

A & E's *Biography: 10 Best, 5 Worst Presidents*

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Review by: David Glauber

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A&E's *Biography: 10 Best, 5 Worst Presidents* provides the viewer with an introductory overview of ten of America's best presidents and five of its worst presidents. Based on the views of a group of 300 historians, this documentary examines why some presidents become great, while others are seen as utter failures. As an hour-long broadcast program, it is understandably broad in its coverage of each featured president. Even then, very few details about the major events are discussed. The program takes for granted that the viewer has a basic understanding of United States history. It explains how a president, like Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was considered great because he inspirationally led the U.S. through the adversity of the Great Depression with his New Deal programs and his steadfast determination to lead the U.S. to victory in World II. On the other hand, presidents, like Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan, who felt powerless to defend the nation against the expansion of slavery and threats of secession by the South, are viewed as two of the worst presidents for not demonstrating the courage and the leadership that the times they governed over required.

In addition to Pierce and Buchanan, presidents Warren G. Harding, Richard Nixon, and Andrew Johnson were depicted as some of America's other failed presidents. Harding was characterized as an individual who had many corrupt friends, including one who tried to make money by leasing oil lands, in what became known as the Tea Pot Dome scandal. Harding was also seen as a failure because he had no goals to strive for. Nixon, on the other hand, had numerous goals he was striving for, including establishing relations with the Soviet Union and China. However, his attempted cover-up of his

administration's role in the 1972 break-in at the Watergate Hotel Complex, the site of the Democratic National Convention, resulted in his forced resignation two years later. If not for this scandal, the video claims that Nixon may have been viewed as a great president. Also on the video's worst presidents' list was Andrew Johnson. He did not break into any establishment or attempt to steal government land. However, he was unable to get along with Congress, namely the Radical Republicans in Congress, who wanted to punish the South harshly after it lost the Civil War. While Congress wanted to take a harsh and lengthy reconciliation plan to ensure Southern loyalty in the Union, Johnson wanted to quickly make-up and to become a nation again. At the same time, Johnson's perceived bigotry as a native Southerner and his allegiance to the Democratic Party, to a Congress that was unanimously controlled by the Republicans, did not endear him very well to them. His inability to compromise resulted in his impeachment at the hands of strong Congressional leadership, but not his removal from office. The details of this friction between Johnson and Congress were not explained in *10 Best, 5 Worst Presidents*, despite its importance in explaining the scenario surrounding Johnson's impeachment. Johnson's impeachment was simply glossed over as a fact of his presidency.

As opposed to these failed presidents, who had poor leadership skills, suffering through scandals or who were unable to compromise when the times called for it, the best presidents gave Americans what they needed at the time they needed it. Presidents Washington, Lincoln, Wilson, and Roosevelt provided inspirational wartime leadership. Thus, a president who can reinforce the necessity of a war and keep the country united behind the war effort, is on his way to becoming a great president. While Washington was not president at the time he led his troops during the Revolutionary War, his courage

was remembered and embraced by the young American nation. When his peers asked him to be a king for life, he refused. He was willing to settle for being a president, and then, only for two four-year terms, which set an important precedent. In addition to these presidents, Harry Truman was seen as a strong leader because of his decision to use the atomic bomb against Japan in World War II. This act saved thousands of American lives and brought the War in the Pacific to a climactic end.

While good leadership in wars helps to create a great president, there are other criteria, as well. Woodrow Wilson and Lyndon Johnson both had outstanding domestic programs, aimed towards the lower and middle classes. Andrew Jackson's embrace of the common man, along with his successful defiance of the Supreme Court, which ruled that the Cherokees Indians could not be moved from their land in Georgia, helped to make Jackson a great president. A young, energetic nation that desired expansion, backed Jackson's decision to forcibly move the Cherokees off of their Georgia land, sending them to Oklahoma. His steadfast convictions, giving the country what it wanted, contributed to Jackson's legacy. Much like Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt demonstrated strong convictions as president by opposing the unlimited power of big businesses by breaking-up monopolies. Also, his role in the creation of the Panama Canal and his addition of a vast amount of national parks to the country added to his rugged and charismatic image. Of all the great presidents, no one had it any easier than Dwight D. Eisenhower, the World War II hero. During his presidency, Americans just wanted to return to their normal, everyday lives after an eventful war period. There were no real expectations of Eisenhower, except to keep the U.S. out of any more world problems.

No list of great presidents would be complete, however, without the addition of Thomas Jefferson. His role in purchasing the Louisiana Territory from France's Napoleon Bonaparte doubled the size of the U.S. and allowed a young nation the room it needed to grow into a world power. This was especially momentous at the time because Jefferson went against the views of his Democratic Republican Party, which believed that the purchase was wrong because the Constitution did not specifically allow for land acquisition. This resulted in Jefferson taking on some of the views of the rival Federalist Party, ending the party system for the time being. Unfortunately, this important tidbit was left out of the video because of time constraints.

Overall, A&E *Biography's: 10 Best, 5 Worst Presidents* provides a good introduction for the general public and history students alike of some of the most successful and some of the most disappointing presidents in U.S. history. A president, who provides for the general welfare of the nation, provides strength to a nation during wartime, senses the desires of the people he governs over, and does not abuse his power will be seen as a great president. Presidents involved with corruption, scandals, and arbitrary abuses of power will be looked down on in the pages of history.