Unmasking the Truth:
America's Overrated and Underrated Presidents

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to unmask the truth of the history of the American presidency, overcoming the personal and political agendas of high school lesson plans, by discussing the presidencies of two underrated leaders (Ulysses S. Grant and Herbert Hoover) and two overrated leaders (Grover Cleveland and Ronald Reagan), bringing to light little-known facts and dispelling public misconceptions, in order to make the public more fully informed of this nation’s most prestigious institution. It is the hopes of the author that this work will inspire readers to take a more critical look into their nation’s history and to actively question the facts presented to them by society’s “educated” members.
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Introduction

The president of the United States is one of the most powerful individuals in the world. He makes decisions that not only affect his country, but the countries of his allies, his enemies, and every one in between. He, along with the Senate and the House of Representatives, passes controversial policies on a daily basis. He elects the Supreme Court justices that make decisions such as *Roe v. Wade* and *Brown v. Board of Education* that govern the way Americans live for years, decades, and even centuries; and he asserts the power to make decisions such as the Monroe Doctrine, the Louisiana Purchase, and the emancipation of the slave that sculpt the way of life in this country. In accordance with the controversies that surround their presidencies, historians are constantly debating what makes a great president and how each successive president measures up to these standards. Drawing the line between a great man and a great president, between great ideas but poor practices, historians are constantly reevaluating and reconsidering history. With all of the controversy that surrounds the office, there is a surprising consensus among the American public as to the best and worst presidents to lead this country. This could be because the definition of a great leader is universal and only varies slightly from person to person, but with the partisanship that thrives in the governmental system of the United States, that solution is highly unlikely. Instead, the answer lies within the American education system, its agenda, and the laziness and fear of teachers and mentors to step away from conventional, accepted thinking and teach American history as it truly occurred. For example, in his book which objectively re-examines the presidency of
Ulysses S. Grant, author Frank Scaturro states that “it has become fashionable to condemn the Grant presidency and, in terms of a historian’s reputation, it is risky to do otherwise” (1999, p.120). Americans have an accepted view on the events and leaders that make up their country’s history. If one strays from that view they are considered extremist and radical. In our instant access, fast-paced society it is much easier to quickly label presidents, putting them in their historical box and moving on to the next subject, than to fully discuss both the positive and negative aspects of their career and all of their implications. It is much more convenient to say that Thomas Jefferson was good because he wrote the Declaration of Independence and made the Louisiana Purchase and that Jimmy Carter was bad because he ruined the economy. However, when citizens of the United States of America take these short and sweet interpretations to be fact, they learn nothing about how Jefferson, a man who fought for equality, owned slaves and began the removal of the Indians; and how Carter, a man labeled as incompetent and unskilled, was responsible for the Camp David Accords, a treaty that ended thirty years of strife between Israel and Egypt.

Furthermore, the American education system, and for that matter, the American media, applies the practice of presenting its history so that America is viewed in the best light possible. For example, Christopher Columbus is revered for the founding of America; however, there is little discussion as to his inhumane torture of the Native Americans. In addition, the suggestion that another group of explorers, perhaps the Vikings or the Phoenicians, should be given credit for discovering this land (a claim which actually has valid and convincing support) is considered practically blasphemous and is tossed aside before any true consideration is given to it. In terms of the presidency,
virtually every presidential administration was plagued with scandal and corruption in one form or another. While the media and the public are quick to criticize those who they feel are not good leaders for their wrong doings, they tend to look past the misdeeds of their proclaimed heroes. For instance, virtually the only thing that President Warren G. Harding is known for is the Teapot Dome Scandal, and everyone in America is all too familiar with Watergate and the Monica Lewinsky affair. On the other hand, very little is discussed of the torrid love affairs of Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy and Thomas Jefferson. Again, Scaturro admits “we have too often a deliberate attempt so to change the facts of history that the story will make pleasant reading for Americans” (1999, p.64). The nationalism, pride, and egotism that are present in American culture today do not allow its citizens to view its past in a rational discerning manner. This paper will attempt to unearth some of history’s tragic misconceptions about its past leaders in order to allow the reader a more realistic look into the venerated office of the President of the United States. While the views and opinions contained herein are by no means the last word on the subject, it is simply a different way of viewing history. Not everyone who reads this will agree with the opinions presented, but hopefully they will form their own opinions and begin to question, not only the office of the presidency or even the field of history, but everything that is presented to them.

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Ranking the Presidents

According to Sigmund Freud, “there are three impossible professions: education, psychoanalysis, and government” (Dallek, 1996, p. xi). Just as a career in government is
impossible, so too is the practice of judging and rating those in office. What is it that makes someone a great leader and what is it that makes them a disaster? Does a good leader have to possess a good personality, or are his or her political skills the only things that are truly important? Does the fact that someone is a great leader also make them a great president? These are a few of the many questions that historians, politicians, and scholars must ask themselves when judging the effectiveness of the nation’s commander-in-chiefs. While there is not a prescribed definition of the characteristics of a good leader, every scholar must have at least a rough set of their own personal qualities that they find important in a leader in order to make a uniform, fair decision. These traits often vary from scholar to scholar. In his study on presidential leadership, George Goethals lists these qualities as opportunity, high levels of activity, intelligence, optimistic reality, and flexibility (2005, p. 545). Ridings and McIver, on the other hand, considered the individual’s leadership qualities, accomplishments/crisis management, political skill, appointments and character and integrity to be of the utmost importance (2000, p. viii). Still yet, John Diconsiglio contends that a president’s charisma, intelligence, leadership ability, political skills, lasting accomplishments, trustworthiness, and statesmanship are all things that should be considered (1996, p. 8).

Another point to reflect on is that, even though the presidents are supposed to be judged solely on their performance while in the office of chief executive, it is extremely difficult to separate their life and accomplishments within office from their life and accomplishments outside of office. Indefinitely, a president’s pre- and post-presidential career will at least slightly influence how one ranks them.
Besides the fact that there is no strict definition of what makes a good leader, ranking the presidents becomes even more complicated by the fact that the Constitution is not conducive to strong presidential leadership, as it calls for the limited role of government (Pearson, 2006, p. 56). Most of the pre-twentieth century presidents felt constrained by the Constitution, which prevented them from taking active leadership roles, while the presidents in the twentieth and twenty-first century have felt more comfortable in loosely interpreting the document in order to justify their actions (Ridings and McIver, 2000, p. x). That then leads to the question of whether a president is great because he is active or because he follows the strict language of the Constitution. While that question is still up for debate, it is interesting to note that all three of the presidents that are considered “great”, (George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt), have all exercised free executive power (Pearson, 2006, p. 57).

Finally, while much of a person’s success in office is due to their political skill, much of it is also luck and being elected into office at the right place and the right time. Ridings and McIver state that “no two incumbents were ever dealt the same hand...Some presidents have had more opportunities to succeed than others. Or to fail” (2000, p. x). The presidents discussed in this document were not judged solely on the number of positive accomplishments that they were able to achieve while in office, but how they handled the situation, whether good or bad, that they were placed in, and whether they made the most of their condition.

There was not necessarily a set criteria that was used in order to judge the presidents discussed in this paper, however, the set of criteria that was found to be most
appropriate was that discussed by Robert Dallek in his work *Hail to the Chief*, in which he examines vision, pragmatism, consensus, charisma, and trust when discerning a president’s abilities (1996). Furthermore, diplomatic skill, legislative expertise, skill as a compromiser and intelligence were also considered. What was most important was that, no matter what decision the individual decided to make, that he had the country’s best interest at heart when making it.

One thing that was not considered in judging the leaders was the choices and actions they made in their personal lives. It is the author’s opinion that it is entirely possible to be a “bad person” but a good leader, and the choices that one makes outside the office should not be used against them when critiquing their actions while in office.

As a final note, as the ideals of the nation change over time, so do the reputations of it’s past leaders. As time passes, experts are able to distance themselves from the individual and gain a more realistic perspective of their accomplishments. Therefore, the reputations of the presidents are continuously rising and falling. Two presidents discussed within this document, Grant and Hoover, have been slowly rising in popularity as historians are beginning to reevaluate their terms in office. Another president, Ronald Reagan, is one of the most controversial figures in American history. With sixteen participants ranking him as the most underrated, and twenty-three participants voting him the most overrated in a poll by the Federalist Society and the *Wall Street Journal* (Lindgren, 2000, p. 12), his rank as a leader is continuously debated and ever-changing. Therefore, while these presidents are considered overrated or underrated
at this point in history, that is not to say that ten years from now, they will remain in that rank.

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Ulysses S. Grant: Underrated

President Ulysses S. Grant faced four major problems during his eight years in office: the rights of the freed black men in the South, the placement and status of the Indians in the West, the flood of soft greenback currency throughout the country after the Civil War, and the highly controversial Alabama claims. Grant was able to solve all of these problems fairly and with a political brilliance equal to that of Abraham Lincoln or Theodore Roosevelt, which led Calvin Coolidge to conclude that Grant’s presidency ranks second only to Washington in constructive achievements (Scaturro, 1999, p. 65). What makes this even more extraordinary is that these strategic political victories came from a man who had no political experience, having only voted for president once before taking office (Miller, 1999, p. 107). Unfortunately, in spite of the vast amount of positive contributions that Grant made for the country during his eight years in office, many consider him “a great general who made a terrible president” (McPherson, 2004, p. 132), and little is known about his administration besides its corruption and misdeeds.

After the Civil War, Grant was by far the most popular individual in the country, and there was no doubt in the minds of the American public that he was going to be president, no matter his skill level and no matter whether he was personally willing to rise to the challenge. Grant expressed his indifference in regards to the presidential position both before and after his terms. After being nominated in 1868, he returned to his home
Figure 1: President Ulysses S. Grant
www.historyplace.com
in Galena without participating in any form of public campaign. To many “he seemed the reluctant warrior awaiting a call to duty” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p.208). Later, after eight years in office he proclaimed:

I did not want the presidency and have never quite forgiven myself for resigning command of the army to accept it. But it could not be helped. I owed my honors and opportunities to the Republican Party and if my name could aid it I was bound to accept (Miller, 1999, p. 107).

Despite the fact that Grant lacked enthusiasm for the presidency, he, his advisors, and the country realized the advantageous position in which Grant was now sitting, for President Lincoln had set Grant up both legislatively and judicially by putting freedman supporters on the Supreme Court and in Congress and thus, securing the passage of several important pieces of legislation backed by Grant quickly and virtually effortlessly. He knew that he had no choice but to accept the office.

The most famous piece of legislation passed during Grant’s time in office was the 15th Amendment to the Constitution. The Ku Klux Klan and other paramilitary operations in the south were using threats and violence to keep African Americans away from the voting poles. Grant realized the importance of the right to vote as did Massachusetts Republican George Boutwell who stated “with the right of voting, everything a man ought to have or enjoy of Civil Rights comes to him. Without that right he is nothing,” (Newman and Glass, 2004). Both Grant and Congress recognized that the only way to secure the right to vote for every African American would be to pass an amendment. The end result, the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, states:
Section 1: The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of race, color, or previous servitude

Section 2: The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation (Foner and Garraty, 1991, p. 1200).

With the passage of this amendment, Reconstruction reached new heights, and finally, after decades of struggle and defeat, African Americans had earned their suffrage.

Following the success of the 15th Amendment, Grant created the United States Justice Department and the positions of Attorney General and Solicitor General in 1870 in order more strongly enforce Civil Rights. During the course of the next two years Congress passed five Enforcement Acts which made it a crime to prevent a person from voting or registering to do so (Newman and Glass, 2004). In this way, Grant directly attacked the KKK, a feat that was admirable in the fact that, at the time, the Klan was one of the most powerful and most violent organizations in the south. Several other presidents would have balked at challenging their agendas and practices. Grant, however, a strong supporter of Civil Rights, jumped at the opportunity. In fact, between 1870 and 1873 hundreds of Klansmen were convicted of violating freedman’s rights in one form or another, virtually shutting down their activities in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Alabama, and practically killing the organization altogether until the following century. Still today, the Enforcement Acts are considered “the farthest reaching (and most widely litigated) provisions under which a person can realize or vindicate constitutional rights” (Scaturro, 1999, p. 71).

Finally, Grant passed the Civil Rights Act of 1875 which banned segregation in public accommodations, transportation, and entertainment facilities. This Act is
considered the high-water mark of Reconstruction and also marked the beginning of the struggle for Civil Rights which would dramatically culminate almost one hundred years later (Newman and Glass, 2004).

The steps that President Grant took toward equality in the 1870’s are monumental, but what makes them even more remarkable is that Grant, a decorated military general who was raised to rely on violence and force, refused to resort to such measures when dealing with one of the most violent groups in this country’s history. Instead, in the spirit of true democracy, he used the court system to carry out his civilian policy. This strategy led to the convictions of over six hundred Klansmen, curtailing their effectiveness and securing the rights of African Americans throughout the country (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 211).

Although it is less well known than the 15th Amendment, the Treaty of Washington, which settled the long disputed Alabama claims with Britain, is one of Grant’s greatest successes while in office. Due to the fact that this Treaty set the precedent of international arbitration in disputes between countries involving weighty matters of honor, it is considered a colossal victory for international relations as well (Scaturro, 1999, p. 54). This conflict arose due to the British involvement in the Civil War and the fact that it supplied war ships to the South. The most famous and most destructive of these ships was the Alabama, which caused drastic damage to Northern cargo ships (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 208). While citizens of the United States demanded large sums of money and a possible annexation of Canada as retribution for the economic damage inflicted upon them by Britain, President Grant and his Secretary
of State, Hamilton Fish, sat down with the British prime minister and peacefully discussed the issues in the presence of a five-member international council with representatives from the United States, Britain, Switzerland, Italy, and Brazil (Taranto, 2005, p. 98). The agreement reached by both parties prevented war and, for the first time in history, settled every standing border dispute in the United States (Scaturro, 1999, p. 52).

While Grant did a great deal in order to stabilize the United State’s relationships abroad and to improve the condition of the African Americans at home, he was also very progressive in his policy regarding the Native Americans. So much, in fact, that scholar Robert H. Keller claims that “the typical Grant stereotype can blind us to his humanity in Indian affairs (Scaturro, 1999 p. 11). Unlike others of the time, Grant was sympathetic to the plight of the Indians, a sentiment which began when he was stationed as a soldier in the Pacific Northwest. He saw western expansion as relentless and unnecessary. In order to counter General Sherman’s plan of extermination, Grant enlisted the help of Christian missionaries to assimilate the Indians into the ways of the white man (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 212). He also initiated his Quaker Indian Peace Policy which established federally run wards for the Native Americans, making the government responsible for the well-being of the Indians for the first time in history (Scaturro, 1999, p. 55).

Grant was the first person in our nation to reveal the injustice that Native Americans had faced since the founding of our country. While there were undoubtedly more thorough and less disruptive ways in solving this problem that would have allowed the Indians to maintain their own culture and personal practices, Grant’s policies were
much more humane and conciliatory than any that had been proposed up to that time. Not only did they solve the problems that were currently plaguing the Native American people, but they acted as an initiator for Indian policy of the future.

In addition to his success in Civil Rights and foreign affairs, Grant was also triumphant in his dealings with the economy. In order to finance the Civil War, Lincoln had released $400 million in greenbacks, money that was not backed by gold, into the economy. After the war, politicians were faced with what to do in order to curb the resulting inflation. Grant, a man of hard money, defeated Jim Gould and Jim Fisk, two of the wealthiest and most powerful men in the country, in their attempt to corner the gold market; and by the time the economic depression, coined the Panic of 1873 hit, Grant had managed to reduce the $400 million in greenbacks by $44 million. Instead of reissuing the $44 million in order to support the failing economy, Grant instead held strong against opponents and passed the Resumption Act, which required that all un-backed specie be removed from the market by 1879. As a result, according to Michael Barone of the *U.S. News and World Report*, "the country prospered with hard money for decades" (Taranto, 2005, p. 97), and his stubbornness in refusing to release money back into the system earned him credit and respect from even his staunchest opposition (McPherson, 2004, p. 138). Figure 2 on the following page shows the economic activity before and after the passage of the Resumption Act, illustrating its success and profitability.

In addition to Grant's major economical success with the Resumption Act, he was also able to reduce the national debt by $300 million in his first term and $435 million in his second term, reduce the interest rate by $30 million, and change the balance of trade
American Business Activity before and after the Resumption of Specie Payments

This chart displays the percentage by which American business activity was above or below the long-term economic trend (represented by 0) between 1870 and 1880. Note the dramatic improvement that followed the resumption of specie payments in January 1879.


Figure 2: Graph of economic activity before and after the Specie Act
Scaturro, 1999, p.53
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from $130 million against the United States to $120 million in favor of the United States (Scaturro, 2001, p.50).

While this section has discussed several positive components of Grant’s presidency, it would only be proper to also defend Grant on historians’ greatest criticism of his administration: its corruption. Scholar William McFeely states that “Grantism is seen by some as a synonym for corruption, but corruption by members of his administration did not distinguish Grant from other presidents” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 200). It is true that virtually every presidential administration has been wrecked by some form of scandal or another, including America’s sweetheart, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Camelot himself, John F. Kennedy. Despite this fact, Grant has been condemned more than any other president in history for the supposed corruption that plagued his administration.

Grant is greatly criticized for the appointment of many of his friends and allies into positions of high office, a concept known as “patronage” or “the spoils system”; however, Andrew Jackson, a man whom scholars consider a near great president, was one of the greatest supporters of the spoils system, strongly encouraging nepotism and using appointments to his cabinet as rewards for his cronies. In fact, Jackson was once quoted as saying “if he were a politician he would be a New York politician” and that the political making of Martin Van Buren, his vice president “embodied the principles of inclusiveness and loyalty that he cherished far more than mere propriety” (Landy and Milkis, 2000, p. 96). In addition, virtually every other president from Washington to Lincoln has also admitted to using the spoils system. Frank Scaturro contends that:
In a government where there are senators and members, where senators and members depend on politics for success, there will be applications for patronage. You cannot call it corruption- it is a condition of our representative form of government (1999, p.22)

He then goes on to state that “there is an immense amount of human nature in Congress and it is human nature to seek power and use it to help friends” (Scaturro, 1999, p. 22). Just because a president takes advantage of the spoils system does not automatically make him corrupt, he is simply adhering to a practice that is an inherent part of this country’s democratic structure. In fact, while many critics accuse Grant of taking part in this form of “corruption”, he was actually responsible for appointing Chester Arthur as a collector in the New York Customhouse, a politician and soon-to-be president who improved one of the most fraudulent and tarnished entities of the American government system (Scaturro, 1999, p. 22). Furthermore, he was the first president to call for civil service reform, suggesting that government appointments should be given on account of merit and not of loyalty, stating in his Second Annual Message on December 5, 1890:

I would have it govern not the tenure, but the manner of making all appointments...The present system does not secure the best men, and often not even fit men, for public place. The elevation and purification of the civil service of the Government will be hailed with approval by the whole people of the United States (Kellogg, 1989, p.137).

While he was not successful in implementing this plan himself, for civil service reform was not taken seriously until President Garfield was assassinated by a disgruntled office seeker, his efforts were instrumental in the formation of the nation’s first civil service reform and helped to oust 192 government officials who were found to be corrupt or inefficient (Scaturro, 1999, p. 24)
In addition to the controversy over Grant’s use of the spoils system, his presidency was rocked by many scandals including Black Friday, Crédit Mobilier, the Whiskey Ring, and the Belknap briberies. All of which can easily be discredited. The Crédit Mobilier scandal, in which the heads of the Union Pacific Railroad allowed members of Congress to buy stock in the company at face value instead of market value in exchange for continued funding, is the scandal most synonymous with the Grant administration. In reality, the activities took place in 1867 and 1868 before Grant was even elected to office. They were merely discovered during his term in 1872. Many Grant supporters claim that it is preposterous to blame him for something that did not take place under his watch, and one such supporter has been quoted as saying “we could as fairly blame President Benjamin Harrison for the Johnstown flood of 1889” (Scaturro, 1999, p. 29); however, this is still an incident that has tarnished Grant’s presidency and reputation since its discovery.

Like the Crédit Mobilier scandal, the Whiskey Ring scandal, in which government officials diverted tax revenue from whiskey producers for personal use, is another controversy largely associated with Grant that did not begin during his time in office, but instead began during the administration of President Andrew Johnson. While it was still able to thrive during a part of Grant’s administration, the members of government who were involved in this plan were too low to be considered a responsibility of the president. The combination of these two facts alone should be evidence enough that this should not be considered Grant’s scandal, but what’s more, Grant actually took an active and impressive role in prosecuting those that were involved in the illegal activity (Scaturro, 1999, p. 29).
Yet another scandal that Grant is credited for is “Black Friday”. “Black Friday” was a plan by financial moguls Jay Gould and James Fisk to corner the gold market, a scheme which required the president to curb the monthly sale of government gold in order for them to gain control. Grant was at first naive to their plan, as he was being manipulated not only by two men that he trusted, but by his own family, as his brother-in-law was also in on the scheme. He soon discovered their intentions though, and in response, sold $4 million in gold, thwarting their plan and boosting the economy (Scaturro, 1999, p. 30).

Last but not least, the Belknap bribery was the only incident in Grant’s presidency where a high appointed official was actually guilty of a truly corrupt act. In this scheme, Secretary of War William W. Belknap’s wife had agreed to secure a lucrative appointment for a friend at an Indian post tradership and then split the profit. In accordance with the plan, her friend made an agreement with the post’s incumbent to receive $12,000 annually for not accepting the position. When Belknap’s wife died, the money then went directly to him. Belknap’s scheme was uncovered shortly thereafter on March 2, 1876. Just minutes after hearing that he had been discovered, Belknap marched into Grant’s office and immediately resigned before the president could even be made aware of what was taking place. Without knowledge of what had just moments ago transpired, Grant accepted Belknap’s resignation (Scaturro, 1999, p. 41). While it would have been preferable for Grant to refuse Belknap’s request to resign and force him to face impeachment, the general public seemed to agree with his actions. The public’s response to Grant’s handling of the Belknap matter was similar to the general consensus that is still prevalent today, that presidential pardons and similar acts show the president to be
gracious and understanding. Still, opponents of Grant believe that this was an example of him naively adhering to subordinates, and strongly condemn him for this act.

While usually scornful and critical of President Grant, presidential scholar Thomas Bailey, believes that the practice of blaming the president for the misdeeds of his major appointees is not always fair because “the chief executive cannot possibly watch every move of every member of his official family” (Scaturro, 1999, p. 46). It is true that Grant made a mistake in the case of Belknap, but it is a minor mistake when one takes into account that he made a total of twenty-five appointments while in office, and Belknap was the only one that presented with a solid case of corruption. Furthermore, his Secretary of State, Attorney General, and Postmaster General are often ranked among the most capable leaders to ever hold their respective offices (Scaturro, 1999, p. 32). It is unfortunate that so many biased scholars and uneducated citizens hold Grant’s one mistake while in office against him and ignore his numerous other accomplishments and triumphs.

President Grant is consistently ranked in the bottom ten presidents in both historical and public opinion polls. In the famous and often cited Federalist Society/ Wall Street Journal poll, he is ranked 32nd, in the C-Span public survey on presidential greatness he is ranked 33rd, and in the Ridings and McIver poll, he is ranked a disastrous 38th (See insert). Historians, such as Thomas A. Bailey declare that he “was an ignorant and confused President whose eight long years in blunderland are generally regarded as a national disgrace” (Scaturro, 1999, p. 1) and others like C. Van Woodward believe “the Administration of President Ulysses S. Grant stands for the all-time low point in
statesmanship and public morality” (Scaturro, 1999, p. 1). But while many denounce him for being a lazy, incompetent drunkard whose complete lack of knowledge about the political machine almost led our country into an economic and cultural disaster, Grant was still popular enough, even after his second term, a time in which presidents have historically left the White House embarrassed and in shambles, to contemplate breaking the two term precedent and run again. What’s more, if the house had not passed an anti-third-term resolution (Miller, 1999, p. 108), there is a very strong possibility that Grant would have been the first president in history to serve for twelve consecutive years. Moreover, he is personally attacked for being ignorant, confused, and uneducated, but this incompetent excuse for a man managed to compose The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant, a two-volume set that is praised for its literary qualities and that is regarded as one of the greatest autobiographies ever written (Scaturro, 1999, p.11).

In recent years, historians have reevaluated Grant’s presidency, an act most likely spurred by the publication of Frank J. Scaturro’s President Grant Reconsidered, which is referenced several times throughout this section, and have begun to see him in a more positive light. They realize that amidst allegations of corruption and wrong doing, he was able to successfully negotiate the Treaty of Washington, develop the Department of Justice, implement the National Parks System which led to the creation of Yellowstone National Park (which is something for which many give Theodore Roosevelt much credit), improve the plight of the Indians, and most importantly, pass many pieces of Civil Rights legislation, leaving Michael Barone to conclude: “If he failed to secure the enforcement of black rights and the peaceful assimilation of the Indians, it is probable, that given the state of opinion of the white majority, no president could have done so at
the time” (Taranto, 2005, p. 98), and “No other President would do more for Civil Rights until Harry Truman” (Taranto, 2005, p. 97).

Despite the strikingly large amount of evidence in favor of President Grant and the growing number of scholars who are beginning to reevaluate his presidency, many are still willing to take the easy way out and dismiss him as evil and corrupt. One can only hope that one day Mr. Bailey and Mr. Woodward will be able to look past history’s quick and easy classification of Grant, and recognize him for the strong leader and political mastermind that he truly was.

Ronald Reagan: Overrated

The leadership style and intellectual aptitude of President Ronald Reagan can best be described by James Patterson’s declaration that “Regan stood for presidential restraint, tax reduction, and small government, yet as president he ran up record deficits. He was ideological in his rhetoric, yet often chose to act the pragmatist. He denounced the Soviet Union as an “evil empire”, then did more to moderate the Cold War than any other president” (McPherson, 2004, p. 288). Just as Reagan the man was a contradiction, an enigma, and at times a walking failure, so too was Reagan the president.

President Reagan, dubbed “the great communicator”, is famous for his personality, patriotism, and charm; and his eight years in office have come to be known as “the Reagan Revolution” to encompass his expansion of the economy, his ending of the Cold War, his reinvigoration of the American spirit, and his move away from big government. However, with his lack of leadership, his dependency on his cabinet, his
Figure 3: President Ronald Reagan
www.historyplace.com
naïveté in political matters, and his limited common sense and intelligence, Reagan was much less a strong presidential figure and much more an actor and a puppet of upper-class right-wing society. While many consider Reagan to be one of the greatest leaders of the twentieth century, he was actually a failure in both domestic and international affairs.

According to public consensus, Reagan’s greatest “accomplishment” while in office was the termination of the Cold War; however this is a misconception. In fact, while in office Reagan actually made many attempts to escalate the war by boosting military spending as part of his “Reaganomics” campaign; installing U.S cruise missiles in Europe; announcing his plans for the Strategic Defense Initiative, or “Star Wars”, a ridiculous, unrealistic plan to protect U.S. from nuclear attacks by building a shield in outer space that was more reminiscent of a sci-fi movie than an initiative that came from the president’s desk; and, with the help of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, “denouncing the Soviet Union in ideological terms that rivaled that of the worst days of the Cold War in the late 1940s” (Wikipedia, 2007).

While much credit is given to Reagan where it is not due, this is not the first time in history in which citizens have blindly praised a president without looking at the entire picture. During his time in office, Franklin Roosevelt was credited with ending the Great Depression, and while his valid efforts toward his social reform programs certainly helped with this feat, it was actually World War II that was responsible for ending the Depression. Much like Roosevelt, Reagan made several valiant efforts toward ending the Cold War, but in reality, it would have happened during that time in history no matter what President would have been in office, which leads many of his critics to claim that
“Reagan didn’t win the Cold War, the Soviets lost it” (Landy and Milkis, 2000, p.225). In fact, some regimes, such as the one in Poland, had begun to dismantle before Reagan even took office. He was simply in the right place at the right time.

The battle between the United States and the Soviet Union had waged on for several years and the Soviet Union was beginning to lag both in financial resources and in popular support. This, coupled with the election of Mikhail Gorbachev, a progressive leader who was more concerned with saving the Soviet Union’s failing economy than with fighting the United States, made an agreement almost inevitable. Reagan was simply smart enough to create a strong friendship with Gorbachev, creating a catalyst for the agreement. Stephen Zunes, a journalist for the National Catholic Reporter, supports this sentiment by stating that “The Soviet Union and its Communist allies in Eastern Europe collapsed primarily because their governments and economies rested upon an inherently unworkable system that would have fallen apart anyway” (2004). Gorbachev himself even admits that the fall of the Soviet Union had nothing to do with the arms race and he states that “when it became clear to us that the one party system was mistaken, we rejected that model. A new generation of more educated people started to be active. Then society required freedom, society demanded freedom” (Zunes, 2004). In fact, Reagan’s threats against the Soviet Union allowed the regime to last longer, as its members rallied together in order to fight the evil United States. While there is no doubt that the increased military spending on Reagan’s behalf played a part in dismantling the Soviet Union, it had no larger of an effect on their economy than it did on that of the United States.
Finally, many people recognize Reagan’s speech at the Berlin Wall to be the final call that ended the Cold War, but in reality, many important political leaders, and even members of Reagan’s own cabinet, believed it to be of no political importance. They felt that it was cheesy and irrelevant and that it “was mere showmanship without substance” (Mann, 2007). Reagan’s most famous speech was yet another example in an extensive list of events that proves Reagan was much more of an actor and a show boat, and much less a president with substantial political vision. There is a long-standing debate in history regarding whether the person makes history or whether history makes the person, in this case, history definitely made the person.

While Reagan was unsuccessful in ending the Cold War, he was an absolute disaster in other areas of international affairs. It is evident that the Soviet Union would have collapsed with or without Ronald Reagan, but he still pursued the country with an unrelenting zeal that made him appear as a “trigger-happy Neanderthal” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 481). That zeal disappeared in 1983, however, when 241 Marines were killed in Lebanon as a result of a truck bomb. In response to this direct physical attack on American soldiers, the president that had vowed to use any means necessary to save the world, backed down when his country needed him most, proving to the world that he was a leader that “spoke loudly but carried a wet noodle” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 477). Later that same week, Reagan needlessly invaded Grenada in order to draw attention away from his failures in Lebanon and prove that the United States was still dedicated to fighting Communism. The United States won this senseless fight, but as a result 19 soldiers were killed and 116 were wounded (Wikipedia, 2007).
These events were all considered disasters in the scheme of international relations; however, Reagan’s ultimate collapse in foreign policy came during the Iran-Contra scandal. While it is impossible to grasp what a complete failure and fraud Reagan was while in office without examining his role in Nicaragua, it is first necessary to become informed of his involvement in El Salvador and the rest of Central America in order to fully understand his deception.

El Salvador in the 1970’s and 1980’s was a murderous, bloody land plagued by a conflict between a guerilla insurgency and a military junta that had a “terrible human rights record even for Latin America (Alterman, 2004, p. 238). While both Carter and Reagan tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to come to a peaceful agreement, neither one wanted to be responsible for letting a country fall to Communism under their watch, a mind frame which bore dangerous similarity to that held by Johnson during Vietnam. Because of the fear that almost every American held of encountering another Vietnam, Congress had passed strict laws limiting U.S. involvement in El Salvador. When the Reagan administration came into office, however, it made providing military support to El Salvador one of its top priorities, completely disregarding the orders of Congress and the principle of human rights in order to accomplish its goal. The Reagan administration was so desperate to keep the level of its involvement in El Salvador a secret that any time an American was photographed or documented as being in the country, they would be removed immediately. In a completely repulsing and unforgivable story by a Knight-Ridder reporter, a military specialist in El Salvador explained the process of “body washing” as he stated:
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If a guy is killed on a mission, and if it was politically sensitive, we’d ship the body back home and have a jeep roll over him... or we’d arrange a chopper crash, or wait until one happened and insert a body or two into the wreckage later. It’s not that difficult” (Alterman, 2004, p. 239).

The secrecy that the government kept surrounding its involvement in El Salvador led to the military deaths of twenty-one American soldiers being formally ignored by the United States government (Alterman, 2004, p. 236). While this account is shocking and deplorable, it was the Reagan administration’s plan since the first minute of its initiation into office. The initiative that Reagan conveniently left from his platform was his plan to use El Salvador to draw a line against the advancement of Communism, and, according to scholar Eric Alterman, “its members did not intend to allow any concerns about the niceties of human rights, religious rights or any other kind of rights to interfere with its victory on the existential battlefield” (2004, p. 247). In fact, Reagan’s newly elected Secretary of State, General Alexander Haig went so far as to publicly announce that international terrorism would take the place of human rights as the foundation of foreign policy. It is interesting to note that Haig would later try to generate military action in Cuba and tell the president that if given the word, “he would turn that fucking island into a parking lot” (Alterman, 2004, p. 263). Reagan and his advisers were so focused on winning the war against Communism, that they chose to ignore the U.S.-supplied force’s killing of innocent civilians in El Salvador including church leaders, nuns, and U.S. citizens; going so far as to state that the nuns were responsible for their own murders and that they fired back at their assassins (Helvarg, 1998). These killings would go on to receive no formal investigation by the government despite their reports to the press that investigations were proceeding satisfactorily (Alterman, 2004, p. 250).
In a particularly gruesome incident known as the Massacre at Mozote, which has come to be known as the bloodiest massacre in Latin American history, hundreds and hundreds of unarmed civilians were murdered by ununiformed police only days before Reagan was to sign a Certification that El Salvador was making genuine progress in the human rights goals that the U.S. had set, (a blatant lie as it has been discussed earlier that human rights were of little concern to the Reagan administration). Weak, half-hearted attempts were made by the U.S. government in order to investigate the event, but it would be a decade before the Salvadoran Truth Commission would discover what truly happened on that fateful day. After digging through the burial sites overcome with decomposing bodies, the Commission was able to identify five hundred human remains. After forensics came back on the testable bodies, it was concluded that there were at least twenty-four shooters involved in the slayings and all but one of the cartridges used had come from an American supplied, American manufactured M-16 rifle (Alterman, 2004, p. 259).

The atrocities and blatant deceptions surrounding El Salvador relate directly to Reagan’s most popular failure in international policy, the Iran-Contra Affair, a scandal that shook his presidency and featured “a covert war, shady payments to drugs and arms dealers, a massive propaganda operation, and, eventually, sophisticated arms sales, Bibles, and birthday cakes for America’s sworn terrorist enemies in Iran” (Alterman, 2004, p. 262), a country which had very recently held fifty-two Americans hostage for 444 days.
During the 1980’s the kidnapping of westerners in the Middle East was a common practice. In an effort to free 30 hostages that had been taken by the Hezbollah in Libya, the Reagan administration agreed to sell weapons to Iran during the Iran-Iraq conflict in exchange for their negotiations with the Libyans to free the hostages. Later, Colonel Oliver North decided it would be a “neat idea” (Ridings and McIver, 2000, p. 263) to use the extra proceeds from the arms sales to fund the Contras, a right-wing guerilla group that was fighting the Communist government in Nicaragua, an act that was made illegal by the Boland Amendment. However, just as the Reagan administration was able to manipulate Congress and the American public into supporting action in El Salvador, so too were they able to accomplish this in Nicaragua. After reports of a “massive” arms flow from Nicaragua to the Salvadoran rebels, accounts which were completely fabricated as it was later discovered that, at best, the arms flow between the countries could be described as a “trickle” (Alterman, 2004, p. 264), Congress agreed to allow the American funded Contras into Nicaragua exclusively to stop the exchange of weapons. It was made clear that any other action in the country would not be tolerated. Of course, Reagan and his advisors had no intentions of merely seizing weapons, and CIA director William Casey, a man to whom lying to Congress was a manner of principle, quickly disobeyed his orders and conducted the Nicaraguan affair as he saw fit (Alterman, 2004, p. 265-266).

Throughout the course of the event, as the media began uncovering bits and pieces of the affair, and later, when the Tower Commission, the organization formed by the president to investigate the scandal, uncovered in-depth details as to the deception of the administration, Reagan claimed to know absolutely nothing about the actions of his
advisors. Other leaders would also confirm the fact that Reagan was kept in the dark about these proceedings. Lying about the events in Nicaragua and Central America came to play such a prominent role in Reagan’s administration that the Office of Public Diplomacy (OPD) was set up specifically for that purpose. The OPD conned thousands of universities, political science facilities, religious organizations, and journalists into printing false stories about Nicaragua and Central America in order to secure American support for their cause. On one such occasion, the government released a report that close to two thousand Nicaraguan troops had invaded Honduras. When the Honduran government admitted that this was not true, a statement was sent to the American embassy in Tegucigalpa claiming “You have go to tell them to declare there was an incursion! You don’t have a choice in this one. You’ve got to get a letter up there right now” (Alterman, 2004, p. 269). By the mid 1980’s it was obvious that everything that the administration maintained about its policies in Central America was bathed in deliberate deception as Reagan consciously lied time and time again. At one point, Reagan became so involved in his lies and so desperate to mask his deception that he ordered the bulldozing, exploding, burning and burying of an entire fleet of American planes that were used in order to aid the Contras after one was gunned down in the region. When asked what connection the American government had with the plane crash, the president responded “absolutely none” (Alterman, 2004, p. 281). During a press conference in 1986, several members of Reagan’s cabinet denied the fact that the president had any idea what was taking place with regards to Nicaragua. Later, it was discovered in Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger’s contemporaneous notes that details of the operation had been discussed directly in front of the president. Finally, in May of 1987,
Reagan claimed that “As a matter of fact, I was definitely involved in the decisions about supporting the freedom fighters. It was my idea to begin with” (Alterman, 2004, p. 288). Later that year he would declare “In capital letters, I did not know about the diversion” (Alterman, 2004, p. 288).

Reagan claimed to be an honest, hard-working man who loved America, however, time and time again, as he was claiming that he had no idea what was going on in respect to the foreign policy of his country, his chief of the National Security Council was erasing computer files and shredding paper documents (Brinkley and Davis, 2004, p. 278). In his book, When Presidents Lie, Eric Alterman claims that “by ignoring history, Americans had condemned themselves to repeat it” (2004, p. 293). While he was comparing Reagan’s mistakes to those made by Johnson during the Vietnam War, the exact statement can be made today when comparing the Iran-Contra Affair and the war with Iraq, a war which has made President George W. Bush a despised individual and a target for many personal attacks. For some reason, millions still claim that Ronald Reagan was a near great president.

Regan suffered many defeats and embarrassments in his foreign relations; however, he was just as enfeebled in his domestic affairs, his most popular of which being his economic system of “Reganomics”. Reaganomics, which many critics thought to be “mired in hopeless absurdity” (O’Brien, 2004, p. 246), called for tax cuts of up to 30%, increased military spending, and maintenance of social programs. While any economics expert can realize that accomplishing these three feats together is virtually impossible, the numbers speak for themselves. During Reagan’s term in office, the
national debt rose from $900 million to almost $2.7 trillion, and, despite the fact that Reagan called for a smaller government, spending increased 11% per capita (McPherson, 2004, p. 291). In addition, in just three years, the United States moved from being the largest creditor nation in the world to the largest debtor nation (Whicker, 1988, p. 128).

One of Reagan’s biggest economic goals was to stop inflation, and he was successful in this only because he virtually stopped the economy altogether. While the administration tried to defend itself by publishing “Ten Myths that Miss the Mark” which claimed spending was higher in fifteen key social programs and that by 1988 the defense budget would be lower than pre-Vietnam America, critics still declared that “the stench of failure hangs over Ronald Reagan’s White House” (Brinkley and Davis, 2004, p. 474). In addition to Reaganomics, virtually every component of Reagan’s economic policies favored the upper-class, from tax cuts for the rich to the removal of environmental and safety regulations for big business; yet hurt poor Americans. As scholar Robert Lekachman claimed, “Ronald Reagan must be the nicest president who ever destroyed a union, tried to cut school milk rations from six to four ounces, and compelled families in need of public help to first dispose of household goods in access of $1,000” (Whicker, 1988, p. 128). While Reagan claimed to fight for Main Street, U.S.A., these actions helped to turn our country into the obsessed, selfish, materialistic society that it is today.

Opponents of Reagan often questioned how much a B-list actor from Eureka College could truly know about political policy, and at times, Reagan proved that this was very little, as he made appointments based on advice from his wife’s astrologer (History Channel), relied on the Strategic Defense Initiative, an impractical science
fiction fantasy which claimed to be able to shoot down enemy attacks on the United States through a laser in outer space, convinced himself of historical truths based on old movies that he only half remembered, and spent much time speculating what he would do if the End of Days were to come during his presidency (Alterman, 2004, p. 241). There were also times throughout his presidency where Reagan had many questioning his overall intelligence, such as the time that he claimed that acid rain was caused by an excess of trees (McPherson, 2004, p.288), and when he ignored the problem of AIDS in this country because he considered it "a gay man’s problem" (History Channel). Besides his political naiveté, and his lack of intelligence, Reagan was also an outright liar. Such instances of his falsehood include the time that he told a White House visitor that he participated in the liberation of German concentration camps during World War II, even though he had never once been stationed overseas during the war; the time that he announced he had received a letter of support from the Pope in support of his actions in Latin America, a claim which the Vatican readily denied; and the report he made in 1985, with apartheid still raging in Africa, that they had somehow eliminated the segregation that had plagued their country for so long (Alterman, 2004, p. 241). Reagan’s lies and imaginations went so far that a senior advisor admitted that “he had a penchant to build these little worlds and live in them” and his son confessed “he makes things up and believes them”(Alterman, 2004, p. 241). While some may argue that these were simple blunders and miscommunications on the part of Reagan, they are, in reality, more so a sign of a weak mind and character.

In addition to his incompetence, Reagan was also an immature and juvenile man who could not handle the situations in which he recklessly got himself into and who took
credit for work which was not rightfully his. After the failure of Reaganomics, a policy which was only passed out of sympathy for him after his shooting shortly before the program was to be voted on, he blamed its misfortune, not on any misdoing of his, but of “the failed policies of the past” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 473). Later, after the scandal of the decade, the Iran-Contra Affair, was announced, Reagan blamed these actions on “hysterical reporters and overzealous aides” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 479) instead of admitting that he took part in the corruption.

Reagan, often dubbed the “amiable dunce” (Brinkley and Davis, 2004, p. 467) was well aware that he lacked the knowledge needed in order to carry out his job successfully, and therefore delegated much of the work to others in his cabinet. According to Colin Powell, Reagan’s passive management style made those in his cabinet uneasy as they felt nervous performing duties without direction. Other critics have likened Reagan’s administration to a ghost ship where you heard “the creak of the rigging and the groan of the timber and sometimes even caught a glimpse of the crew.” Still others compared his leadership style to that of an ancient king or Turkish pasha “passively letting his subjects serve him, selecting only those morsels of public policy that were especially tasty (Gould, 2003, p.192). Reagan relied heavily on Presidential Counselor Edward Meese, Chief of Staff James Baker, and Deputy Chief of Staff Michael Deaver, who were considered Reagan’s “triumvirate”. These men were responsible for all of the nitty-gritty policy work of the Reagan administration from speech writing to bill drafting, yet Reagan was never slow to take credit for their ideas and to bask in their glory (Brinkley and Davis, 2004, p. 471). Reagan was also quick to take the accolades after Iran released fifty-two American hostages within in the first hour
of his inauguration when, in reality, the release was a result of months and months of
tireless compromise between former President Jimmy Carter and Iranian officials.

Many historians have termed Reagan’s eight years in office the Reagan
Revolution, however, scholars Marc Landy and Sidney Milkis claim it was merely a
“coup d’etat” (2004, p. 198). They claim that Franklin Roosevelt was a great president
because “he did not take the safe road of simply rehearsing his administration’s
accomplishments” (2004, p.223), however, this is exactly what Reagan did. Reagan was
popular enough at the time of his election to try to get controversial, yet beneficial,
legislation passed through the Hill, yet he chose to play it safe and protect his popularity.
Ideologically, he rhetorically supported every Conservative initiative under the sun, but
realistically, he did not act on any of them. He was more concerned with his reputation
than with taking bold chances in order to significantly improve his country.

Great presidents are famous for their political genius in realistically viewing the
nation’s problems and how to solve them, the legislative expertise needed in ordered to
decide how to bring about the solution, and the drive to actually make sure those policies
are enforced. Reagan was simply an idealistic cheerleader. In choosing songs such as
“Morning in America” and “Happy Days are Here Again” to play along his campaign
trail and using phrases such as “rendezvous with destiny”, Reagan used his acting skills
in order to talk Americans into believing that America is a wonderful place, but did little
to actually show them. Figure 4 is a political cartoon depicting the shallowness and
simplicity of Reagan’s character and attitude during his reign over the nation.
Figure 4: Political cartoon depicting the idealism, optimism, and lack of substance associated with Ronald Reagan’s presidency

www.cartoonstock.com
Reagan was a president bathed in corruption and scandal who showed no true concern for the future of this country or for the people who reside here. He was a second grade actor who treated the White House like Hollywood and admitted to striving for a hell of an opening and a hell of a close only to coast through the middle (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 482). While he was loved in America for his uplifting speeches, his sparkling rhetoric, and his unrelenting patriotism for Main Street USA and its old-fashioned values, his presidential failures proved that his time in office was “the triumph of a glittering personality more than of a great character” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 468) and that “he was liked more than respected” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 480). The fact that Reagan was ranked eighth in the Federalist Society/ Wall Street Journal (see insert) proves that he was successful in winning impressionable Americans over with his charm and patriotism instead of political skill. In fact, when people look back on Reagan’s years in office, they are not reminded of great social reform or impressive diplomatic talent, instead they are reminded of a time when “The Gipper” was in command, the “evil commies” were destroyed in the Soviet Union, and life in America was grand. Figure 5 is a political cartoon which illustrates the degree of Reagan’s “overratedness” in the eyes of the American people.

As discussed previously, the tides of presidential popularity are continuously rising and falling as historians are constantly reevaluating history’s events. Hopefully some day soon, historians and the American public alike will view Reagan’s administration not in the nostalgia and wonder in which it is now seen, but as the joke that it really was.
Figure 5: Political cartoon depicting Reagan's level of "overratedness"
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Herbert Hoover: Underrated

“Please do not use me as a whipping boy for the New Era. I was neither the inventor nor the promoter nor the supporter of the destructive currents of that period. I was the ‘receiver’ of it when it went into collapse” (Norton, 1984, p. 103). These were the words uttered by Hoover upon his departure of the White House, and they still ring true today. Herbert Hoover was by no means a great president. He wasn’t, however, a complete disaster either, as history books would lead one to believe. With the Depression starting merely eight months after Hoover took office, it is impossible for his administration and his policies to have been its cause, as a crash that momentous would have been years in the making. Still, shanty houses made of cardboard dubbed as Hoovervilles, newspapers used for warmth known as Hoover blankets, and empty pockets turned inside out termed Hoover flags all associate the thirty-first president with being the cause of the Great Depression and an utter failure of a leader.

Up until his term as president, Herbert Hoover had been an extremely successful businessman and engineer. By the age of forty he had become the director of eighteen mining companies around the world, making him a multi-millionaire (McPherson, 2000, p. 218), and leading fellow professionals to claim that he “personified executive competence” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 332). His intelligence and attention to detail was admired by many and made him a public success. Politician Jon L. McNab proclaimed that “he sweeps the horizon of every subject. Nothing escapes his view. His trained mind marshals every factor and where he proposes a remedy, it neglects nothing
Figure 6: President Herbert Hoover

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the omission of which would disturb the final solution” (Norton, 1984, p. 104). Friend and supporter, Bruce Barton also stated that “I might get more fun out of Smith (Hoover’s opponent in the 1928 election), but I’d make more money with Hoover (Norton, 1984, p.104), in reference to Hoover’s mathematical training and the fact that he would be able to keep personal emotion out of the White House. Barton would later go on to warn him that “people expect more from you than they have from any other president” (Norton, 1984, p. 107). This was one reason why the public was so disappointed when Hoover “failed”, for they had expected such astronomically great things from him. However, at the onset of his term, the New York Times praised him for a “versatile ability and sterling character” and labeled his election as “the dawn of the Hoover era” (McPherson, 2004, p. 118).

Many historians, both Republican and Democrat agree on the fact that Hoover was dealt a stiff hand during his term as president, but some still contend that he is merely an exceptionally poor leader. While not associated with his presidency, a quick review of his leadership roles both before and after he took office would convince them otherwise. Hoover began his career in the public light when he was chosen to organize food distribution and relief funds for Belgium during WWI. He then returned to the United States and was placed in charge of its Food Administration in 1917. He returned to Europe the following year to again help distribute food and organize the feeding of thousands of starving individuals. At the end of the war, he was chosen by President Woodrow Wilson to accompany him as his economic advisor to the Versailles peace conference. During this conference, his intelligence and command of the issues was so impressive that John Maynard Keyes declared Hoover was “the only man who emerged
from the ordeal of Paris with an enhanced reputation” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 335). Following that, he was the commerce secretary during the terms of both President Warren G. Harding and President Calvin Coolidge. After his presidency, though his reputation had suffered quite a blow, he organized European war relief and later became the chairman of the Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of Government during the Truman administration, and finally, worked on an administration for government reform during the Eisenhower administration. His talent and skill in several arenas in the political game lead many to call him the “Secretary of Commerce and undersecretary of everything else” (McPherson, 2004, p. 291), for they felt that he had the ability and aptitude to handle anything which Washington threw at him.

While it seems as though Hoover was only able to find success in Europe, even in his efforts during WWI, he proved that he could be successful in the U.S. as well, as his call for wheatless and meatless days and victory gardens along with his support of agricultural price supports and the cultivation of marginal lands helped the real income of farmers jump 25% and made America the “breadbasket of the Allies” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 334-335).

During the election of 1928 even the opposing party could find nothing wrong with Hoover. In fact, when asked to run for the office of the president, he was asked by both the Democrats and the Republicans. Furthermore, during his Republican campaign, he was backed by such admirable men as Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, and Charles Lindbergh (Norton, 1984, p. 105). The events leading up to Hoover’s election as president of the United States proved that his “suitability for the presidency seemed
unquestionable” (McPherson, 2000, p.118). His vision was a progressive reform that would make a more efficient, better managed government. With his avid success in the mining industry and his skills as a business man, he would have been able to not only meet, but surpass these goals. Unfortunately, after the onset of the Depression, he could worry about little else.

One can see the success that Hoover would have had in office if it weren’t for the Depression by viewing his first few months in office. During that time he announced an expansion of Civil Service protection, canceled private oil leases on government lands, announced substantial tax refunds, ordered police forces to strike down on organized crime (as he was president during Al Capone’s heyday), supported a new immigration policy, launched his Commission of Conservation and Administration of the Public Domain, called for the commitment to national parks and wildlife refuges, and signed the Agricultural Marketing Act. Furthermore, he played with the question of a new federal Department of Education, ordered the military to cut its expenses to a minimum, prevented a Texas rail strike, proposed tax reductions that favored low income families, pledged $5 million to a program to redirect federal prisons, brought Americans closer to the Indians, proposed a shorter work week, pledged hundreds of millions of dollars in relief for farmers, and implored into a pension program that would give every person over the age of sixty-five $50 a month (Norton, 1984, p.107-110).

While the list of Hoover’s accomplishments is obviously extensive, his biggest project was his plan to create a Federal Farm Board which would build a floor under farm prices by making loans to farmers and purchasing surplus crops outright (Norton, 1984,
This program was a blessing for thousands in the country, for at the time, farmers were some of the poorest, neediest individuals in the country, and a group that had received little help from presidents past. Later, this program would help to drastically raise the price of wheat, cattle, and hogs and was declared “the biggest break in the world out west” (Norton, 1984, p.109). Hoover had the drive and the ambition to force poverty out of the country once and for all which led Norton to assert that “not since Woodrow Wilson declared the New Republic, had so decisive of a leader set the nation’s priorities” (Norton, 1984, p. 107) and the Kansas City Star to declare “the White House has become a positive force” (Norton, 1984, p.108). While Hoover is continually criticized and hidden beneath the shadow of the sensationalized Roosevelt administration, his actions during his first few months in office matched, if not surpassed, those set by FDR in his First 100 Days.

Thanks to his business sense, President Hoover was able to implement many successful economic programs and governmental policies throughout the country; however, thanks to his “tradition of service” and “standards for tolerance and justice” (Britten, 1999, p. 522) that he learned growing up as a Quaker, Hoover was able to push social issues of equality and fairness into the public as well. In regards to the African American community, Lou Hoover, although receiving much criticism for her actions, was the first First Lady in history to have an African American woman in the White House when she invited Mrs. Oscar De Preist, the wife of a Chicago congressman to tea. Later, President Hoover would also break precedent and invite R.R. Morton, the president of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to dinner, making him the first African American guest to dine in the White House since Booker T. Washington did thirty-two years earlier.
His attitude toward the Native Americans was progressive as well, as he encouraged individualism and initiative as a means to rapidly achieve economic self-sufficiency for the Natives. While Hoover, like many of his predecessors, pushed for assimilation instead of individual Indian culture, he did this only because he felt that it was the only answer, as the basis for historic Indian culture had been swept away (Britten, 1999, p. 156). Personally, however, he wanted them to have equity of opportunity and the chance to develop their own individual talents. He did not patronize or abuse the Indians like many presidents before him had, and he felt that it was important to both the themselves and to the country as a whole that their success be achieved based on individual initiative and not through the guardianship and care of the federal government (Britten, 1998, p. 552). Throughout his interactions with the Indians, Hoover found it of utmost importance that “the government live up to its responsibilities regarding its native citizenry and listen to the Indian’s side of the story. The government ought to be able to do justice to its wards” (Britten, 1999, p. 535). One way that Hoover accomplished this was by compensating the Ute Indians for the 1905 transfer of nearly one million acres of their land in Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico to national forests, a generous and fair action that would have been unthinkable to any other president.

His appointment of Charles James Rhoads, “a magnificent gentleman, with a good heart and a good head,” (Britten, 1998, p. 523) to the Bureau of Indian Affairs helped to facilitate his goals. Rhoads did not force assimilation with shock treatments; instead, he endorsed reservation day schools which allowed children to remain close to their parents instead of being bussed to strange, unfamiliar places in order to attend white schools. Furthermore, he also opened reservation schools to white children in order to
establish non-intimidating interaction between the two groups (Britten, 1998, p. 530). While Rhoads’ Native American policy was extensive and all-encompassing, its three main components were the establishment of an Indian arts and crafts board that would promote the sale of hand-made Native American crafts while guaranteeing their authenticity; a creation of tribal corporations, in which the natives would incorporate their land into allotments so that they could be turned into tribal estate and exchanged for shares of stock, protecting them from usurpation; and the institution of an Indian claims court that would bring suits which the Indians made against the government to finality in a limited number of years, preventing the Native Americans from paying an exorbitant amount of legal fees (Britten, 1998, p. 537). Unfortunately, like many other programs during Hoover’s administration, these plans fell short because of lack of funds due to the Depression. And like many other programs during Hoover’s administration, it was easily passed by Roosevelt and his executives after the war, allowing him to take the credit for policies for which Hoover had fought hard and believed in whole-heartedly.

Not only was he a genius when it came to economics, business, and domestic affairs, Hoover was brilliant when it came to international issues as well. His Secretary of State was astonished at Hoover’s grasp of foreign policy and declared that “Hoover had forgotten more about the world then most diplomats had ever learned” (Norton, 1984, p.108). With his knowledge intact, and his Quaker background keeping him peaceful and fair, he withdrew troops from Haiti and Nicaragua, publicly pledging to noninterference in the internal affairs of Latin America; mediated a border dispute between Chile and Peru; and negotiated treaties of arbitration or conciliation with forty-two other countries (Norton, 1984, p. 108).
that was unfortunately quashed after Japan invaded Manchuria, was the acceptance of a disarmament agreement between the U.S., Britain, and Japan at a 5-5-3 ratio. Hoover claimed that he hoped the agreement would “mark a further step toward lifting the burden of militarism from the backs of mankind (Norton, 1984, p. 114). In accordance with his Quaker background, Hoover’s main goal in foreign affairs was the guarantee of peace and compromise, virtues that he was able to uphold throughout his four years in office.

In addition to Herbert Hoover’s prowess in his position as chief executive, his wife was also a strong leader as well. During his presidency she encouraged 250,000 Girl Scouts nationwide to join in the relief efforts, used the radio to raise awareness of volunteerism, and encouraged groups such as the 4-H organization to help in the effort. While in the White House, she also mobilized committees of friends to assure that appeals that were received at the White House found their way to sources of local aid (Norton, 1984, p. 340).

One thing, outside of the Depression, that Hoover is greatly criticized for is his handling of the Bonus Army march in which 31,000 World War I veterans came to the White House demanding the immediate cash payment of their Service Certificates which had been issued eight years earlier. These certificates did not mature until after twenty years, so therefore, by law, they would not be able to be redeemed until 1945. Hoover’s response to the protesters and the actions of those who were placed in charge of dispersing the demonstrators were sensationalized in the media, with reports of cruel inhumane orders from Hoover which left four dead, dozens injured and thousands exposed to tear gas (Wikipedia.com, 2007). Unfortunately, this is not how the event
actually occurred. What is left out in most history books is the state of Washington while these individuals were in town. During the protest, the streets were filled with dirty men cooking beans on the sidewalk, polluting, harassing onlookers, and laying siege to government buildings. Throughout the course of their stay, they managed to arouse more resentment than sympathy from those involved. While the demand for their bonuses was not met, Congress still accepted a plan to apportion $100,000 in order to aid the marchers in their journey home. The majority of the protesters readily accepted this offer; however, around 2,000 chose to stay in Washington, further increasing the hostility that was brewing as a result of the conflict. As the White House became barricaded and guarded, Lou Hoover still valiantly served coffee and sandwiches to those who had chosen to remain.

Up until this point, Hoover had delegated all responsibilities of the crowd to the local police department, and it was not until actual violence broke out, as bricks were thrown during a demonstration and two people were killed, that the president called in the Army. Even though Hoover had employed the use of military force, he instructed Secretary of War Hurley to avoid bloodshed, to “use all humanity consistent with the due execution of the law” to remove the women and children before any action took place with “every kindness and consideration” (Norton, 1984, p. 139). Hurley chose to place Douglas Macarthur in charge of clearing out the protesters. Macarthur in turn, immediately disobeyed the orders that no soldiers cross the bridge to where the protesters were located and assembled a brigade with a thousand soldiers, midget tanks, and machine guns and began marching. When the message reached Hoover that Macarthur had purposefully laid aside his orders; attacked “Bonus City”, as it had come to be
known; torched their shelters; and sent an infant to the hospital, he coolly skirted his emotions in the public eye. He would later tell friends, however, that “it would be years before he discovered exactly how much authority the general had assumed for himself… intercepting the White House messenger and telling him to get lost.” “I upbraided him,” was all that he would say in response (Norton, 1984, p. 139). Like every other event that occurred during his presidency, Hoover was given unnecessarily bad press in relation to this affair and was never given the opportunity to defend himself.

At the start of the Depression, Hoover preached personal responsibility and welfare capitalism which called for companies to voluntarily sponsor unions, institute profit sharing and pension plans, pay decent wages, and protect workers from factory hazards and unemployment (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 335). At first, these programs were quite successful, and both government and business dropped their laissez-faire attitudes, causing the Wall Street Journal to boast that “never before, here or elsewhere, has a government been so completely fused with business, and never before had one man been associated so thoroughly with success in both, or in bringing the two together” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p.336). Unfortunately, his tactics were not successful for long as businesses were less and less willing to personally aid their employees as the economy began to drastically decline, and he was again under the chopping block.

Hoover was even further criticized throughout the Depression for not changing his lifestyle in order to live in the means of his time. As he was telling people to ration their food and go days without certain products, he continued to eat seven course meals for lunch and dinner. Hoover did not do this in order to seem superior or bourgeoisie,
instead it was merely a show, intended to prove to the country that he was not worried and that he did not even bother to change his daily routine because he knew that the country was going to pull through. In reality he took a 20% pay cut in a salary which he had already refused, donated $10,000 a year to San Francisco’s Department of Welfare, raised $250,000 to support destitute miners, and called in friends to review the letters of engineers that were having a rough time in order to find them all of the aid possible. Furthermore, members of Hoover’s cabinet took volunteered pay cuts as well, including at least two members of his Federal Farm Board who gave up their entire salaries altogether in order to better help those in need (Norton, 1984, p.120).

Hoover was at an extremely unfair disadvantage when he took office, for no president in history had ever found himself in the position in which Hoover was sitting. The Federal Farm Board, which had been very innovative and effective in the past, was not designed to handle the sweeping collapse that it was now facing, as were dozens of other social reform programs that had been implemented in the country (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 339). Hoover was at first against using government help in order to work through the Depression, but anyone in his position would have been of the same mind frame (O’Brien, 2004, p. 181). The nation was going through a monumental economic crisis, and spending an exorbitant amount of money did not seem to be the wisest way in which to solve the problem. After Roosevelt took office, Hoover had tried everything he could think of in order to solve the problem, and it appeared as if government intervention was the only thing remaining to try. In essence, Hoover was the guinea pig of the Depression, and Roosevelt was able to watch and learn from his mistakes in order to implement his successful programs.
Landy and Milkis claim that “the people were eager to be convinced that FDR would exhibit the kind of bold and energetic initiative that they had demanded but not received from Hoover” (2000, p. 155), however, that is not necessarily true. While in office, Hoover initiated many social programs, launched public works to provide more jobs, and lowered taxes to stimulate new investment; all which were premises of Roosevelt’s New Deal. When it was obvious to Hoover that the market was going to crash, he appealed to the senate for an influx in public works (an action for which FDR was given a mass of credit), and recommended the doubling of public buildings, dams, highways, and harbors. He also called for a tax cut of the federal budget discount rate. Later that year he appealed to the public to build homes and created the President’s Emergency Committee for Employment. This along with the success of the Federal Farm Bureau and his allotment of $150 million for his public works program created a Little Bull Market and restored American faith in the economic system. These were all much greater measures than what was taken by Van Buren, Cleveland, or Teddy Roosevelt and left reporters to declare that “no one in his place could have done more” (Norton, 1984, p. 117). Even the Harvard Business School agreed with his actions.

Landy and Milkis further claim that the American people believed that FDR would “replace the rejected theories of old” (1999, p.158) that were present during Hoover’s administration. In all actuality, Hoover was responsible for the ideation or implementation of many of the great ideas and great works for which Roosevelt has been given credit. For example, he started the practice of relying on the radio in order to reach the public about presidential issues and gave seventy to eighty radio addresses when he was in office (Norton, 1984, p. 75). He was also the first to ask for the Public Works
Administration, however it was not officially granted until Roosevelt took office. In addition, his distrust and his call for an investigation into the unethical stock market practices that were some of the causes of the Great Depression, paved the way for Roosevelt’s Securities and Exchange Commission that would form in the years to come (Norton, 1984, p. 128).

What is even more tragic about this situation is the fact that Hoover had secretly warned President Coolidge during his time in office about the “fever of speculation” (Norton, 1984, p. 104), and he personally came into the White House urging the purchase of bonds instead of stocks and cautioning Wall Street of its actions (Norton, 1984, p.115). The misfortune is even further extended in that fact that Hoover was one of the only presidents in this country’s history who actually fully understand the ins and outs of its economic system, yet no one was willing to listen to him. During the election, the Democrats admitted that “he is probably more vividly conscious of the defects of American capitalism than any other man in public life today” (Norton, 1984, p. 104), yet he was still ignored and then later blamed for the economic misdoings of individuals who were far less informed and held much less power. Many presidents before Hoover who had faced an economic crisis had tried to avoid the problem, Hoover, on the other hand was willing to attack it head on. He was the first president to take full responsibility for the task of ending an economic crisis, and pledged to do it as humanely as possible. Other leaders, such as President Reagan, would have placed the blame for the Depression on someone else and then left it up to his cabinet to solve. Hoover did more to promote recovery than any other president in hard times past (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 333), yet he could get no one in the public or government to concede with his requests.
Despite the blame that Hoover received for being the cause of the Depression, he was still willing to do everything in his power in order to reverse it, which included working extraordinarily hard, long days. His work days were at least eighteen hours in length and he never took one sick day while in office. He valued the time that he was able to spend at work so much that he usually loathed festivities and public gatherings because they took up too much time (Norton, 1984, p. 122). Thanks to President Hoover’s hard work at the end of his term, he was able to enjoy a short spike in the economy as farm product prices rose 12%, production of iron and steel went up 20%, textile mill production increased 50%, the value of the stock market shot up by 60%, 700,000 men that had finally found work, hoarding had stopped, gold had been brought back into the economy, and more banks were opening than closing (Norton, 1984, p. 145-146).

Furthermore, his Reconstruction Financial Corporation was able to loan hundreds of millions of dollars to ailing banks, insurance companies, and other failing institutions (Norton, 1984, p.13), he raised the maximum tax on upper-income Americans from 24% to 55% (Norton, 1984, p.125) and allowed $40 billion in relief funds to pass through the senate (Norton, 1984, p.135). These events led many politicians and citizens to believe that perhaps their ordeal was finally over and that Hoover had come through in the end. As evidence of this, Hoover received a note from a supporter in his last days in office which told of a jewelry store in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania that had a sign hanging in the window asking “That was a pretty bad depression, wasn’t it?” (Norton, 1984, p. 146). He had finally turned away from his regulation of “rugged individualism” after everything else he tried had failed, and began taking up the practices that would make FDR so
famous. Unfortunately, these actions proved to be too little too late and he left the office cast in a shadow of disappointment and failure.

Even though Hoover knew that there was no hope for his reelection, he still worked diligently until the very end, proving that he truly cared about his country and not just about his office, leading one supporter to affirm that “he is still consumed with ambition despite all he has suffered” (Norton, 1984, p.144), and another to state that while “his critics were concerned with the next election, his own thoughts were of the next generation” (Norton, 1984, p. 126-127). He truly loved his country and the people in which he served, and despite all of the criticism that he faced during his four years in office, he was still distraught when he was defeated by Roosevelt. He knew that he had what it took in order to pull the country through, and was willing to put the nation’s harsh words aside in order to get the job done

Hoover has received the brunt of the blame for the Great Depression despite the fact that much of it was not warranted. The Depression was caused by the poor economic practices of the Coolidge administration and ended, not because of the economic genius of Franklin Roosevelt, but because the end of World War II created a huge economic boom for the country. Yet Herbert Hoover was the man in the spotlight and Americans yearned for anyone but themselves to blame. Will Rogers summed up the sentiment surrounding Hoover at the time by stating “if someone bit into an apple and found a worm in it, Hoover would get the blame” (Norton, 1984, p. 120). The public was so intent on placing the blame on Hoover that they were willing to overlook all of the hard work, positive efforts and contributions that he was able to make for the country during
his presidency. Despite how history teachers make it seem, in his four years in office, Hoover implanted more social and economic programs during his four years in office, than Roosevelt did in over double that time. His term has often been referred to as a “whirlwind of activity” and many scholars profess that “before he was done, his public building projects overshadowed those of all of his predecessors combined” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 126). However, history has managed to erase all the positive things that Hoover has contributed from the common stream of knowledge and now, the man who sent live turkeys to his friends at Thanksgiving because he didn’t want their slaughter on his conscience (Norton, 1984, p. 126) will go down in history as heartless and inhumane.

Hoover is very rarely ranked in the bottom ten in presidential polls; however, he is not as close to the top as he rightfully should be. Now that the glow of Roosevelt has begun to fade, and Hoover is able to step out of the shadow of the Depression, historians are able to view his presidency in a more objective, positive light. Still, the public is unable to dissociate Hoover’s good name with America’s darkest hour. Hopefully, as more information is made known to the public about the positive contributions that Hoover made for this country, they too, will be willing to give him the credit which he rightfully deserves. Ideally, Hoover will one day be regarded as the great man and the respectable leader which he truly was.

Grover Cleveland: Overrated

Grover Cleveland is not on this list for what he did do, but for what he did not do, which is hardly anything. In all actuality, the only thing that is even remotely interesting
Figure 7: President Grover Cleveland
www.historyplace.com
about the man is that he is the only president in history to be elected to two non-consecutive terms. Cleveland was not as astoundingly popular when he came to office as the other men discussed in this document, instead he won the position because his opponent, James G. Blaine was of questionable honesty, both personally and financially (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 241). Likewise, compared to the other men included herein, there is very little to discuss about Cleveland’s presidency. Once again, this is because there was very little to Cleveland’s presidency. His one and only true function while in office was the veto, which allowed him to millions of American’s with one fell swoop of his pen. Cleveland made it well known that he firmly believed that “it was his duty to stop bad things from happening, rather than to make beneficial things take place” (McPherson, 2004, p. 160) and furthermore that “though the people should support the government, the government should not support the people” (McPherson, 2004, p. 164).

In accordance with this belief, Cleveland struck down virtually every proposal for a social program and every plea for a war pension that came through his door. In fact, his love of the veto earned him the nickname of “His Obstinacy,” and he set out to prove that nickname was correct, for by the end of his second term, he had killed three times as many bills as all of his predecessors combined (O’Brien, 2004, p. 128).

Cleveland’s nemesis which he spent the majority of his time in office fighting was the war pension, and he would often spend tireless amounts of hours crooning over every detail of every plea for help, finding a way that would allow him to strike it down. While it was callous enough to ignore the pleas of the poor, weak and suffering that helped defend the country that he was now leading, what makes his acts even more deplorable is the fact that, during a time when having an exemplary military record was one of the
strongest assets a politician could have, Cleveland did not participate in the Civil War. What’s more, when he was drafted into the service, he took advantage of the controversial Conscription Act and paid a Polish immigrant $150 to fight in his place. (McPherson, 2004, p. 161). Therefore, not only did he not feel enough pride for his country to risk his life in protecting it, but he also, when in a position to help them out tremendously, alienated the men who were willing to do so. While it is disheartening that a president would take such a merciless stance toward his fellow countrymen, what is even more disturbing about this situation is the zeal in which Cleveland carried out his work. According a White House insider during his administration:

Cleveland delighted in the little and would labor pantingly at the windlass of small things. It was this bent of infinitesimal that led him to put in hours darkly arranging a reason to shatter some old woman’s pension with the bludgeon of his veto” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 243.

With an economy that was failing, a country that was succumbing to corruption and scandal, and labor unions that were becoming increasingly volatile and upset, this seems like such a menial task in which to focus an entire presidential term.

Another large veto for Cleveland was the Texas Seed Bill of 1887 that would have greatly aided farmers who were suffering from an acute drought in the south. Congress had only apportioned $10,000 for the bill, a very trivial sum in the broad view of government spending, but Cleveland adamantly opposed it saying that “he could find no warrant for such appropriation in the Constitution” (McPherson, 2004, p. 164), despite the fact that farmers were one of the most destitute groups of people in the country at that time.
Finally, even though he was present for some of the worst labor strife in history, Cleveland was stated as being “less than sympathetic” to the plight of workers (McPherson, 2004, p. 164). There were two major labor strikes which Cleveland had to face while in office, the Haymarket Riot in Chicago in 1886, which protested for the right to an eight hour work day and the Pullman Palace Car Company strike of 1894, also in Chicago, which was provoked by a 30% pay reduction. Both issues Americans felt to be very deserving of protest, and in both situations Cleveland refused to even listen to the arguments of the distraught workers. Instead of compromising with the leaders of the protests in order to find a middle ground, Cleveland immediately employed federal troops to dismantle the demonstrations, using violent means to put a stop to non-violent activities (McPherson, 2004, p. 164-165).

Early in his second term, the country was stricken with the greatest economic crisis that it had yet to face, known as the Panic of 1893. Then, more than ever, the American people needed someone who was willing to understand and relate to the problems of the poor and suffering. Grover Cleveland was not the man for the job. Throughout the depression, he continued his practice of ignoring the poor and disenfranchised, turning down their pleas for assistance and support on the grounds that if he were to provide financial support to these suffering people that it would “encourage the expectation of paternal care on the part of the government and weaken the sturdiness of our national character” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 243). Frustrated with the president’s inaction in helping the plight of the suffering, many of those left unemployed by the depression took action by marching on Washington. These actions were completely legal, completely non-violent, and protected by the Constitutions; however,
Unmasking the Truth

the president still expressed a great distaste to the event and to the people who partook in it (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 247). The public further showed their disapproval and their knowledge that something was amiss in the White House when, during the midterm elections of 1894, the Democrats lost 117 seats in the House, the largest reversal of congressional strength in history (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 247). Cleveland has been quoted as saying “every thoughtful and patriotic man has at times been disappointed by the apparent indifference and demoralization of the people” (McPherson, 2004, p. 164).

While this quote was uttered by Cleveland himself and was intended toward an outside event, this quote could have very well been spoken about Cleveland himself, in discussing the disappointment that the American public felt toward electing a cold, insensitive man to lead their nation. President Roosevelt enjoyed such great popularity and is revered as one of the greatest presidents today because he was able to sympathize with the problems of those who were struck down by the Great Depression. If Roosevelt is considered great for this skill, then Cleveland should be considered a near disaster.

The Panic of 1893 ended up dominating Cleveland’s second term, even though he had the power to help ease it. The only positive steps that he took in order to fight the depression was his action in opposition of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890 which called for the monthly government purchase of silver, a less valuable metal, to back American currency. Cleveland was convinced that rejecting this practice would lead to the end of the economic depression. When it did not work, he appeared incompetent and suffered grave political consequences (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 247). What is worst of all, due to his inaction, the federal reserves had fallen so low, to a mere $41.3 million, that he was forced to borrow $62 million in gold from the banking giant, C.P.
Morgan. Although Morgan was able to help the president and restore a part of the nation's economy, he also prospered greatly from the deal, and the transaction made it seem as if Cleveland had sold out to big business, which in reality, is exactly what he did (McPherson, 2004, p. 165).

Not only was Grover Cleveland unwilling to help the poor and the suffering in this country, he also turned his back on the freedman who had spent twenty long years building their lives as equals after decades of oppression and abuse. Cleveland, who was once quoted as saying that there is “a grievous amount of ignorance, a sad amount of viciousness, and a tremendous amount of laziness and thriftlessness” (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2007) among the black community, allowed the reverse of racial reforms of Reconstruction and oversaw the creation of the Jim Crow laws, mandated by the Supreme Court decision of Plessey v. Ferguson, which allowed segregation under the “separate but equal” requirement. This policy was unrealistic and would plague southern blacks with even greater inequality for another seventy-five years. Cleveland, the first president outside of Lincoln’s political party since the Civil War came to Washington with the intent to end the practice of awarding government jobs to African Americans. While Cleveland looked the other way as governmental departments began firing their African American employees, he himself gave no appointments to African Americans, including low-level appointments and appointments as representatives to African nations. He even went so far as to condemn those governments in the south that had allowed African Americans a voice in political affairs (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2007).
Rounding out the list of social groups that Cleveland alienated while in office, he was also a staunch opponent of the Women’s Suffrage Movement and once stated “sensible and responsible women do not want to vote. The relative positions to be assumed by men and women in the working out of our civilization were assigned long ago by a higher intelligence” (Wikipedia.com, 2007). Figure 8 is a political cartoon depicting Susan B. Anthony, one of the staunchest advocates of women’s suffrage, chasing after President Cleveland.

While virtually the entirety of Cleveland’s presidency was consumed with vetoing pensions, ignoring the poor, and demoralizing the Indians and the Native Americans, he did find time to botch his work in foreign policy as well. For example, during President Harrison’s term, which fell between the two terms of Cleveland, he had laid out a plan to annex Hawaii and make it a part of the United States. Virtually all Cleveland had to do was sign off on it and the deal would be complete. Instead, due to his heavy isolationist beliefs, he completely ignored the situation altogether and the annexation was forestalled until McKinley took office. These isolationists’ sentiments also prevented him from promoting a program endorsed by Chester Arthur to build a canal in Nicaragua, and to ignore free trade agreements with Mexico and South America, two programs which would have greatly improved the trade and economy of the United States. Furthermore, he asserted a pro-Spanish policy during the Cuban revolution which upset many members of congress, and worst of all, invoking the Monroe Doctrine; he challenged the British role in a dispute over gold in Venezuela, almost leading to a second war with the country (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 248)
Figure 8: Political cartoon depicting Susan B. Anthony chasing after Grover Cleveland in her struggle for women’s suffrage

www.americaslibrary.gov
The only good things that came out of Cleveland’s administrations, the Dawes Severalty Act, which aimed at assimilating the Indians by breaking up their tribal land into individual plots and the Interstate Commerce Act, which created the first national regulatory agency to oversee a major industry, Cleveland had very little to do with, for he was still wasting his time vetoing pensions and controlling appointments and patronage (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 243). During his re-election campaign, he finally did step up and promise bold initiatives in regards to tariff reform, one of the most beneficial and helpful issues that he backed. However, he did not pressure Democrats to enact his ideas and the Republican congress ended up writing their own bill. He did not follow through with his promises, making him appear dishonest and lazy. Congress adjourned that year having accomplished nothing (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p.244). While the Democratic hold on the Senate was too weak to get their proposed tariff bill passed, the senators made a compromise in the form of the Wilson-Gorman tariff that, while not as beneficial as the outright removal of the tariff, was still much less restrictive than many other proposed bill had been. In this situation, Cleveland had two options, either sign the bill in a gesture of party harmony, or show his support for the Republican idea of tariff reform and use his veto power as he had so many times in the past. Instead, Cleveland chose to be stubborn and refuse to take any action on the bill, letting it become law without his signature. This infuriated the Democrats and made it appear as if he avoided the tariff issue altogether (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 247)

In an attempt to make himself appear as if he was a decent, moral human being despite the fact that he was heartless toward America’s problems, Cleveland played up his strong religious upbringing and his sound morals, running on the campaign name
“Grover the Good” and posting campaign posters stating that he was “Honest, capable, and faithful” (Figure 9). While Cleveland put on an air of honesty and truth, he was racked by scandal during his first election in 1884. As the story goes, when Cleveland was a lawyer in Buffalo, New York, he met a young, attractive woman and had a child by her. While that was as far as many went, Reverend George Ball, in an article in the *Buffalo Evening Telegraph* declared that Cleveland seduced the innocent, young virtuous girl and promised to marry her. After finding out she was pregnant, he withdrew his promise of marriage and it took “two detectives and a doctor of bad repute to spirit the woman away and dispose of the child” (Summers, 2000, p. 833). It is true that virtually every president has had at least one skeleton uncovered while in office, some much more scandalous that that of Cleveland; however, it is one thing for a president to be immoral, but it is quite another thing to be immoral yet still base one’s entire campaign and one’s entire career on piousness and ethics. Cleveland took advantage of an impressionable young girl and then disposed of her, an act that does not agree with someone whose nickname is “Grover the Good”. While this scandal is much tamer in comparison, it still led opponents to state that the “election would argue a low state of morals among the people, and be a burning shame and never-to-be-forgotten disgrace to the nation,” and left others to claim that “no man with such a private character as is shown in respect to him is fit to fill any office in the gift of the people” (Summers, 2000, p. 833). Later in his article, Ball would accuse Cleveland of “habitual immoralities” (Summers, 2000, p. 833), hinting that this was not an isolated incident, and declared “since his candidacy is being pushed on the assumption of irreproachable morals, it would be criminal to allow the virtuous to vote for so vile a man as thus under a false impression that he is pure and
Figure 9: Campaign poster for Grover Cleveland claiming that he is “honest”, “capable”, and “faithful”

www.historycooperative.org
honorable. The American people have a right to know” (Summers, 2000, 834). Cheers of “moral leper” and “Ma Me, Where’s my Pa?” rang out during his campaign and many women’s rights activists turned against him. Figure 10 shows a popular cartoon of the time that depicts Cleveland, Haplin, and their illegitimate child and is entitled “One More Vote for Cleveland”.

Cleveland was the only Democrat to be elected during an era of Republican domination in the White House from 1860 to 1912, and according to Brinkley and Dyer, he was someone “whose lack of skill as a leader contributed to the decline of the Democratic party in the 1890’s. Grover Cleveland’s ineptitude, historians now claim, helped the Republicans achieve their electoral victory at the end of the Gilded Age” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 240). Upon the termination of Cleveland’s presidency, he was not able to boast that he had done one single beneficial thing for the country, and in contrast, had either harmed or hindered thousands of suffering American citizens in need. Scholars today claim that “during the last two years of his presidency, Cleveland became a political liability for the Democrats as everyone looked ahead to the next presidential election (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 247), and others believe that he was “an inept party leader whose stubbornness and dogmatism contributed to the erosion of Democratic electoral fortunes” (Brinkley and Dyer, 2004, p. 249). It is often hard to understand how a man who did so very little for his country was able to be re-elected.

As stated previously, the number one component that was taken into consideration when ranking the presidents was whether the individual was acting with the best interests of the public at heart. Grover Cleveland proved time and time again that the best interest
Figure 10: Political cartoon depicting Grover Cleveland, Maria Haplin, and their illegitimate child that appeared in newspapers during the scandalous election of 1884

www.vw.vccs.edu
of the country was not even a consideration in his decision-making. He was unable to provide this country with even one beneficial piece of legislation or executive action. Instead, every decision he made further harmed the country and all of those living in it. While Cleveland only ranks in the middle of most historian polls, this is much above his spot in the bottom five which he rightfully deserves.

Conclusion

The education system does a great disservice to its citizens by hiding the truth of the country’s history. In this effect, it paints brilliant, able leaders to be terrible representatives and terrible people; and it presents selfish, harmful leaders as effective and successful. It is nothing less than a tragedy that men such as Ronald Reagan, who outright lied to the country and the people that he supposedly loved time and time again, are revered as near heroes and men such as Herbert Hoover, who had a heart of gold and strove to match his presidential actions with his Quaker values, as a monster.

While some of the information contained herein may be quite surprising and possibly even shocking, it is important to remember that none of it is made up. Every fact and every line can be found in history books, commentaries, and documentaries; it simply takes some digging. What’s more, this is only a percentage of the facts, truths, lies and deceptions that have been uncovered by historians and scholars so far. With more in-depth examination and critical scholarly research, many other hidden scandals and unknown accomplishments can and will be uncovered. While the history of the United
States is never a certainty and no one knows what the future will hold for the field of
social sciences, one thing that is certain is that nothing should be taken at face value.
While objective dates and locations are definite, in reality, little in history can be
considered the cold hard facts. The majority of events that make the record books are
disagreements, whether between political parties bickering over policies, countries
dueling over borders, or races fighting over territory, and everything in between. History,
therefore, is merely nothing more than differing view points presented in an objective
manner. Realistically, the way the perspectives are presented and viewed can even vary
depending on everything from the community in which one participates, to the religion
one practices, to the company one keeps, and even simply to where one resides in the
country or in the world. For example, in the South, it is taught that the Civil War was a
battle to protect states rights and limit the federal government, while in the North it is
considered an epic duel to overthrow the evil institution of slavery. Furthermore, in the
United States, its democratic government is considered the ultimate testament of equality
and freedom, while in the Middle East it is a symbol of greed, egotism, and moral laxity.
The key to unraveling the mysteries and the inconsistencies of the complex field of
history is to remain critical and analytical and to always search for one’s own opinion and
truth.

Just as history, a field which appears static and concrete, evolves and changes, so
too should ones’ opinion of the world. After reading this paper, the reader could be
completely convinced that Grant was the greatest president to grace the White House and
Reagan was the biggest oaf to call Washington home. Tomorrow, however, an earth
shattering document could be released detailing unknown sandals in which Grant was
directly related, or showing secret conversations between Gorbachev and Reagan that prove that he was truly responsible for ending the Cold War, and the reader’s opinion could completely change. It is much more rewarding to be uncertain and curious than to remain stubborn, decisive, and uninformed.
Works Cited


Image Works Cited

Figure 1: “Presidential Portraits.” 4 July 1996. Retrieved 23 August 2007 from

Figure 2: Scaturro, Frank J. President Grant Reconsidered. Lanham, Maryland: Madison

Figure 3: “Presidential Portraits.” 4 July 1996. Retrieved 23 August 2007 from

Figure 4: “Ronald Reagan Cartoons” Retrieved 23 August 2007 from

Figure 5: “Ronald Reagan Cartoons”. Retrieved 23 August 2007 from
<www.cartoonstock..com.>

Figure 6: “Presidential Portraits.” 4 July 1996. Retrieved 23 August 2007 from

Figure 7: “Presidential Portraits.” 4 July 1996. Retrieved 23 August 2007 from

Figure 8: Library of Congress. “Susan B. Anthony Supports Women’s Suffrage
Movement.” Retrieved 23 August 2007 from
<www.americaslibrary.gov.>


POLS FREQUENTLY REFERENCED

1. Federalist Society/Wall Street Journal

2. C-Span Survey of Presidential Leadership

3. Ridings and McIver Poll
## RANKINGS

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http://www.opinionjournal.com/hail/print_rankings.html

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The number listed above is the mean score of all the scholars' rating of each president. On this scale, five is the highest possible score.

William Henry Harrison was president for a mere 30 days and James Garfield served for only six months. Many of our scholars thought their early deaths in office made it too difficult to evaluate them, so they are not included in this survey.
C-SPAN Survey of Presidential Leadership

Historian Survey Results Category: Total Score/Overall Ranking

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Chester Arthur 423 32
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Herbert Hoover 400 34
Millard Fillmore 395 35
John Tyler 369 36
William Henry Harrison 329 37
Warren G. Harding 326 38
Franklin Pierce 286 39
Andrew Johnson 280 40
James Buchanan 259 41

Viewer Results

Twenty Years of Public Affairs Programming. Created by America's Cable Companies.

C-SPAN home
© 2004, National Cable Satellite Corporation
## The Ranking of U.S. Presidents

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ORIGINAL THESIS PROPOSAL
As a member of the Honors College, you are required to complete an Honors project. This project permits you to build on your experiences throughout your college career and develop a unique product (paper or creative work). The project qualifies for three credits of Honors 499 and is graded. For more specific information see the Guide for the Senior Honors Thesis available from the Honors College.

The first step in undertaking an Honors project is to identify a topic and a BSU faculty member who will serve as your project advisor. If you need help developing your proposal, finding a topic, or identifying a project advisor, you are welcome to discuss possibilities with Dean James Ruebel, Associate Dean Joanne Edmonds, or Honors Fellow Barbara Stedman. Alternatively, if you have already determined a topic and found an advisor, you may wish to bring this completed form with you for your thesis conference. At least one conference with Drs. Ruebel, Edmonds, or Stedman is a required part of the project process.

Make your appointment for this conference by phoning the Honors College at 5-1024.

Please provide the following information:

Name ___________________________ ID# _______ E-mail _______
Address __________________________ Phone _______
Major(s) __________________________ Graduation date _______ (e.g. Spring '03)
Academic Advisor __________________ Project Advisor ____________

Title of Honors Project __________________________

Please type or print all information requested. Write clearly and concisely. Explain all abbreviations and technical terminology. Check your spelling! (You may do this on a separate form if you wish, and you may combine answers to the questions below.)

1. The Honors project should broaden your educational experience through independent work that adds to your knowledge and develops your talents. How will your project help you accomplish these objectives and add to your personal goals? Why, in short, do you want to do this particular project?

   I chose to complete this particular project because, in deciding to graduate in three years, I have had very few chances to take elective courses. My study in criminal justice (major) and psychology and Spanish (minors) have been very intensive, and I would like the opportunity to explore other areas. The presidential colloquium that I took with Mr. Markle in the Fall of 2006 greatly sparked my interest, and I wanted the opportunity to further delve into the subject matter. The fact that, if I had the chance, I would change my major to political science with a minor is history makes me ever more interested in this topic.

2. When are you signing up for HONRS 499 (or what is the proposed equivalent)?

   I have scheduled HONRS 499 for the Summer of 2007.

3. What will be the outcome of this project? (Be specific—e.g., a paper, finished piece of research, creative activity...)

   The final product will be a paper with research and critical analysis components.

   -OVER-
The purpose of this paper is to unmask the truth of the history of the American presidency, overcoming the personal and political agendas of high school lesson plans. I think anyone of upper high school age or older would benefit from the information in this paper. If read in high school, it could allow students to enter their history classrooms with an open mind and critically analyze the information they are taught, not believing what their teachers say to be the whole truth. If read in college or later, it could allow for intellectual debate, personal questioning, and a greater interest in the subject matter. Hopefully, it will lead to further questioning of other American institutions.

5. Project Description (please be specific—approximately two paragraphs):

This project will require an in-depth look into the terms of all 42 of our nation's presidents, a great portion of which was obtained through Mr. Markle's presidential colloquium. A discussion on the qualities of a good leader will also be needed in order to set up a basis for how I will judge the presidents. Next, I will reference historian and public opinion poles in order to determine the degree of the individual's "overratedness" or "underratedness." Once the background research is complete, I will determine the three most overrated presidents and underrated presidents of our country's history and then spell out my reasons for my decision.

While I have not determined exactly who the presidents will be, I will focus my initial attention on Herbert Hoover and Ulysses S. Grant as most underrated and John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan as most overrated. Along with scholarly research, this project might also allow for personal interviews of students at various levels of education as well as professionals in the field in order to gain a sense of whether the popular opinion of certain presidents still prevail. This paper could lead to discussions of and spell out implications for similar critical analysis in other areas of history.

6. State what the importance or implications of this project are. What do you expect to learn, or what would others learn from knowing about your anticipated results?

One of the goals of the Honors college is to teach students to question the norm, to think critically, and to form their own opinions and beliefs. It discourages against taking what those in authority say at face value. This paper will force me to define what I believe to be the definition of a good leader, and then to form my own opinions, using historical facts and not public opinion poles, of those who I believe are truly great (or not).