

TOP TEN WORST PRESIDENTS

It takes a special person to become President of the United States and it takes leadership, experience, decisiveness and a bit of luck to keep the job from overwhelming a person. Below is a list of ten men who lacked most or all of these qualities and who, with the rest of the country, subsequently, found their tenure in the White House more of a curse than a blessing. Of course, choosing which presidents are the worst is always going to be—at least some degree—subjective, though I have made an effort to curb my own biases as much as possible. It's also important to realize this is not an unpopularity contest; there have been personally popular men who have made bad presidents just as there have been unpopular men who have made good presidents. Instead, I base my rankings on each man's accomplishments—or lack thereof—in relation to the length of time they were in office (I am not rating presidents who did not complete at least two years in office) and what the geo-political and economic situation was at the time. Also, it must be remembered that just plain bad luck played a role in some of these men's demise, so don't be too hard on them. And so, without further ado, here is my list of the top ten men who would have been better off being on vacation when their respective parties called them to service.

10. (Tie) BENJAMIN HARRISON, 1889-1893:



The grandson of the ill-fated 9th president of the United States, William Henry Harrison (who died in office just a month after being sworn in), the cold and stiff Benjamin rode into power largely based on his pledge to keep the government's promise to compensate the many Civil War veterans who had been promised bonuses which his successor, Grover Cleveland, had adamantly refused to do. Once in office, 'ol Ben was good for his word and coughed up the promised funds, after which things went downhill from there—especially economically. By the next election cycle, the country was in a full-blown depression and Cleveland won his old job back. What can you say about a man who was defeated for reelection by the very same man he had defeated four years earlier?

10. (Tie) WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT, 1909-1913:



It would be hard for any man to follow in the footsteps of the larger-than-life Teddy Roosevelt, but the corpulent Taft definitely failed to live up to even the lowered expectations of the time, which was especially curious considering that Taft had been Teddy's hand-picked successor. TR was what one would call a progressive and thought Taft would continue on in that tradition, but it quickly turned out that he was an old school Republican after all, much to Teddy's chagrin. So disappointed was he in Taft that Teddy challenged him in the primary in 1912 and, though he won more states and delegates than the incumbent president, he still lost out to Taft. Never the pragmatist, Teddy then went on to run a third party campaign, splitting the Republican vote and handing the White House to the Democrats for the first time in sixteen years.

9. JIMMY CARTER, 1977-1981:



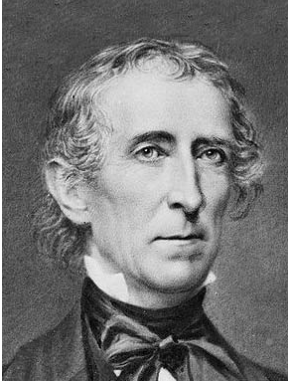
Jimmy Carter wasn't that bad, was he? Well, only if we look at his record: he dropped the ball—but no bombs—on Iran, resulting in the American embassy staff there being held for 444 days and oversaw a period of double digit inflation and unemployment. And you thought things were bad under Ford? To be fair, Jimmy did get Israel and Egypt to the peace table in 1977, resulting in the Camp David Peace Accord, which helped to stabilize the region—as much as it can be stabilized—for over thirty years. Over all, though, if one were to sum up the Carter administration it would probably be: "best of intentions but a job too big for the man to handle." I'll give him an A for effort, though.

8. MILLARD FILLMORE, 1851-1853:



In yet another of a long list of weak pre-Civil War presidents, we have Millard Fillmore, the second man to assume the presidency upon the death of his predecessor (in this case, Zachary Taylor, who died just over a year into his administration). It's not that Fillmore made lots of mistakes, it's just that he didn't do much either—other than perhaps encourage secessionists by deciding it might be a good idea to make the newest western states slave states in an effort to appease the south. In his own words: "God knows that I detest slavery, but it is an existing evil ... and we must endure it and give it such protection as is guaranteed by the Constitution." How's that for a man of convictions?

7. JOHN TYLER, 1841-1845:



The first sitting vice-president to ascend to the presidency (upon the death of William Henry Harrison who died just a month after being inaugurated) things did not go well from the beginning. It seems that some weren't entirely clear that the Vice-President could simply assume the presidency upon the president's death, creating a political crisis (which Tyler won), and that, believe it or not, was the high water mark of his administration. After that, Tyler quickly turned on his former supporters, vetoing their entire agenda, and getting himself expelled from the Whig party (which is not surprising considering he was a former states rights Democrat before joining the Whigs). By the time he left office, not even his wife was willing to give him for a second term. He eventually won a congressional seat in the Confederate government but died before he could take office, ending a long but decidedly unillustrious public service career.

6. HERBERT HOOVER, 1929-1933:



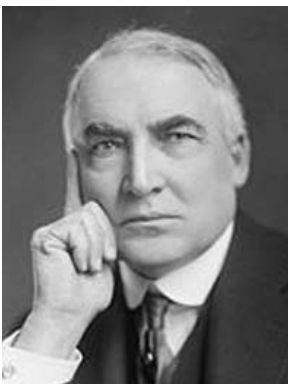
Hoover, perhaps in the best example of worst timing ever, managed to ride a groundswell of support into office in 1928, only to see it all come crashing down—both literally and figuratively—just a few months after being sworn in. Of course, he got all the blame for it, even though the dynamics that made the crash inevitable had been enshrined in American financial institutions long before Herbert ever put his hand on the Bible, which is unfair. What he was responsible for, however, was helping the country work its way out of the Depression, which he proved to be wholly incapable of doing. Hoover tried, to be sure, but by the time the economy began showing signs of having a pulse again, it was too late and he lost the presidency to some guy named Franklin Roosevelt.

5. ULYSSES S. GRANT, 1869-1877:



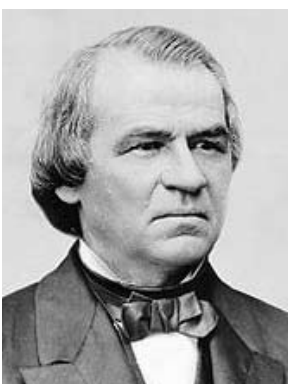
Such a fine general should make an ideal president, or so one would think, right? Not so quick. It seems the genial and semi-sober Grant, while a man of personal integrity himself, had absolutely no capacity to discern the same in others. As a result, he surrounded himself with some of the most corrupt men ever to sit on a cabinet. Worse, he fiercely believed in loyalty and so was reluctant to sack anyone once their indiscretions became not only public, but self-evident. Obviously, it was much easier to command a million-man army than a nation, as Grant found out the hard way. Had it not been for his personal popularity (Grant is the most popular president to make the bottom ten) it's unlikely he would've seen more than the one term.

4. WARREN G. HARDING, 1921-1923:



If any man had less capability to be president than Ohion Warren G. Harding, it's hard to know who it might be. Harding basically became president because he was considered handsome (by the standards of the time—and remember, this was the first election in which women could vote) and because people were tired of Woodrow Wilson's shenanigans. Unfortunately, he was much more interested in womanizing, gambling, and seeing to it that his political cronies lined their pockets than he was in anything approaching leading the country. Fortunately, the economy was booming in the twenties or he could well have gone down as the worst president. He died just three years into his term, supposedly of heart disease, though there is speculation he may have been poisoned—probably by one of his mistresses.

3. ANDREW JOHNSON, 1865-1869:



Old Abe was not known for his ability to pick competent generals until he happened upon Grant; the same might be said for his choice of running mate in 1864, when he chose Andrew Johnson—and anti-secessionist Democrat from Tennessee—to be the man entrusted with being a heartbeat away from the presidency. The problem was that Johnson and the Republican controlled congress couldn't agree on much of anything. (Johnson holds the record for most presidential vetoes and for having the most presidential vetoes overridden by congress.) As a result, he ended up in a four-year-long spat that turned the post-war reconstruction efforts into a nightmare and nearly prematurely cost him his job when he avoided being impeached by a single vote. What was 'ol Abe thinking?

2. JAMES BUCHANAN, 1857-1861:



Okay, so he wasn't quite as bad as his predecessor in that he didn't openly support secession and slavery; it's just that "ol' "Buck", as he was known, did absolutely nothing to stop or even slow the secessionist train down as it headed for the washed out bridge ahead at full speed. What is sad is that Buchanan had the résumé to be a good president: a popular and experienced politician, Buchanan ably represented Pennsylvania in the House of Representatives and later the Senate, and served as Secretary of State under President James K. Polk. What he lacked was awareness of the dangers the country faced or the courage to do anything about them, which is even more unforgivable than simply making mistakes. Buchanan might have made a passable president had he served ten years later or ten years earlier, but in 1857 he proved disastrous.

1. FRANKLIN PIERCE, 1853-1857:



Ol' Frank usually makes it to the bottom of most of these lists, probably because he did more to set the stage for the Civil War than any other president. What did he do? Well, he like repealed the Missouri Compromise act of 1850, thereby reopening the question of the expansion of slavery in the West and further fueling the fires of secession—which he also supported, by the way (even becoming the only ex-president to openly support the south during the Civil War). It's not that Franklin was evil; in fact, by most accounts he was a personally fairly genial guy; It's just that he was badly on the wrong side of history and probably did more than any other president to make civil war inevitable. He is also the only president to have died of alcoholism, succumbing to sclerosis of the liver in 1869. Think of him as the anti-Lincoln and you get the idea.

BONUS TRIVIA FACT: Since 1789, forty-three men have held the presidency. Of them, fifteen have been Democrats, eighteen have been Republicans, four were Whigs (the precursor to the Republican Party), four were Democratic-Republicans (the forerunner of the Democratic Party), one was a Federalist, and one, George Washington, was an independent.