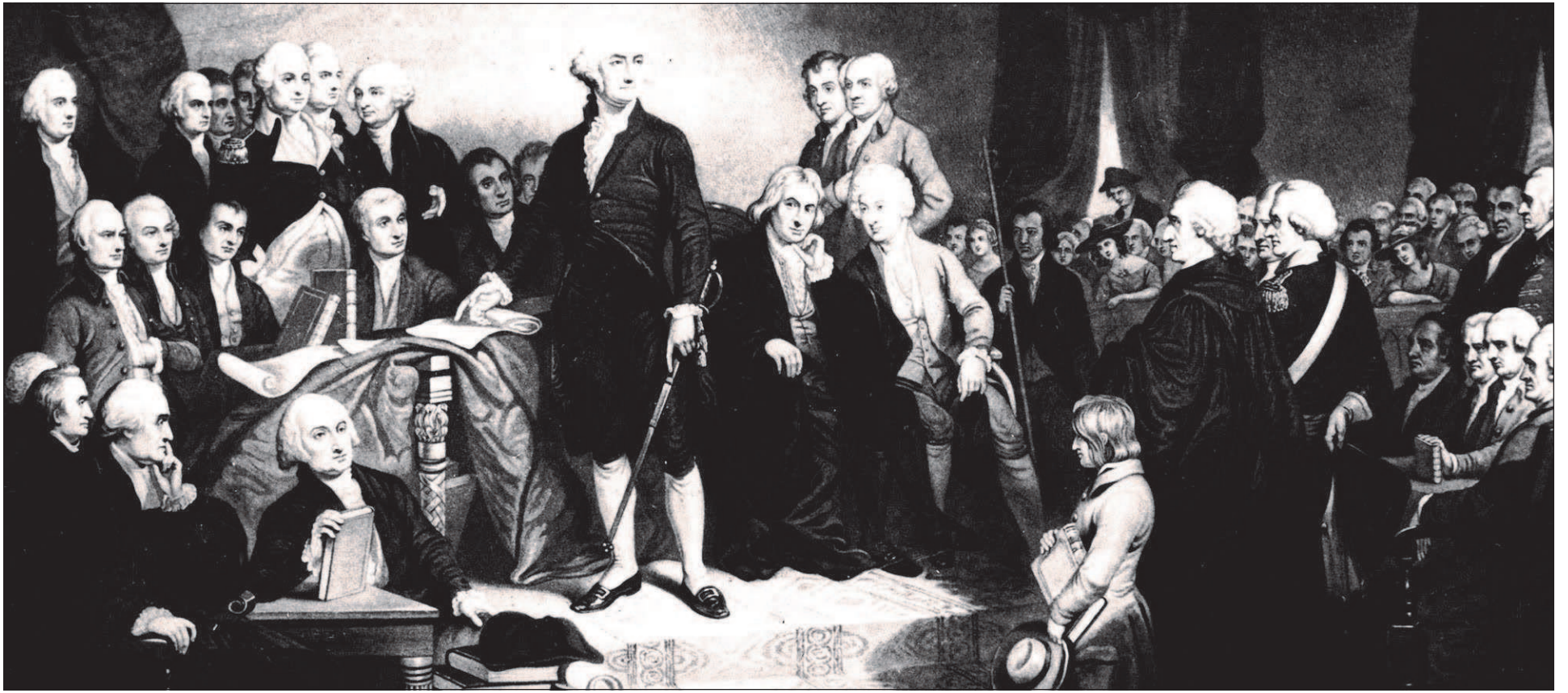


# On Presidents Day, we celebrate the good ones



AP Photo/File

President George Washington delivers his inaugural address in the Senate Chamber of Old Federal Hall in New York on April 30, 1789.

Presidential biographers will tell you there are flaws in all of their subjects. But at certain moments, when the chips were down — such as the nation's birth, the Civil War, World War II — the right leader showed up to meet an enormous challenge.

While the scourge of Islamic terrorism still threatens America, the abiding enemy of a large share of Americans is change — economic and cultural — that threatens livelihoods and personal values. In the face of that, it's not always clear that current national leaders have a program of substance. Instead, they win by channeling the anger and fear of the disaffected voters.

But that is not leadership. And that is what makes this a dispiriting time.

Disappointment with current elected leaders is disappointment with our times as much as it is about the people in question.

Many years ago, on George Washington's or Abraham Lincoln's birthday, it was traditional for elementary schools to hold programs honoring those hallowed presidents. These days we have Presidents Day.

In many ways, we are more in need of some discussion of Washington and Lincoln than we were in the 1950s. And it's not the children who need to hear about the virtues of those great men. It's the adults. Especially the adults who make and administer our laws.

We need to discuss Washington and Lincoln not because they dwarf the presidents we have known in our lifetimes. We need to talk about them because they rose to their tasks at two of the most difficult moments the nation

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ever faced.

Looking backward, the rise of Washington and Lincoln seems inevitable. The preeminent Washington scholar, James Thomas Flexner, titled his one-volume biography "The Indispensable Man."

Oregon U.S. Sen. Mark Hatfield made a similar point about Lincoln, whose life the senator studied in some depth. "Lincoln did not feel that he chose his place in history, but rather that history had chosen him," Hatfield said. "Clearly no other individual could have brought so much good out of the seemingly infinite seas of madness and blood with which he was forced to deal."

Compared to Lincoln, Washington is an elusive figure. "No American is more completely misunderstood than George Washington," wrote Flexner.

As Garry Wills notes, one cannot understand George Washington without grasping the Enlightenment, which produced him. If that era was defined by a set of shared values, our era is one of dissonance. The reality of America's increasingly divergent values is a phenomenon that is driving our politics in 2017. We have not had much luck finding a president who epitomizes America at this moment.

It is worth remembering that Americans are nearly always dissat-

isfied with our presidents and that we nevertheless prosper in ways far beyond our founders' wildest imaginings.

Washington, unique in American history for winning his two terms with unanimous votes by the Electoral College, was widely ridiculed and disliked at the end of his presidency.

He faced an armed uprising in 1791. Some blamed his policies for economic disruptions in the nation's early years. Washington was a slave owner. He sided with Alexander Hamilton vs. Thomas Jefferson, a conflict that gave rise to continuing ripples of political partisanship that still trouble us today.

Despite his imperfections, with the wisdom of time and a degree of looking backward with rose-tinted glasses, Washington is now justly celebrated for having done most things right.

As the Miller Center at the University of Virginia notes, "he tolerated dissent, vicious attacks on his reputation and name, and a divisive press — all in the interest of freedom. There is little reason to suggest that Washington, unlike so many of his successors, ever sought to use his office for personal empowerment or gain. Neither did he shelter his friends for the sake of their friendships when conflicts of interest arose.

"Perhaps most importantly,

Washington's presidential restraint, solemnity, judiciousness, and nonpartisan stance created an image of presidential greatness, or dignity, that dominates the office even today. He was the man who could have been a king but refused a crown and saved a republic."

The men including Washington who crafted our system of government understood and explicitly dealt with concerns that presidents could become too important. It is inevitable the top elected job in a great nation becomes the focus for blame and credit. But in the U.S. system of government, the president is a public employee, not the personification of the nation, as was the case in the European monarchy we left behind. The presidency is important but our nation is infinitely more so.

While intensely pragmatic, Lincoln has been sainted for his humanity. As Sen. Hatfield put it, "The true essence of Abraham Lincoln was his ability to lead without sacrificing compassion." Compassion is a trait we need to see more of from the White House's current occupant.

Presidents Day is good time to celebrate the good ones, who manage to govern in ways that promote peace and prosperity. But it's also an opportunity to thank even the mediocre and lackluster ones, who often sacrifice health and reputation in efforts to serve the country.

Finally, Presidents Day is a good symbol for the fact that they are only small parts of who we as a nation — we give 1/365th of 2017 to honoring them, and many of the remaining days to thinking little of them. This is as it should be.

# What a failed Trump administration looks like

By DAVID BROOKS  
New York Times News Service



Still have trouble seeing how the Trump administration survives a full term. Judging by his Thursday press conference, President Donald Trump's mental state is like a train that long ago left freewheeling and iconoclastic, has raced through indulgent, chaotic and unnerving, and is now careening past unhinged, unmoored and unglued.

Trump's White House staff is at war with itself. His poll ratings are falling at unprecedented speed. His policy agenda is stalled. FBI investigations are just beginning. This does not feel like a sustainable operation.

On the other hand, I have trouble seeing exactly how this administration ends. Many of the institutions that would normally ease out or remove a failing president no longer exist.

There are no longer moral arbiters in Congress like Howard Baker and Sam Ervin to lead a resignation or

impeachment process. There is no longer a single media establishment that shapes how the country sees the president. This is no longer a country in which everybody experiences the same reality.

Everything about Trump that appalls 65 percent of America strengthens him with the other 35 percent, and he can ride that group for a while. Even after these horrible four weeks, Republicans on Capitol Hill are not close to abandoning their man.

The likelihood is this: We're going to have an administration that has morally and politically collapsed, without actually going away.

What does that look like? First, it means an administration that is passive, full of sound and fury but signifying nothing. To get anything done, a president depends on the vast machinery of the U.S. government. But Trump doesn't mesh with that machinery. He is personality-based while it is rule-based. Furthermore, he's declared war on it. And when you declare war on the establishment, it declares war on you. The Civil Service has a thousand

ways to ignore or sit on any presidential order. The court system has given itself carte blanche to overturn any Trump initiative, even on the flimsiest legal grounds. The intelligence community has only just begun to undermine this president.

Trump can push all the pretty buttons on the command deck of the Starship Enterprise, but don't expect anything to actually happen, because they are not attached.

Second, this will probably become a more insular administration. Usually when administrations stumble, they fire a few people and bring in the grown-ups — the James Baker or the David Gergen types. But Trump is anti-grown-up, so it's hard to imagine Chief of Staff Haley Barbour. Instead, the circle of trust seems to be shrinking to his daughter, her husband and Stephen Bannon.

Bannon has a coherent worldview, which is a huge advantage when all is chaos. It's interesting how many of Bannon's rivals have woken up with knives in their backs. Michael Flynn is gone. Reince Priebus has been unmanned by a thousand White House leaks. Rex Tillerson had the

potential to be an effective secretary of state, but Bannon neutered him last week by denying him the ability to even select his own deputy.

In an administration in which "promoted beyond his capacity" takes on new meaning, Bannon looms. With each passing day, Trump talks more like Bannon without the background reading.

Third, we are about to enter a decentralized world. For the past 70 years most nations have instinctively looked to the U.S. for leadership, either to follow or oppose. But in capitals around the world, intelligence agencies are drafting memos with advice on how to play Donald Trump.

The first conclusion is obvious. This administration is more like a medieval monarchy than a modern nation-state. It's more "The Madness of King George" than "The Missiles of October." The key currency is not power, it's flattery.

The corollary is that Trump is ripe to be played. Give the boy a lollipop and he won't notice if you steal his lunch. The Japanese gave Trump a new jobs announcement he

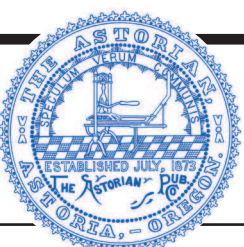
could take to the Midwest, and in return they got presidential attention and coddling that other governments would have died for.

If you want to roll the Trump administration, you've got to get in line. The Israelis got a possible one-state solution. The Chinese got Trump to flip-flop on the "One China" policy. The Europeans got him to do a 180 on undoing the Iran nuclear deal.

Vladimir Putin was born for a moment such as this. He is always pushing the envelope. After gifting Team Trump with a little campaign help, the Russian state media has suddenly turned on Trump and Russian planes are buzzing U.S. ships. The bear is going to grab what it can.

We're about to enter a moment in which U.S. economic and military might is strong but U.S. political might is weak. Imagine the Roman Empire governed by Monaco.

That's scary. The only saving thought is this: The human imagination is vast, but it is not nearly vast enough to encompass the infinitely multitudinous ways Donald Trump can find to get himself disgraced.



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