Were past American leaders as good as we remember?

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Last Friday, as the country braced for what promised to be a tense inaugural day, I opened my issue of The Dartmouth to find an interesting article. Titled “Verbum Ultimum: Death at an Inaugural” written by the Dartmouth Editorial Board. It made a bold claim, stating that “for all their flaws, most of our leaders of yesteryear have found it possible to put aside their private vices to embody the ideals of our country in their public lives” (Dartmouth Editorial Board, 2017). I’ve heard this idea many times and from many different sources. Statements, like this one, expressing some longing for the past or a time in which things were simpler, more-pure, and wholesome, appear frequently. But, there is a great deal of disagreement about whether “the good old days” were really all that good. Many people rightly point out that the past was certainly better for some, but mostly at the expense of others. Examples like segregation, slavery, and suffrage (among many) illustrate their point. Seeing the similarity between these two ideas, idealization of the past and idealization of past leaders, I couldn’t help but wonder, is what The Dartmouth’s Editors wrote true? Were our past leaders really the embodiments of American ideals and are today’s leaders really so devastatingly different?

It makes sense that people would think that past leaders were better than today’s. We have a natural tendency to want to believe our nation and its leaders are good, noble, selfless, and kind, especially if they were successful. It is also no secret that “collective memory in the United States has been subject to distortion and alteration” (Kammen, 1995, p. 329). There are many reasons for this distortion, from intentional to unintentional and its results range from positive, to negative, to benign (Kammen, 1995, p. 329). One of the main motivations for the miss-remembering of the past is stability. Unfortunately, as Pulitzer-Prize winner and Cultural
Historian Michael Kammen explains, this “stability is achieved at a price: a tendency to depoliticize the civic past by distorting the nation’s memories of it – all in the name of national unity, stability, and state-building (1995, p. 334). In other words, for the sake of unity, we forget the more controversial parts of our political past and emphasize the less controversial aspects in our collective American memory. In fact, this depoliticization has been applied as much to the events of our past as it has to the actions of our historical leaders.

For example, in the Dartmouth’s article the editors used Franklin Roosevelt as an example of an ideal American leader. This just wasn’t the case and it certainly isn’t the whole story. Roosevelt was not the embodiment of American ideals. Although he certainly accomplished great things for the American people, leading us in war and creating the New Deal, he was also responsible for despicable actions against American citizens. The most disgraceful of which were Japanese internment camps, one of the most shameful chapters “and largest violation of civil liberties” in American history (Smith, 2003, p. 1). Dr. Irons of Boston University explains that under Roosevelt’s direction:

120,000 people of Japanese ancestry, two-thirds of them native born American citizens, were forced into these camps … For no other reason than their race, and simply as an expression of racial prejudice, [Japanese-Americans were] forcibly rounded up by army troops, placed in internment camps, surrounded by barbed wire, living in pine wood barracks with no heat and no insulation during the freezing winters and boiling hot summers in the deserts. Never charged with a crime, not a single one committed an act of espionage or sabotage, yet the asserted reason for the internment was to protect the west coast and the military facilities against espionage and sabotage. (2009, p. 42).
The internment camps are frequently forgotten and Roosevelt is routinely celebrated as one of America’s greatest leaders. I can’t say whether he was ideal or terrible. What I can say is that conveniently forgetting his wrongs makes for a flawed comparison to the present state of American leadership and politics.

The famous old saying (often misattributed to Winston Churchill) that “history is written by the victors” is repeatedly proven true (History, 2015). When we think of revered leaders of the past we must remember that we are generally learning the story that they and their supporters recorded. When we think of Abraham Lincoln do we go to old Confederate papers or do we read accounts from Yankees? Generally, it’s the history, as recorded by the North, that is recounted to school children. And why would it be any other way? The North was diametrically opposed to the ideas and goals of the south. Such ideas would naturally be discarded, as accounts, beliefs, and facts are passed down to new generations.

Furthermore, during his administration, Lincoln’s opponents were often incensed at his actions. According to History Professor Phillip Paludeen “Practically from the day he took office, however, Lincoln was called a dictator in one form or another” (Paludan, 2007, p. 1). He even clashed with the supreme court, prompting a letter from the Chief Justice admonishing Lincoln’s violation of the Constitution (Paludan, 2007, p. 1). Moreover, Northern or Yankee Democrats often lamented the “tyranny” of Lincoln over issues like the suspension of habeas corpus, despotism, destruction of states’ rights, suppression of journalists, and restriction of civil liberties (Paludan 2007, p. 1).

Each of these aspects of Lincoln’s leadership would be as concerning to Americans today as they were during the Civil War. Yet, as a nation, when we remember Lincoln we do not recall that he arrested Americans without a right to be brought before a court nor do we recount the
censorship of the press. We remember his great accomplishments. We rejoice in the abolition of slavery. We are grateful that his leadership kept the union in tact and we generally revere the man. Had the Confederacy won, the legacy of Lincoln would certainly be different for millions of people.

Thankfully the Confederacy didn’t win, but the example serves to prove an important point. Our leaders are flawed, and our history tends to overshadow their worst traits by celebrating their best accomplishments. This can serve to leave people with the false impression that the past was somehow better than the present, that the leaders of old possessed some wisdom and level of restraint that they simply didn’t have. This impression results in pessimism, negativity, and the degradation of hope. Instead we should acknowledge that there never did exist such a time or leader that perfectly embodied our American ideals, nor should we allow political setbacks or disappointments to cloud our perceptions. Our nation is not falling apart nor is our “political culture decaying” (Dartmouth Editorial Board, 2017). The truth is we have always been faced with challenges from abroad and from within and we will always have struggles.

This is important to acknowledge because, the more people compare the state of the nation today to some unrealistic and rosy image of the past, the less accurate the impression of the state of our nation they get. We have never had a perfect leader and we never will. In fact, we have had terrible leaders. But, this doesn’t mean, as The Dartmouth might think, that our country is headed for disaster, doom, or collapse. Instead it means that we must keep debate and democracy alive. Always, we must watch our leaders and demand good governance from them. We must be careful of the pitfalls of collective memory and distortions of the past. Never, may we assume that if only we could find that perfect leader, like the ones of “yesteryear”, could we
rest easy and know we are taken care of. And despite the temptation to believe it, there simply never was and never will exist such a person, except, perhaps, in our memory.
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References


