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Feb. 13, 1999

Mr. Brain Lamb
C-Span
400 North Capitol Street
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. Lamb:

Having thought about it a long time already, somewhat to my own surprise I have concluded that Harry Truman was our second greatest president (after George Washington). As the inscription read on Truman's favorite tombstone, "He done his damndest."

In this century, I would fault Teddy Roosevelt for his blood lust, both human and animal; in this respect, the man was criminally insane. Taft never wanted to be president, but he was a great Chief Justice. FDR managed to solve the Great Depression only by getting us into war. He was, however, magnificent as a wartime leader. Wilson was a fierce segregationist at a time when the Patent Office, at least, had a Black gentleman, Henry Baker, in a professional position. Harding was best noted for what he called "bloviating," speechifying effortlessly in an mellifluous flow of words that meant absolutely nothing. Coolidge was called upon to do practically nothing, and he excelled at it. Hoover, a great man badly maligned by the Democrats, had a terrible presidency, largely due to restrictive monetary policies of Federal Reserve Board chairman, Eugene Meyer (father of Katherine Graham). Eisenhower was a success because the Russians respected and feared him as a successful former general. Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon were spectacularly bad. Carter was not a great success in dealing with our amoral European allies who were bewildered because he was a genuinely good man (a "Christer," in the disdainful characterization of Dean Acheson); and he failed to cope with the inflation brought on by Johnson's and Nixon's policies. Reagan had just a very few ideas in his senescent brain, but they were good ones, and he was a likeable guy. Bush was no good as an adminisitrator, as he showed when, as vice-president, he was in charge of a joint task force on drugs. As for Clinton, I am reminded of Mary McCarthy's crack about Lillian Hellman: "Every word she utters is a lie--including all the ands and the-s."

In the 19th century, I suppose Lincoln was the tops, and I would be willing to rank him just behind Truman in the overall list. Jefferson has to be up there if only for the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark expedition. Madison was the principal author of the Constitution; his presidency was an anti-climax after that great achievement. Monroe took a \$5,000 "loan" from John Jacob Astor, just one of many strange financial transactions in "The Era of Good Feeling." Andrew Jackson was a genocidal monster, particularly with regard to the Cherokees. McKinley might have been a great one had he lived longer. James K. Polk I regard as "The Good Thief" in more ways than one. After stealing California, Texas, Arizona and New Mexico for us from the Mexicans, he stole heaven for himself (at least according to Catholic theology, which is the only variety I am familiar with) by being baptized on his death bed. This wiped away all his sins, which some historians think he had no shortage of. I will pass over in respectful silence the accomplishments, if any, of such worthies as Franklin Pierce, Chester A. Arthur, the Harrisons, and the ever popular Millard Fillmore.

O - Pres

Since I am guilty of ending a couple of sentences with a preposition, let me cop a plea by quoting from a book of Yiddish humor: "Why did you bring that book I didn't want to be read to out of up for?"

I hasten to add that this does not apply to the books you feature on *Booknotes*. My wife and I enjoy that and many other programs on C-Span. Just keep doin' what you been doin'.

Very truly yours,

