

## THE EVOLVING AMERICAN PRESIDENCY SERIES

### *Series Foreword:*

The American presidency touches virtually every aspect of American and world politics. And the presidency has become, for better or worse, the vital center of the American and global political systems. The framers of the American government would be dismayed at such a result. As invented at the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention in 1787, the presidency was to have been a part of the government with shared and overlapping powers, embedded within a separation-of-powers system. If there was a vital center, it was the Congress; the presidency was to be a part, but by no means, the centerpiece of that system.

Over time, the presidency has evolved and grown in power, expectations, responsibilities, and authority. Wars, crises, depressions, industrialization, all served to add to the power of the presidency. And as the United States grew into a world power, presidential power also grew. As the United States became the world's leading superpower, the presidency rose in prominence and power, not only in the United States, but on the world stage as well.

It is the clash between the presidency as created and the presidency as it has developed that inspired this series. And it is the importance and power of the modern American presidency that makes understanding the office so vital. Like it or not, the American presidency stands at the vortex of power both within the United States and across the globe.

This Palgrave series recognizes that the presidency is and has been an evolving institution, going from the original constitutional design as a chief clerk, to today where the president is the center of the American political constellation. This has caused several key dilemmas in our political system, not the least of which is that presidents face high expectations with limited constitutional resources. This causes presidents to find extraconstitutional means of governing. Thus, presidents must find ways to bridge the expectations/power gap while operating within the confines of a separation-of-powers system designed to limit presidential authority. How presidents resolve these challenges and paradoxes is the central issue in modern governance. It is also the central theme of this book series.

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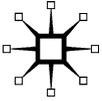
*Bad Presidents: Failure in the White House*  
by Philip Abbott

*Bad Presidents*

*Failure in the White House*

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BAD PRESIDENTS

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*Thomas Flynn Reading*

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# Contents

<i>Preface</i>		ix
One	Classifications: Kings and Presidents	1
Two	The First Bad President?: John Tyler	23
Three	The Compromise: Millard Fillmore	43
Four	The Byronic President: Franklin Pierce	61
Five	Building the House?: James Buchanan	77
Six	Lincoln in Reverse: Andrew Johnson	97
Seven	The First Bad “Hidden-Hand” President: Ulysses S. Grant	115
Eight	The Booster: Warren G. Harding	133
Nine	The Minimalist: Calvin Coolidge	147
Ten	Weathering the Storm: Herbert Hoover	163
Eleven	<i>Ex Parte Exercitii</i> : Richard M. Nixon	177
Twelve	The Latest Bad President?: George W. Bush	199
Thirteen	Conclusion	211
<i>Notes</i>		221
<i>Index</i>		245

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## *Preface*

When I was a child, every year our teacher would ask students to contribute a portion of their lunch money for maintenance of a memorial to James Buchanan. As I recall, the request began something like this: “James Buchanan may not have been a very good president but he was the only one from Pennsylvania.” Bad presidents, and few would dispute classifying Buchanan in this category, do not have their likenesses carved on Mount Rushmore. Schools, airports, and buildings are not named after them. Warren G. Harding planned the erection of a grand mausoleum in his home town. When he died only Herbert Hoover, who himself was later ranked among this group, was willing to dedicate the structure. Today, of course, all presidents, good and bad, are entitled to their own archives and museums.

In one sense we would like to forget our bad presidents and remember only those who succeeded. An inverse of Mount Rushmore, with the likenesses of Buchanan and others, would not be likely to attract many tourists. Nevertheless, we would do well to study these presidents to learn why they were bad, and how they were bad or indeed if they were really that bad. These presidents, after all, have done great damage. They have caused wars; they have wrecked the economy; they have perpetrated grave injustices; and they have threatened the constitutional order. They shake our confidence in our ability to select able leaders, and they place burdens on their successors to correct their errors. Nevertheless, in an odd way we need to remember bad presidents, not only to avoid their mistakes in the future but also to have a measure for great and good ones. William Shakespeare understood this dynamic between great and bad leaders better than anyone else. Based on his insights, I identify different ways a president can be bad and examine the case for including 11 in this category. In each, from John Tyler to Richard Nixon (and possibly George W. Bush), I look at a tipping point that places them in this unenviable category. Perhaps studying these presidents is the best memorial for them.

As always, I have benefited greatly by suggestions and comments from a large number of colleagues, both in political theory and

presidential studies. As always, I have especially profited from the advice and support of my family, particularly Patricia Abbott, who took time away from her own writing to help with this project.

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