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Is Trump the Worst President Ever?

By Matthew Stevenson
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Although Donald Trump has only been in office for a few weeks, it is hard to go anywhere and not hear that he is the worst ever American president. Neither Richard Nixon nor Warren Harding, or even the thirty days of William Henry Harrison's pneumonia, are believed to rank in his bottom-feeding percentile. But if Donald is that bad, it may go down as his greatest achievement.

I grant you that Trump has the potential to be great on the worst-ever scale. It is no small accomplishment that his national security adviser did not last three weeks on the job and was run out of town for pillow talking with the Soviets. (I was reminded of the last scene in *No Way Out*, when Kevin Costner starts speaking Russian.)

Domestically, Trump has a lot to offer with his denigration of women, minorities, immigrants, and Muslims. That said, his racist attitude only puts him in a league with Woodrow Wilson (fond of the n-word) and Teddy Roosevelt (who liked to brag that his government had hired fewer Negroes than did William McKinley). Further out on the spectrum are the twelve slave-owning American presidents (from Washington to Grant), who will be tough to bring down.

As someone ethically challenged, Trump brings a lot to the table. He's worked Atlantic City casinos and fondled Miss Universe contestants. Both avenues show promise. And before assuming office, Trump put his labyrinthine business interests (including, presumably, dividend checks from sheikdoms) into a revokable trust and staffed it with his inflatable-doll sons.

But the jury might be out for a while if it has to decide whether Trump University or Trump Steaks ("*Believe me — I understand steaks, it's my favorite food!*") are as bad as Grant's dallying with Credit Mobilier, Harding's drain from Teapot Dome, or the Clinton Foundation.

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In terms of international affairs, and ignorance thereof, I grant you that Trump could—as they say at the Olympics—"go podium," especially if he keeps finding the likes of Michael Flynn to advise him on national security or continues to think of foreign relations as a variation on Caribbean hotel development (*E pluribus condominium*).

Keep in mind that making a hot mess of American foreign policy is something presidents do well. Most left the world in worse shape than they found it.

For example:

—Washington set the gold standard early, getting rolled by the British with the Jay Treaty, but then Jefferson punted on the same impressment issue, leaving it to James Madison (a brave man, by the way) to fight a war with England.

—Both James Polk, with his invasion of Mexico, and William McKinley, in his liberation of Cuba, wanted to make the world safe for American imperialism, although often their instrument of war was massacre.

—With the Treaty of Versailles, the pious Woodrow Wilson condemned Europe to another world war. (Referring to Wilson's Fourteen Points, French President Georges Clemenceau whispered: "God only needed ten.")

—Then there are all those presidents from Dwight Eisenhower to Nixon who decided that American blood and treasure were best consigned to a rat hole in Indochina, the example of which allowed later presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama to play dominoes in Afghanistan and Iraq.

So for Trump to be among the worst in foreign affairs, he will have to be *very* bad.

Getting embroiled in a Russian blackmail scandal would help, for sure, but somehow those rumored Moscow sex tapes—with Russian hookers in a former Obama presidential suite—sound more like KGB revenge porn than another shadow over Blooming Grove.

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Sexually speaking, with two messy divorces and a triple-double in groping, Trump clearly merits consideration as a world-class predator, certainly someone who could hold his own with Bill Clinton as a fondler or Lyndon Johnson, who liked to say: “I’ve had more pussy by accident than Kennedy had by design.”

Still, I am not sure how Trump would fare in an extramarital playoff with, say, John F. Kennedy (who on most days needed to be with a woman who was not his wife) or Warren Harding, who while president had a love-child stashed away on the Jersey Shore and made love to Nan Britton on the floor of a White House closet.

For now, despite his blatant sexism, Trump probably belongs in a womanizing category somewhere between Woodrow Wilson and Grover Cleveland.

Before becoming president Wilson had a torrid affair with a Mrs. Mary Peck, who he had met in Bermuda, and while running for office in 1912, Wilson’s henchmen were dispatched to buy up a huge collection of love letters.

Trump might, however, find more common cause with fellow New Yorker Grover Cleveland, who was prone to dalliances, some of which involved unwelcome aggression.

According to a new biography, when living in Buffalo, Grover had his way forcefully with 38-year-old Maria Halpin, who became pregnant and delivered the baby that Cleveland might well have fathered.

Although Cleveland’s moniker was “Grover the Good,” he responded to Halpin’s demands for child support by having the baby put in an orphanage and committing the mother to a lunatic asylum, which in presidential history is up there with Hillary Clinton slut-shaming some of Bill’s conquests.

* * *

If Trump aspires to being the worst president ever, he will probably need to make his bones with some kind of world-class financial scandal. After all, he got to the White House by way of Atlantic City, the casino wheel, Florida real estate, and Hollywood, where the only common denominators are the easy virtue of other people’s money.

So the talent is there. And he has put up the numbers as a stock jobber.

In case you missed the Atlantic City story, in the 1990s, when Trump's boardwalk empire collapsed, the foreclosing banks decided it was better—to use Lyndon Johnson's expression—to have Trump inside the tent pissing out, than outside the tent....

When several corporate reorganizations failed to pay back his creditors, the lending banks allowed Trump to roll his subprime assets into a public company, Trump Hotels & Casino Resorts, which was floated on the New York Stock Exchange (ticker symbol DJT—guess what that stands for). Then Vaudeville Trump was put on the road to pump the stock. He found his calling as a financial carnival barker.

The company went public in 1995 at \$14 a share. It raised \$140 million from investors (later more) and installed Trump as chairman of the board, a position he held until 2009. For a while he was also chief executive officer.

During these years the public Trump company lost an accumulated \$647 million (as of 2004), although the chairman routinely voted himself multimillion dollar bonuses and overall sucked out of the company \$44 million in executive compensation, not to mention other fees and sweetheart deals that the company sent his way as if fairy dust.

Anyone in 1995 who invested \$1 million in Donald Inc. had less than \$100,000 by 2004, when the company declared bankruptcy, sheltering Trump from personal liability.

Part of the reason for the company's miserable performance is that Trump stuck the public company with many of his earlier, non-performing debts that had been in his name.

The same pyramid man is now running that great subprime savings and loan, the Federal Reserve Bank. Maybe he can take it public?

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Although the chances are good that Trump (still the beneficial owner of an indebted global empire) will get run out of town under the Title of Nobility (aka Emoluments) Clause of the Constitution, which reads,

No title of nobility shall be granted by the United States: and no person holding any office of profit or trust under them, shall, without the consent of the Congress, accept of any present, emolument, office, or title, of any kind whatever, from any king, prince, or foreign state,

he could also find himself brought down in the kind of old fashioned political scandal that doomed Richard Nixon (Watergate) or John Adams (Alien and Sedition Acts). Any one of these scandals would let him go top five.

File these high crimes and misdemeanors in the drawer marked "abuse of power," but both had their origins in a hatred of the press.

The Watergate scandal involved Richard Nixon tapping the phones of the Democratic Party national chairman, Lawrence O'Brien, who had his office in the Watergate building, although the caper made no sense. Nixon was well ahead in the polls, and O'Brien was a ceremonial chief.

In reality—those celebrated *Post* reporters Woodward and Bernstein actually missed the story—Nixon's plumbers had more interest in a call-girl ring run from those offices than they did in Democratic phone calls.

In a larger sense the Nixon black-bag operatives were searching for administration leaks to the press, much the way in 1798 Adams persuaded Congress to pass sedition laws that “made it a crime for American citizens to ‘print, utter, or publish . . . any false, scandalous, and malicious writing’ about the Government.”

Wait until Trump starts quoting John Adams as precedent for his hatred of the press. And he would also love the Alien Act, of the same year, that made it harder to become an American citizen and easier to deport illegals.

* * *

Pressing hating could well bring down the new administration.

The Trump gang sees most journalists as if they were the love children of Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning, with Julian Assange presiding at the baptism.

The president hates criticism, especially when it is satiric. I can easily see him becoming obsessed with media calls for his removal, to the point that he would stop at nothing to silence those in opposition or celebrating his misfortunes.

Notice how the Trumps, collectively, sue for libel anyone who questions their vast wealth or altruism. Trump sued one biographer for, allegedly, underreporting his net worth. Melania Trump sued a blogger and the London *Daily Mail* for reporting the heresy that sometimes supermodels have been known to work as “high-end escorts.”

If Trump is willing to burn his bridges to the CIA and the NSA over Russia leaks to the press, why not use the judicial system to go after seditious reporters, who last time I checked rarely pack heat.

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So far in opposition, the best the Democratic party can manage is to suggest that Trump is a Manchurian president, elected with the ballot connivances of Putin's Russia and sustained by moles and fifth columnists (as in irredentist Spaniards, not Frank Bruni).

The problem with Trump starring in a rewrite of a John Le Carré novel—*The Russian President?*—is that most Soviet scandals require enormous leaps of faith.

Senator Joseph McCarthy, for example, had his famous list of “205 card-carrying” Communist sympathizers in the State Department, but those charges went nowhere, and he was left barking at alleged subversion in Hollywood.

Even if the Trump campaign did have a hot line with Russia during the election, and even if Trump authorized such bromancing, I can’t see how that would be an impeachable offense. Embarrassing, yes; impeachable, I doubt it.

After all, Richard Nixon had back channel links to North Vietnam during the 1968 campaign, much the way in 1980 Ronald Reagan’s transition team was speaking with the Iranians who were holding Americans hostage in Tehran. Treating with the enemy comes with the job description, unless, of course, the political forecast calls for golden showers.

* * *

A more durable scandal will have to come out of Trump’s financial world, where few media consumers can understand the small type of money.

Played out in breathless primetime, even a vanilla transaction can be turned into a deal with the devil, once someone unpacks all the Delaware front companies, incentive compensation, sweetheart union contracts, no-show jobs, off-shore hedge funds, padded banking fees, and links with mob-related contractors that are part of any gilded construction job, especially in New York, New Jersey, or Florida.

Then imagine such a cascade of doubt played out daily in the press, on Comedy Central, or in front of a Senate investigation, especially if some Cypriot bolt-hole company, stuffed with Russian flight capital, has tried to influence peddle around Trump Inc.

For his defense, Trump will claim all aspects of his business life protected by executive privilege (remember that Nixonian flag of convenience?), and in no time—as with the clumsy travel ban—Trump’s financial house of cards will be on trial before the Supreme Court.

* * *

Mercifully, most presidencies, even the bad ones, have limited shelves lives. Harding was gone in less than three years—done in by his cronies who met everyday with the president in a clubby townhouse near Dupont Circle, where the only items on the menu were whisky, insider trading, and solicitous women.

Nixon flamed out in five years, although the irony of his My-mother-was-a- saint end-game was not that a courageous press restored a balance to power, but that the FBI, in the guise of Deep Throat (aka Deputy Director Mark Felt), was a main instrument in the silent coup. (If anything, Woodward and Bernstein were dupes and pawns.)

I don't blame the impeached Andrew Johnson for cratering his presidency. His drunkenness didn't help, of course, but the Tenure of Office Act was a Republican ploy to entrap the Democratic president suspected of soft-soaping the South. Simply politics as usual.

Lyndon Johnson gave up his presidency in 1968 when the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, against American bases and South Vietnamese cities, exposed the administration's bluster about the war as hollow boasting. The question was asked: If the United States is winning the war, how come the Viet Cong is running loose on the Saigon embassy grounds?

* * *

Do I think Trump will leave office in disgrace as one of the worst ever American presidents? Sadly, even for someone with his titanic ego, such a milestone could be a tall order.

He would need to match Nixon's paranoia and arrogance with Lyndon Johnson's military incompetence, and then throw in Chester Arthur's corruption and maybe Harding's lust for life. It's asking a lot.

Racism alone will not consign a president to the dustbin of history. Both Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson spoke well of segregation, yet many Americans still think of both men with affection.

Nor will xenophobia drive a president from office. John Adams hated foreigners, especially the French. So, too, did Millard Fillmore, who as a former president ran again in 1856 as a nativist candidate, campaigning on his hatred of Catholics.

Calvin Coolidge allowed Sacco and Vanzetti (who became symbols of immigrant America) to go to the electric chair. George W. Bush put America on Islamic lockdown because Karl Rove convinced him it would be good for his reelection (it was).

* * *

More precarious for Trump is that Americans tend to turn against a president whenever they sense that he is lying.

Nixon was shown the door, not for tapping Democratic telephones, but for lying about the coverup. Johnson's mistake wasn't killing a generation of young men in a pointless war, but for misleading the public about the progress of the fighting.

One thing we know, even after three weeks of Trump's presidency, is that he likes to lie. Big lies, little lies, white lies—they all suit his infomercial (Infowars?) style. For Trump so far, the bigger the lie (voter fraud, inauguration crowds, etc.), the more believable it seems. This deception could well be his ticket to immortality.

During the campaign, there was a certain outrageous good fortune about Trump's lying, as if he were remaking *The Sting* with Paul Newman and Robert Redford, dealing cards from a marked

deck to con the Clintons. (Doyle Lonnegan: *Your boss is quite a card player, Mr. Kelly; how does he do it?*

Johnny Hooker: *He cheats.*)

Americans can handle a sting, but they don't like lying.

Rather than run the wire scam with Steve Bannon on the liberal establishment, however, Trump will probably go out in the manner of Willy Loman, even though that salesman was from Brooklyn, not Queens. As Arthur Miller writes:

He's a man way out there in the blue riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back—that's an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple spots on your hat and you're finished.

Who isn't seeing a few spots on Trump's neckties?