what?" Retiring Senator Lamar Alexander, a widely respected veteran lawmaker and a former education secretary, echoed many of his GOP colleagues when he said the seven House Democratic impeachment managers made their case that Trump abused the powers of his office and unjustly obstructed a congressional investigation into his request that the

Ukrainian president announce a probe into his eventual 2020 general election foe, Biden and son Hunter Biden. But, hey, so what? After all, Trump, at least in early 2020 had coattails in red states that those senators were banking on riding to fresh six-year terms in their mostly Tuesday-Thursday jobs.

Only one GOP senator, Mitt Romney of Utah, dared vote to remove Trump – but only on one of the two counts. The president and his team, despite Republican senators echoing the Democratic House managers and former Special Counsel Robert Mueller that he had indeed abused his power on multiple occasions, claimed he had been totally acquitted and proven innocent on all charges. Trump swashbuckled into the East Room the next day and displayed a copy of the Washington Post with its war-type headline – "Trump acquitted" – and delivered a lengthy and rambling victory speech that lambased Democrats and signalled his new feeling of empowerment. Trump interpreted the Senate's almost party-line vote to drop the House's charges as being immune – possibly even above the law.

He fired impeachment witnesses. Inspectors general in several agencies were dismissed in the dark of night. Trump even publicly pressed for two former aides and friends, political consultant Roger Stone and former White House national security adviser Michael Flynn, to receive lesser or no sentences at all after being of convicted on charges related to their work for him. Though Attorney General Barr denied feeling any presidential pressure, he acted according to Trump's wishes more than once in the post-acquittal months.

Asked by this scribe in February 2020 how life after the impeachment saga was going, one White House official who speaks regularly with Trump replied: “About the same as before.” Not quite. As several legal experts wrote for the Lawfare blog at that time, there was a whole lot more “business as unusual” going on in the nation’s capital than before Speaker Nancy Pelosi in October announced her caucus would open impeachment proceedings. So it was no surprise to Trump watchers when, amid protests on the streets of Washington in July 2020 following Mr Floyd’s death, the president’s post-acquittal mood set up a stunning scene at the executive mansion. As Trump delivered remarks in the Rose Garden, his words were drowned out at times by a force of federal police firing tear gas and “pepper bombs” at protesters to clear the area near the White House.

Why?

So Trump could walk to a nearby church that had been damaged the night before during protests and hold up a Bible. It was a rather cynical move that many in Washington saw as a campaign stunt to fire up his conservative base. But his brazen attitude led him to order what amounted to a military operation inside the District of Columbia. Later that night, blackhawk helicopters hovered over protesters, their powerful rotors shaking storefront windows and snapping tree branches. US military choppers shined their bright spotlights on the crowd of American citizens – ironically covered in the tan paint scheme that conjures memories of America’s post-9/11 misadventures in Afghanistan, Iraq and other places in the Middle East and

Southwest Asia that Trump so criticised during his 2016 presidential bid. Nothing felt the same after that June night. Trump has seemed different since, and his poll numbers show much of the country does, too.

But while this president was more brazen after his Senate acquittal, he rarely showed much reluctance to stretch America's laws – especially ones rooted in the Founding Fathers' fears of a UK-like monarchy and designed to keep the chief executive in a legal box – before House Democratic leaders were seriously thinking about an impeachment inquiry.

Democrats and some "establishment Republicans" spent his term calling him "lawless" and warning he views himself as "above the law." The House tried doing something to remedy this perceived ill, but there was never even a remote chance fearful-of-him Senate Republicans were going to remove him from office. The president who once said he could shoot someone on New York's Fifth Avenue and get away with it was proved correct. But that does not mean his every possible illegal executive order or threat were allowed to go through. One under-noted part of his norms-busting and law-bending term has been that, in many ways, the US federal system, a sort of dam, did hold.

An example: His 2017 "travel ban". The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals shut down this president's orders on several occasions, including the initial version of his infamous "travel ban" that was crafted to block individuals from some Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States, once a "melting pot" of folks from all over the planet. Trump's first version of

the order set off coast-to-coast outrage, with massive protests at major international airports that threatened to shut down some air travel – and potentially cut into the bottom lines of major US airlines. The widely respected Lawfare blog noted the final version, which was upheld by the US Supreme Court on an ideologically split 5-4 decision that conservatives won, noted that version was "more carefully drafted and appears to be, at least in part, the result of an interagency policy process that included input from the Department of Homeland Security and intelligence agencies." By using expertise in multiple government agencies, the White House learned – but seldomly used it subsequently – that the path to sound policy flows through a coordinated, comprehensive and organised policy process that is as practical as it is methodical.

The law-ignoring president never really acknowledged learning to lean on his White House lawyers a little more before announcing major policy moves were "two weeks" away. (Early on, everything was coming in that span of time. Very little actually did.) But he learned to qualify his hardline pronouncements with two phrases that said something – and garnered him the cable news and print media coverage he seems to require. One: "We'll see what happens." The other: "I'm looking at it."

These phrases were quickly adopted by some of his top, and most media-savvy aides, like top economic adviser and former CNBC host Larry Kudlow. They used them even more strategically than did Trump, sending up trial balloons about potential legislative demands in talks with Democrats and to gauge legal experts' reactions to any slew of moves they

had dangled in front of the boss that he might be able to enact without congressional approval. Most often, the headlines and cable news chyrons were breathless, warning of impending doom, but the administration soon dropped the ideas. If he is re-elected, will Trump's use of the phrase continue in a second term? We'll see what happens...

As his potential day of reckoning with voters fast approached, Trump's problems were largely self-inflicted. A string of racially tinged actions and statements, moves that were deemed sexist or outlandish, and other blunders had him trailing Biden. But even before anyone knew what the coronavirus was or watched federal troops take on American citizens on US city streets, the conservative president did very little to expand his political base. And he at times seemed uninterested in appealing to anyone but lightly to moderately educated white males, alienating parts of his 2016 election coalition that included many GOP-leaning and college-educated whites in suburbia. One Republican insider with ties to the Trump White House would grow frustrated during chats with this correspondent, wondering aloud one afternoon about Trump driving away Republican voters: "It's like he wants to lose." Other insiders reported tales from inside the West Wing of a president who refused to listen to advisers, and mused without any supporting data that his 2016 supporters would rejoin him come election day.

Most Americans seem to have made up their mind about Donald John Trump. It's basic human nature, really, when we meet or are subjected to such a unique, bold and put-oneself-first-at-all-costs personality type. There

are Type A individuals. Then there is what might be dubbed the Type DJT personality. The two views of Trump and his presidency can be perfectly illustrated in comments made by Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont on 17 August 2020 in his Democratic National Convention speech and the president's own assessment of his presidency just hours earlier. Sanders: "While Rome burned, Nero fiddled. Trump golfs." Mr Trump: "We built the greatest economy on earth and now we are doing it again."

IN HIS WORDS

"This American carnage stops right here and stops right now."

"Yeah, no. I don't take responsibility at all."

"I am the 'Chosen One'."

"I was elected to represent the people of Pittsburgh, not Philadelphia."

"I'm very consistent.… I'm a very stable genius."

"Well, I do think there's blame, yes, I think there's blame on both sides. ... But you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides. ... You had people in that group that were there to protest the taking down of, to them, a very, very important statue and the renaming of a park from Robert E Lee to another name."

“I don’t know if you’ve seen, the polls have been going up like a rocket ship. George Washington would have had a hard time beating me before the plague came in, before the China plague.”

“There was no collusion. Everybody knows there was no collusion.”

“You’re not going to need an exit strategy [for Iran]. I don’t need exit strategies.”

“Covfefe”

IN OTHERS’ WORDS

“He’s a f***ing moron.” – Rex Tillerson, former US Secretary of State

“I have never been called this much by a president in my life. It’s weird, and it’s flattering, and it creates some opportunity. It also creates some pressure.” – GOP Senator Lindsey Graham

“The fact is, Donald’s pathologies are so complex and his behaviours so often inexplicable that coming up with an accurate and comprehensive diagnosis would require a full battery of psychological and neurophysical tests that he’ll never sit for.” – Mary Trump, president’s niece and a clinical psychologist

“He tries to divide us.” – General James Mattis, USMC retired, former US Secretary of Defence

“I couldn’t be more proud to stand alongside this president and to be a part of this team that has served the American people during this challenging hour.” – Vice-President Mike Pence

“It’s very disappointing because I think the president went out at the beginning of this thing and really was statesmanlike…” – Attorney General William Barr on the Covid-19 pandemic

“He’s an idiot.” – Gen John Kelly, USMC retired, former White House chief of staff and former US Secretary of Homeland Security

“‘Cause they hate him.” – Senator Graham

MINUTIAE

» Born in New York City’s Jamaica Hospital Medical Centre

» Played first base for his high school baseball team

» Has uttered 20,055 false or misleading statements since taking office, according to The Washington Post’s Fact Checker team

» Avoids coffee

» Does not drink alcohol

» Favourite beverage is Diet Coke

» Favourite foods include fast food and vanilla ice cream

» Is reportedly served two scoops of ice cream when hosting dinner guests at White House; they only get one

» Is prone to seasonal sniffles

By John T Bennett

THE PRESIDENTS’ RESIDENCE

The president’s official residence in Washington - 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue - has a history scarcely less colourful than that of the presidency.

Work began on it in 1792; John Adams was the first to occupy it (before it was finished) in 1800; Dolley Madison famously did it up, with the help of a grant from Congress, only for the British to burn it to a shell in 1814. James Monroe spent $50,000 - controversially - doing it up again, in extravagant Parisian style; Martin Van Buren was attacked for turning it into "a palace as splendid as that of the Caesars"; Chester A Arthur

auctioned off wagon-loads of priceless presidential memorabilia in order to pay for another makeover in the 1880s.

There have been numerous refurbishments and additions since, including extensive restorations under Theodore Roosevelt (who added the West Wing), William Howard Taft (who added the Oval Office) and Harry S Truman (after the house was declared to be in imminent danger of collapse in 1948). The most extravagant recent redecoration was instigated by Jacqueline Kennedy, with the help of the French designer Stéphane Boudin.

President Theodore Roosevelt officially gave the White House its current name in 1901. It had previously been known by an assortment of names, including the "President's Palace", the "President's House" and the "Executive Mansion".

The White House now has six storeys, and includes 132 rooms, 35 bathrooms, 412 doors, 147 windows, 28 fireplaces, eight staircases, and three lifts.

Around 570 gallons of (white) paint are required to cover its outside surface.

The house did not get running water until 1831; central heating arrived in 1837; James Polk added gas lighting in the 1840s; and Millard Fillmore installed the first stove in the 1850s.

For many decades, the house had a problem with rats. Andrew Johnson, an animal lover, used to leave out food for them (while his daughter Martha, acting as his First Lady, tried to poison them). Rutherford Hayes claimed that they nibbled his toes at night. The problem was solved by Benjamin Harrison, who let ferrets loose in the house until all the rats had been killed.

Five full-time chefs are employed in the White House kitchen. Up to 140 guests can be entertained there at a time for dinner, while there are facilities to provide hors-d'oeuvres for more than 1,000.

There is an underground bunker - the Presidential Emergency Operations Center - located under the East Wing. There is also a tunnel to the Treasury building.

The Hayes family banned alcohol from the White House between 1877 and 1881.

There are many mature trees in the gardens, including several magnolias planted by Andrew Jackson.

Many presidents have added recreational facilities on arriving at the White House. Attractions currently available include a tennis court, a jogging track, a swimming pool, a putting-green, a cinema and bowling lane.

THE US PRESIDENCY IN NUMBERS

Number of presidents: 45

Number of men who have been president: 44

(Grover Cleveland is counted as No 22 and No 24)

Living presidents: 6

(George H W Bush, Barack Obama, George W Bush, Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter and Donald Trump)

Presidents whose children became president: 2

(John Adams, George H W Bush)

Presidents whose grandchildren became president: 1

(William Henry Harrison, grandfather of Benjamin Harrison)

Left-handed presidents: 7

(Herbert Hoover, Harry S Truman, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, George H W Bush, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama)

Ambidextrous presidents: 1

(James A Garfield)

Presidents who died in office: 8

(William Henry Harrison, 1841, Zachary Taylor, 1850, Abraham Lincoln, 1865, James A Garfield, 1881, William McKinley, 1901, Warren G Harding, 1923, Franklin D Roosevelt, 1945, John F Kennedy, 1963)

Presidents who were assassinated: 4

(Abraham Lincoln, 1865, James A Garfield, 1881, William McKinley, 1901, John F Kennedy, 1963)

Presidents who survived assassination attempts: 7

(Andrew Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, George W Bush)

Presidents who were freemasons: 15

(George Washington, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, James Polk, James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, James A Garfield, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft, Warren Harding, Franklin D Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Lyndon B Johnson, Gerald Ford)

Unmarried presidents: 1

(James Buchanan)

Presidents elected in a year ending in "0": 10

Thomas Jefferson (1800); William Henry Harrison (1840; died in office), Abraham Lincoln (1860; assassinated), James A Garfield (1880; assassinated), William McKinley (1900; assassinated), Warren G Harding (1920; died in office), Franklin D Roosevelt (1940; died in office), John F Kennedy (1960; assassinated), Ronald Reagan (1980; survived assassination attempt); George W Bush (2000; survived assassination attempt; alive at time of going to press)

Presidents born in Virginia: 8

(George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, Zachary Taylor, Woodrow Wilson)

US states that have never given birth to a president: 29

Presidents elected to the office despite losing the popular vote: 4

(John Quincy Adams, Rutherford B Hayes, Benjamin Harrison, George W Bush in 2000, and Donald Trump in 2016)

Presidents who were not elected at all, either as president or as vice-president: 1

(Gerald Ford became Richard Nixon's vice-president after Spiro Agnew resigned over Watergate, then took over the presidency when Nixon resigned as well)

Presidents who died on 4 July: 3

(John Adams; Thomas Jefferson; James Monroe)

Presidents who were born on 4 July: 1

(Calvin Coolidge)

Presidents who died on 26 December: 2

(Harry S Truman; Gerald Ford)

Presidents with beards: 5

(Abraham Lincoln; Ulysses S Grant; Rutherford B Hayes; James Garfield; Benjamin Harrison)

Tallest president: Abraham Lincoln (6ft 4in)

Shortest president: James Madison (5ft 4in)

Shortest-lived president: John F Kennedy (died at 46)

Longest-lived president: Gerald Ford (93 years, 121 days)

Shortest presidency: William Henry Harrison (31 days)

Longest presidency: Franklin D Roosevelt (12 years, one month and eight days)

Oldest president on taking office: Donald Trump (70)

Youngest elected president on taking office: John F Kennedy (43)

(Theodore Roosevelt was 42 when he stepped into the shoes of the assassinated William McKinley, but was 46 the first time he was elected.)

Average age on becoming president: 55

Heaviest president: William Howard Taft (23st 10lb at his peak)

Lightest president: James Madison (7st 1lb)

Presidents who were preceded and succeeded by the same president: 1

(Benjamin Harrison)

Cleverest president: Thomas Jefferson

(John F Kennedy, entertaining Nobel laureates in the White House in 1962, told his guests that this was the most distinguished gathering of intellectual ability that had ever graced that dining room - except when Thomas Jefferson dined alone there)

President who sired the most children: John Tyler (15)

Presidents who have had US counties named after them: 24

(Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Madison, Lincoln, Monroe, Polk, Grant, Garfield, Adams [including some that refer to Quincy Adams], Harrison, Pierce, Taylor, Van Buren, Buchanan, Fillmore, Cleveland, Roosevelt [both named for Theodore, not FDR], Tyler, Arthur, Harding, Hayes, McKinley)

Presidents who have had mountains named after them: 14

Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Jackson, Taylor, Grant, Arthur, Washington, Lincoln, McKinley, Pierce, Roosevelt (FDR; in Canada), Eisenhower (also in Canada - although it reverted to its original name, Castle Mountain, shortly after his death)

The Lincoln/Kennedy Connection

Abraham Lincoln was elected to Congress in 1846; John F Kennedy was elected to Congress in 1946.

Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860; John F Kennedy was elected president in 1960.

Both presidents were shot while in office, in the head, by a Southerner, on a Friday.

Both were succeeded by Southerners named Johnson.

Andrew Johnson, who succeeded Lincoln, was born in 1808. Lyndon B Johnson, who succeeded Kennedy, was born in 1908.

Lincoln was shot at Ford's Theatre. The car in which Kennedy was shot was a Lincoln, made by Ford.

Both three-named assassins - John Wilkes Booth and Lee Harvey Oswald - were murdered before they could be tried.

The list goes on, with declining accuracy. Coincidence-obsessives add that Lincoln's secretary was named Kennedy (false), while Kennedy's secretary was named Lincoln (true); and that John Wilkes Booth was born in 1839 (false), while Lee Harvey Oswald was born in 1939 (true); and that, Lincoln, a week before he was shot, was in Monroe, Maryland (true), whereas Kennedy, a week before he was shot, was with - and possibly in - Marilyn Monroe (false). But you try explaining such niceties in a pub quiz...

LEADERS' WIVES: FIRST LADIES BY NUMBERS

Number of First Ladies: 47

(official total, counting Frances Cleveland twice)

First use of the term "First Lady": 1849

(by Zachary Taylor, at Dolley Madison's funeral)

First Ladies officially counted as First Ladies although they died before their husbands were sworn in: 4

(Martha Skelton Jefferson, Rachel Robards Jackson, Hannah Van Buren, Ellen Arthur)

Official First Ladies who weren't married to the President: 1

(Harriet Lane, niece of the unmarried James Buchanan)

Unofficial First Ladies - nieces, daughters, daughters-in-law, etc - who carried out social duties on account of the death, illness or disposition of the President's wife: 10

(Martha Randolph, Emily Donelson, Sarah Jackson, Angelica Van Buren, Jane Harrison, Priscilla Tyler, Mary McElroy, Rose Cleveland, Mary McKee, Margaret Wilson)

First Ladies who died while First Lady: 3

(Letitia Tyler, Caroline Harrison and Ellen Wilson)

First Ladies who married in the White House: 1

(Frances Folsom Cleveland)

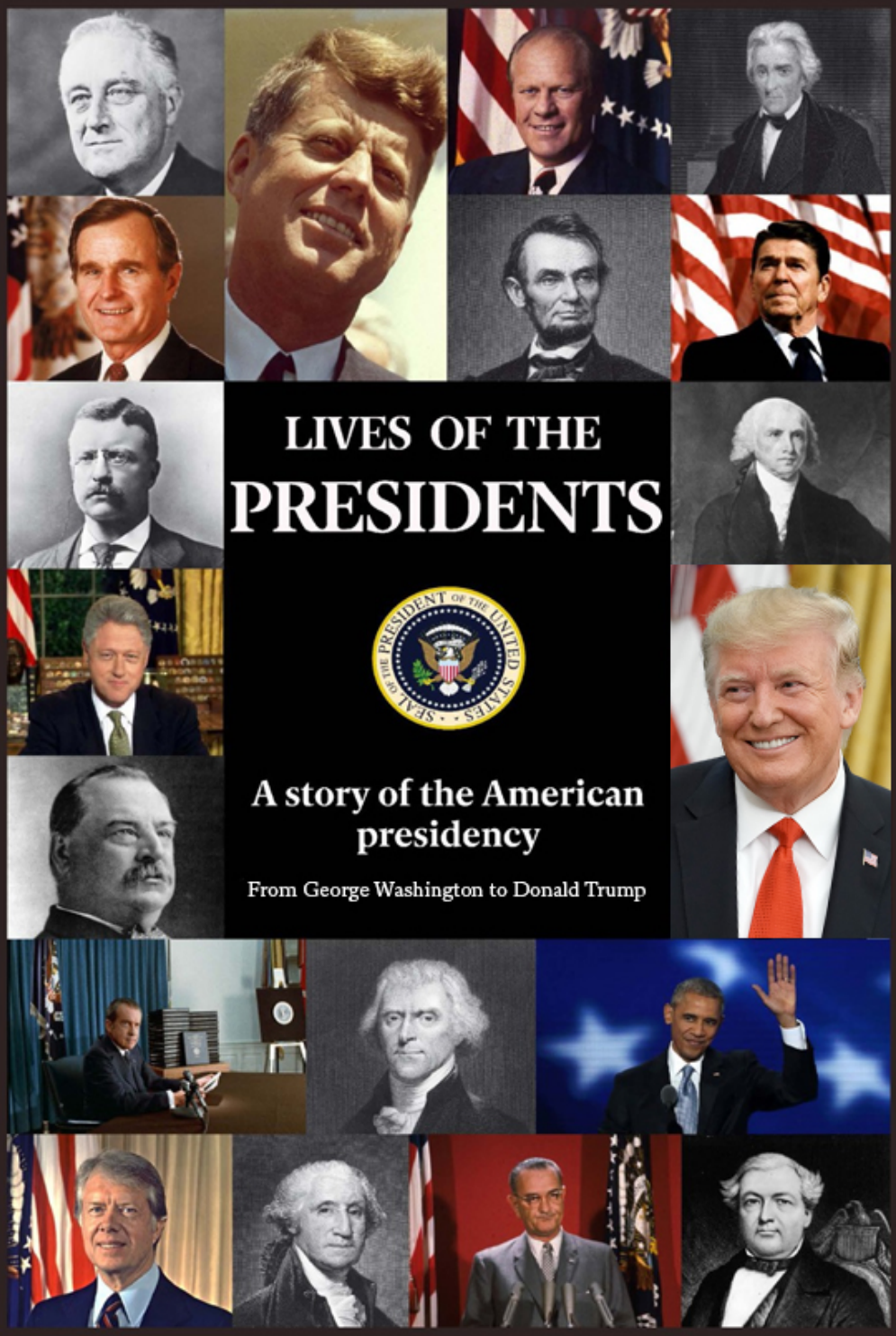
Longest-lived First Lady: Bess Truman (died aged 97 years, 247 days)

Highest-profile pre-Civil War First Lady: Dolley Payne Todd Madison, who entertained lavishly, instituted the inauguration ball, refurbished the White House, rescued many valuables when the British sacked Washington in 1814 but also served occasionally as First Lady for the widowed Thomas Jefferson, when his daughter was unavailable.

Highest-profile post-Civil War First Lady: Jacqueline Lee Bouvier Kennedy, who created such a sensation when she travelled with her husband to Europe that he was reduced to saying: "I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris."

Most powerful First Lady: Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, who screened all her husband's work while he was convalescing from a stroke and decided which matters were important enough to bring to his attention.

The INDEPENDENT



LIVES OF THE PRESIDENTS

A story of the American presidency

From George Washington to Donald Trump