

# OUR PRESIDENTS

DON SEITZ

*HAVE we ever had a great President? An able President? According to Don Seitz, hardly ever. From Washington to Coolidge he blasts his way leaving us bewildered by his trail of broken idols. To most readers his views may seem iconoclastic. The Editor will not be surprised if we receive an avalanche of indignant protests; but in publishing this article THE FORUM pursues its fixed policy of eliciting the truth through the clash of divergent opinions.*

MEASURED by the requirements of a government for the people, by the people, in the general public interest, how many of the men who have been elected President of the United States have measured up to the standard?

In the beginning of the republic it was not intended that the people should elect their chief magistrate. They were to select members of an electoral college, the groups of which were to meet in their several States and solemnly pick out a perfect President. Quite naturally, George Washington was the first to be chosen. He could readily have made himself Dictator, or Emperor, had he so desired. His chief anxiety was to hold the discordant thirteen together. They showed alarming signs of falling apart, and the Constitution was not fully ratified for many months.

In a new government it was not possible to produce perfection. It had trouble enough to exist. Scandals were plentiful and factional discord became most rancorous. The Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, who had no belief in popular rule, was tied up with Thomas Jefferson, who was whole-heartedly devoted to it. Hamilton became involved in a scandal with a woman whose husband peddled "influence", and the Secretary was compelled to make a public confession, quite as frank as anything ever disclosed by Jean Jacques Rousseau, to save his political repute.

Such was the burden of his office that Washington was glad to lay it down at the end of his second term to devote himself to agriculture at Mount Vernon. His fame was not helped by his

Administration, but his services were so great and his character so exalted, that no one can question his title to immortality, — but not as a President.

Adams, who succeeded him, was of the coldest New England type. A true history of his Administration was so vicious in its revelations that it was suppressed. Scandalous in detail, it probably was not wholly deserved. Yet little can be found in the record of Adams as President to prove that he even nearly approximated the ideals. Of course, Jefferson, with his notion of popular government, was a mischief-maker and bedeviled Adams as much as he could. Yet each died on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, revering the other.

Of Jefferson it can be said that he was more concerned with enforcing his views than managing the affairs of government. He bought Louisiana and the Northwest from Napoleon and so saved us the necessity of stealing it in later years. This was a masterpiece of foresight, though Bonaparte pressed the bargain as a step against the further growth of the British Empire. Jefferson's "embargo" brought great calamity upon our seaboard and his policy toward the Army and Navy left the country naked to the winds.

With all his "democracy" he made Madison his successor, and Madison produced the War of 1812 which almost caused a secession of the New England States. Monroe, who came after, remains famous as the inventor of a doctrine that has more than once threatened our peace, and has for more than a century been a source of offense to the South American republics. Briefly interpreted, under its enforcement, the United States will permit no one to "lick" our neighbors but ourselves.

John Quincy Adams followed. Up to and including his day the Presidents and the Government had been aristocratic. Now came Andrew Jackson of Tennessee, to demand that the People enter the White House. He defeated Adams on the popular vote, but a discriminating Congress to whose hands fell the choice shut the door of the pallid palace in his face. Adams's administration was one of discord and turmoil that did no good to the land. The United States Bank fastened itself upon the country, and New England Whiggery had its way, but not without Congressional conflicts that embittered men and distressed the country.

At the next election Jackson triumphed, and also in the next. The Electoral College became a rubber stamp, and the People entered the White House wearing their muddy boots and spitting on the carpet. The victors got the spoils. A woman upset Jackson's Cabinet, and South Carolina came near to seceding. A warship kept Charleston under its guns until the State cooled off. "The Union must and shall be preserved" said "Old Hickory" and he meant it. But his Administration of eight years was a battle,—not a government. He broke the United States Bank, but gave nothing in its place, though just as weeds replace cultivation, "wild cat" banking kept the country in distress until the exigencies of the Civil War produced a stable system.

Like Jefferson, Jackson provided a successor to himself in the person of Martin Van Buren, smooth, sly, and "foxy". He, too, played politics, and administration went to the dogs,—indeed, it could not be said to have been established. He failed to succeed himself. The Whigs selected William Henry Harrison on his repute as the "hero" of Tippecanoe, where with a large body of troops he defeated a small body of Indians under a much abler man, Elskawata, "Prophet" of the Shawnees. His term in office was short, but inconsequent. Pompous and ill-informed, he had no idea of affairs and saved his fame by dying. John Tyler of Virginia then became the first Vice-President to fill the chief chair. Tyler achieved the annexation of Texas as a sop to the cotton growing slaveholders and laid the foundations of the unjust Mexican War. His successor, James K. Polk, put that conflict over with no justification that any historian could ever discover, but it gave us a fat slice of sage brush, California, and a continued serial of international complications, plus added power to the slave owners. His Administration was super-political and gave way to one of the heroes created by the war, Zachary Taylor, "Old Rough and Ready". The Democrats had tried to suppress Winfield Scott, who conquered Mexico, fearing that success as the head of the army would make him President, but the Whigs preferred Taylor. He lived only a few weeks after taking office. A dish of cherries and milk brought on a colic from which he did not recover and Vice-President Millard Fillmore of Buffalo, New York, filled his place. Fillmore continues to be rated as a nonentity. He sent Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry to Japan, whereby under

the next Administration, that of Franklin Pierce, the Mikado's Empire became open to the world, though as Mr. Dooley accurately described it: "We didn't go in; they kim out". They did indeed, and to-day have become one of the New World's greatest anxieties. The Japanese alone remain grateful for the exploit.

The election of Pierce in 1852 was another echo of the Mexican War, in which he had served as a volunteer general. The Democrats wanted a Northern man who would satisfy the slaveholders, and Pierce filled the bill. He signed the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and that set Kansas to bleeding. Pierce was a friend of Nathaniel Hawthorne and the best thing he did while in office was to make the author Consul at Liverpool when the fees were corpulent. Jefferson Davis was Pierce's Secretary of War, and the South dominated his Administration. The country seemed safe, however, and the Democrats continued their rule by electing James Buchanan of Pennsylvania in 1856.

Buchanan was a swallow-tail. He had been Minister to England and had held a Cabinet place. His pictures show a fine old gentleman, much given to observing proprieties and nothing else. History is very hard upon him. Secession began while he was in office and he dealt with it feebly. Yet to study the times it is difficult to determine what he could or should have done. He meant well to both sides, but did not know how to handle either. The rise of the Republican party from the mixed elements of Free Soil, Know Nothing, and faded Whig elements was really a revolution. Order had ceased in American politics and chaos had come.

Yet the defeat of Democracy which produced the Civil War was not due to the new party's strength, but to Democratic dissensions. A solid Democracy would have defeated the rail-splitter. It could not be kept concrete. Stephen A. Douglas had the most votes in the Charleston Convention of 1860, but could not get the necessary two thirds, any more than William G. McAdoo could in 1924. Many vain ballots were cast, Benjamin Butler of Massachusetts, who was soon to be known as "The Beast" in the sunny South, voting fifty times for Jefferson Davis of Mississippi.

Adjourned to Baltimore, Douglas won in a perfunctory gathering which seemed unable to grasp the seriousness of the situation. The irreconcilable pro-slaveryites bolted and set up John C. Breckenridge of Kentucky and Joseph Lane of Oregon as their

candidates. The flickering Whigs in a futile and final effort to live named John Bell of Tennessee and the oratorical Edward Everett of Massachusetts; this further tangled the crisis. I have always had an antipathy for Everett since an old private of marines told me he had to stand at "present arms" five solid hours while Everett orated at the laying of the Washington Monument cornerstone.

So out of the welter Abraham Lincoln was elected, and the crumbling of the Union began. Lincoln has become one of the immortals whose fame as a wise, just, and merciful man cannot be assailed, yet he led a party into office that was more aggressive for spoils and far less representative than the "People" of Andrew Jackson. The shrieking Horace Greeley, the shrewd, suave William H. Seward, nursing his "irrepressible conflict", and the cynical old lobbyist and law peddler, Thurlow Weed, made and guided it. There is no statecraft visible in their proceedings, no desire to "save" the Union. Rule or ruin was their program. They did both.

It is one of the cruel consequences of "party" government that success at the polls is more important than care for the public interest. This bedevils the best meaning of Presidents and makes his position one of the utmost difficulty. He must choose between party and people. It is not possible, in its very nature, for a party to represent the people; it represents its machinery.

This then was Lincoln's peril. He was saved from conflict with the people by the war which broke out when he had been but five weeks in office. He had no chance to show qualities of amelioration or deal in diplomacy. That he was a consummate politician goes without saying. That he became a martyr obscures this fact in popular memory. He was surrounded by politicians and spoilsmen of the most rapacious sort. His Cabinet was a conspiracy against him. Could he have enforced in it such submission as Woodrow Wilson effected in 1917-18, the war between the States would not have run half the course it did. He was bullied by Stanton, betrayed by Chase, and much perplexed by the shiftless Seward. Welles was a Democrat, and his only friend, but a political liability, not an asset, because of his faith. Of Stanton little need be said. He lives as a great Secretary of War, tireless and faithful. It would be easy to prove that he was something quite different. His

effort to become a despot after Lincoln's death led to the attempt to impeach the luckless Johnson. Lincoln could not live up to the civil requirements of his office because of the war, and his use of the great powers invested in him is mainly a record of incompetence and disaster. The North won, not the Government. Lincoln's fame remains, measured by emotion. Had he survived his second term it would have been established by facts.

Of Andrew Johnson it is impossible to speak fairly, for the poor man never had a chance. He was an inebriated Daniel in a political lion's den, with Zach Chandler, Thad. Stevens, and Ben Wade as the chief roarers. Three more unprincipled politicians never sat in seats of power. They beat down Johnson's hands, although he had been Lincoln's own choice. But for the quiet courage of Ulysses S. Grant and W. T. Sherman and the armed force they could command, evil days indeed would have followed.

No greater mistake was ever made than the choice of Grant for President. He was taken on the strength of his name to keep the party in power, yet it led to a great revolt that would have succeeded but for the selection of Horace Greeley to lead the opposing hosts. Agitators cannot lead. Copperhead Democrats would not follow Greeley; Republicans regarded him as an apostle. So we had eight years of scandal and disgrace at Washington. Grant was President in name; Roscoe Conkling the ruler, with lovely Kate Chase Sprague as his ruling influence. Politically, no record could have been worse. The public interest was ignored by the Washington cabals, and Grant, with all his noble qualities, remains the most incompetent of Presidents, gauged by the proper standard.

Now comes a paradox. The man who succeeded Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio, was not elected. An electoral commission dominated by Conkling gave him the decision. Samuel J. Tilden gave way rather than bring on another conflict in this sorely tried land. Bitterly assailed, with "fraud" stamped on his brow, Hayes gave us a truly honorable and proper Administration. He sustained the Constitution and saw that the laws were observed, which are the President's chief duties in time of peace. He ceased to surround the ballot boxes in the South with bayonets. He removed the garrisons and with them "carpet bag" governments. He gave the South a chance to live. He inaugurated civil service,



and the U. S. dollar became worth one hundred cents by the resumption of specie payments during his stay in office. There were no scandals. Political vermin vanished from Washington. People sneered at his simple life. William M. Evarts, his chief adviser, observed that "water flowed like champagne" at White House dinners. Mrs. Hayes was a W. C. T. U. Now that Volstead rules the land this joke seems far-fetched. Champagne! What is it?

But Hayes was not ruled by Conkling. That turkey cock's sun set with Grant's going. When Garfield was elected Conkling sought to reassert his power. The bullet of an assassin ended the quarrel, — and Conkling, as a political factor. What Garfield might have been is beyond speculation. His death, however, gave the United States a good President in Chester Alan Arthur. He had been put on the ticket to placate Conkling and when he came into office Conkling was out by his own action in resigning from the Senate in search of a "vindication", which the New York State Legislature refused to give him. As a result, perhaps, Arthur's Administration was orderly, gentlemanly, and just. He, after Hayes, being the only President to keep his place, while champagne again flowed in the White House and the cooking was much improved. Mr. Arthur was a connoisseur in canvasback and terrapin.

In considering Grover Cleveland, the first Democrat to take office after the war, much allowance must be made for the state of mind that selected him. Conkling had met with a prodigious defeat in New York when he attempted to make Charles J. Folger governor. Cleveland was elected. Logically he became the Presidential nominee of his party. He carried New York and the election by less than 2,000 votes, these being somewhat nebulously gathered in Gravesend, a town at the tip of Long Island, ruled by one John Y. McKane, who held that every man was entitled to vote somewhere, and why not in so pleasant a spot as Coney Island, which was in his bailiwick. Long Island City was another soft spot in the figures. The Republicans had used it to cheat before and could not stand the backfire of an investigation. So Cleveland got in. He was at once called bigger than his party and, as a result, provoked some pretty rows. He went beyond the province of his office, said some epigrammatic things, and was defeated for re-election by Benjamin Harrison of Indiana.

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Harrison came near to being a model President. He was a small man with a waxen face who said little and worked hard, — a grandson of the William Henry who defeated Elskawata. One of his English ancestors, a butcher by trade, lost his head by voting to amputate that of Charles the First. He was not the least bit popular with either people or politicians. He refused to be swayed by one or ruled by the other, nor did he try to run the Government uphill. Rated by the requirements he stands nearly 100 per cent. to the good. Quite naturally he was defeated for re-election.

Cleveland ran again in 1892 and came back, thanks to a populist tip-over in the West which gave John B. Weaver forty-two electoral votes. His second term was one of trouble. The party did not obey his request to revise the tariff on a revenue basis, and he let the Wilson bill become a law without his signature. His Secretary of the Treasury dealt with Wall Street in filling its coffers with gold needed to keep its credit sweet until forced by a newspaper, the "World," to trust the people. He did it with a growl. The people came across about twenty to one.

Seeking an issue that would disconcert him, the Republican press and leaders seized upon a boundary dispute between Great Britain and Venezuela to rattle his nerves, — and succeeded. To upset his enemies he challenged England to mortal combat and laid the train for a world war. The old lady was too sensible to accept the challenge, but he gave the nation a scare that wrecked the Stock Exchange for a period and raised hell generally. The opposition was properly rebuked, but it is hard to see how he "served" the people.

Cleveland's strenuous term was followed by the Administration of William McKinley, nominated by Mark Hanna after John Sherman had been betrayed by the Ohio delegation. It has always been held to McKinley's shame that he was under Hanna's thumb. This was not true. Hanna had a curious reverence for him, — curious and unusual in that he was a strong soul. McKinley was not. He was urbane and politic. In short, a nice man. Yet Hanna was humble in his presence, deferred to and was devoted to him. He had fathered a tariff that laid many "implied obligations" of his party and was a true Ohio Republican, respectable enough to do anything and get away with it. The war with feeble Spain to "free" Cuba, to please William R. Hearst,



was his doing. Spain thought she was yielding, but did it "tomorrow" instead of to-day. Nobody is proud of that war.

Here again the bullet of an assassin killed a President who was improving and put a circus in the White House. I once talked with James J. Hill about Theodore Roosevelt, when first well in the saddle, observing: "Well, he wants to run everything."

"Yes," replied the Great Northern magnate,— "like a baseball nine."

And so it was. The Constitution took a vacation. It needed rest, perhaps, having been badly damaged during Cleveland's régime by Congressman Tim Campbell's inquiry: "What's the Constitution between friends?"

Roosevelt gave it a rest. Also the House, the Senate, and everything except the American people. He "took" Panama, decimated the Twenty-fifth Infantry, "settled" the coal strike, took Harri-man's money and gave him no return, meddled with everything from childbirth to populism and had a "bully" time. No one else did. The panic of 1908, the friction with Japan, the dominance of labor unions and capitalism over the people at large, all date from him. Worse than that, with the help of William Jennings Bryan, he destroyed political opposition and made politics too one-sided to be interesting. Then he gave us Taft to keep his seat warm while he went a-hunting.

To consider Taft seriously as President is not polite. He was long regarded as a stop-gap for Roosevelt. Indeed, he did not seem to take the office seriously. He traveled incessantly and when he did anything it had a Rooseveltian flavor. He floundered and fell when it came time to stand on his own feet. Then Roosevelt performed a great service. He wrecked the Republican party.

It cannot be said, however, that the country profited by the débâcle. Woodrow Wilson was the outcome. Here again we had the luckless result of non-opposition in government. Shot to pieces the Republicans for the moment could provide none and Bryan had made the Democrats impotent. So one-man-government continued. Far abler and more despotic than Roosevelt, Wilson belied the name of Democrat. His Cabinet was ignored, his Ambassadors left in the dark. He dealt with important government matters through unofficial agents, whether from mistrust or impatience, it is hard to decide. He made many bad and more

weak appointments; he took on his Secretary of the Treasury as a son-in-law. The World War came out of a clear sky. How did he deal with it? In three phases:

1. Too proud to fight
2. Peace without victory
3. Force without limit

He won his re-election under the first phase. The people did not wish to go to war. He could not have gotten a vote for a declaration out of Congress. The campaign slogan for 1916 was: "He kept us out of war."

When the second phase developed he had been re-elected. Immense scorn from Republican sources welcomed his pronouncement. Like Cleveland in the Venezuela affair he avenged himself upon the opposition by entering, within a very few weeks, upon the third phase. He lived up to it. Under his vast war powers he used "force without limit", abroad and at home. He put gyves on the American people, trusting them not for a moment. He enforced a "selective" draft that "selected" everyone. He penned harmless aliens up in stockades, forced the press into an attitude of self-censoring that destroyed its usefulness and its liberties, and made himself the most powerful figure in the world at a gross outlay of \$23,000,000,000. Then he invented the League of Nations, by which some fifty-four are now successfully allied against the United States.

Throughout all, luck stood by him until his war powers ceased and he could no longer command or commission. Then the people rose and, by a vast majority — 7,000,000 — an unheard of figure in American elections, repudiated Wilson and his policies. They shook off their chains and it will be many a year before they hold out their hands again for shackles.

On this mighty wave of reaction Warren G. Harding rode into office. He was a plump printer from Marion, Ohio. Statesmen had died-out in Ohio and small men with ambitious wives were pushed into power. Harding, as one of these, became United States Senator. Boies Penrose, boss of the Senate, saw in him the kind of a genial nonentity who would fit the reaction. Like Mr. Artemus Ward he was "as genial a feller as you ever met." Now the boys in the party had been out of the crib for fifteen years. Roosevelt allowed no one to play there but himself. Under Wilson, Republicans

were at a heavy discount. With Harding they all came back. He exerted himself in no way to interfere with the orgy. Deeply disappointed, the people at large would have rended him but for his removal by death. This gave them Calvin Coolidge. He is what they want, — a “mean” little Yankee, sharp-eyed, close-fisted, who will cut down taxes, keep “good fellows” at a distance and stick to his job. He has a chance to meet the needs of the Nation as only two or three of his predecessors have done.



# BELLES LETTRES IN BALLOT BOXES

## *II — A Forgotten Statesman*

GEORGE HENRY PAYNE

THERE is something fascinating about the successful British Statesman, but we must look at him from a literary and not a political angle. The American who goes out for an enjoyable ramble among the lives and works of distinguished English politicians should leave his sensibilities at home. But once we forget that the average British statesman has a contempt for our kind of politics, — perhaps justifiably, — and that if he has achieved success, it has been through being passionately British, the charm is apt to be unlimited.

Plantagenet Palliser, I said last month, was a statesman who is literary only in the sense that he was created by literature. An astute friend of mine, Mr. Aba Gonegaga, who has read widely in English and American political history, said he had never even heard of Palliser, and yet to me he is one of the great characters in English literary politics.

"I have heard of Peel, Melbourne, Palmerston, Gladstone, Disraeli," exclaimed Gonegaga, "but I find no trace of this Plantagenet Palliser that you say was Prime Minister of England in the last century."

There's the rub! There are many Englishmen who do not know that he was Prime Minister, and it is only those who are fortunate enough to know where to go to find the records that will be able to trace his career. Of course it is true that he was Prime Minister for only a short time, and it is true that he was involved in no wars, except with his wife; it is true that he was involved in no diplomatic deceptions, but nevertheless I insist that to outside students of English politics, like Mr. Gonegaga and myself, he is much more real than many of those whose dull doings cumber the pages of the chronological historians.

If it is true that the writings of Anthony Trollope, the biographer of Palliser, are no longer read, the more the pity say I. But I don't think it is true. I have in my library the forty volumes of Trollope that were edited by Harry Thurston Peck, — poor