
MENCKEN ON PRESIDENTS

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S.L. HARRISON

Journalism, in today's politically-correct world with a supine and docile press, is absent an outspoken political observer like H.L. Mencken. His public forum in the Baltimore Sunpapers, the Smart Set, the American Mercury and books provided HLM with an arsenal of artillery that targeted the nation's presidents.

TO PRESIDENTS (and those who sought that lofty office) H.L. Mencken directed his studious attention. A fifty-year newspaper career afforded him first-hand observation of presidents from William McKinley to Harry S Truman. Also, HLM witnessed the candidates vying in conventions from 1904 through 1948 and assessed them all. Nor did Mencken hesitate to judge earlier White House tenants.

Toward the Federalists, the founding fathers of the presidency, Mencken was, by and large, benevolent. George Washington, revered Father of Our Country, would today, Mencken wrote, "be ineligible for any office of honor or profit"; he was "a promoter of stock companies, a land-grabber, an exploiter of mines and timber." But for "all his drinking, swearing and marathon dancing" he was "the first, and perhaps the last American gentleman,"

who "could no more betray the best interests of the nation than he could betray his class." Mencken wrote that Washington, in his "muddled, pragmatic way, was a politician, but he was surely not a democratic politician. He was willing to labor for the mob, but he was not willing to court it and take its orders."

"Most of our great men have been transparent damn fools," wrote Mencken; "I except, of course, Jefferson." Mencken wrote: "Jefferson was unquestionably one of our giants," a man whose "integrity was of Doric massiveness." Of both Jefferson and John Adams, Mencken added: "in one thing they were exactly alike: they were men of complete integrity...courage...honesty...resolution...All these things were in both Jefferson and Adams."

Andrew Jackson, wrote Mencken, was "the *Stamvater* of the new statesman and philosophers...the first to put the

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rewards of conformity above the dictates of common decency,” but the Constitution “survived the rise of homo boobiens.” Jackson was a military man, Mencken wrote, and “disliked the serfs he lifted up.”

Abraham Lincoln, Mencken noted, became “the American solar myth, the chief butt of credulity and sentimentality.” In point of fact, Lincoln was “a practical politician of long experience and high talents, and by no means cursed with idealistic superstitions.” Under Lincoln, Mencken wrote, “slaves were freed only in part of the nation; all of the rest continued to clank their chains until he was an angel in Heaven.” Mencken admired Lincoln: “He was, above all things else, an extremely shrewd, realistic, and competent man;” he predicted that “Lincoln promises to outlast all the other gods of the American people” for “mostly the wrong reasons.”

Tongue in cheek, Mencken noted that Millard Fillmore was the first president to install a bathtub in the White House. Fillmore, “an ardent advocate of the new invention,” ignored the public outcry and ordered its installation. His cast iron version was replaced by an enameled model in Grover Cleveland’s first administration. (This spoof of Mencken’s is recorded in some reference works as factual history.)

Civil War hero Ulysses S. Grant was, wrote Mencken, the “almost perfect military man—dogged, devoted and dumb.” A “more honest man never lived,” but in the White House, Grant “displayed an almost inconceivable stupidity.”

Chester A. Arthur “made, on the whole, a good president,” Mencken wrote, and later, “We’ve had one honest man since the Adamses and that was Grover Cleve-

land.” Most other presidents were collectively described as “preposterous worms”—“the Franklin Pierces, Tafts...Chester A. Arthurs [HLM was sometimes inconsistent], Benjamin Harrisons, John Tylers, Rutherford B. Hayes and so on.” Mencken dismissed these presidents as “ninth-rate politicians, petty and puerile men, strangers to anything resembling honor.”

Acres of trees were felled to provide the newsprint that Mencken expended dealing with the presidents of his time—Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Only a vast book could compile the multitude of invective Mencken directed against these men, especially FDR and the New Deal. (The best collection is Malcolm Moos’ *H.L. Mencken on Politics: A Carnival of Buncombe*.) The following provide a representative sampling.

Of William McKinley, Mencken merely noted that he rescued the masses of people from “the Bryan madness of 1896.” Theodore Roosevelt was, wrote Mencken, “by long odds, the most interesting man who ever infested the White House, not excepting Jefferson and Jackson.” But Roosevelt was “a very slippery fellow, and he knew how to sacrifice principle to expediency.” Moreover, “he played to the worst idiocies of the mob; he hit below the belt almost habitually...and would sacrifice anything and everything to get applause.” In essence, Mencken assessed Roosevelt I as “blatant, cruel, overly confidential, devious, tyrannical, vainglorious, sometimes childish” and in the long run, “a very grave danger to democracy.”

Amiable William Howard Taft,

selected by Roosevelt, was overshadowed, Mencken wrote, by the appearance of the Ford automobile for it “had vastly more effect upon the ideas and progress of the American people than all the acts, official and otherwise, of Taft...or a whole herd of Tafts.” Taft was “heartily and innocent,” Mencken wrote: “All his life, even while he was in the White House, he was consumed by a desire to sit on a bench in the Supreme Court.”

Woodrow Wilson, who slipped into the White House courtesy of Teddy Roosevelt’s Progressive Party, was the first of a series of presidents roundly castigated by Mencken. Indeed, Mencken’s reputation as president-baiter was established in large part by Wilson, Harding, Coolidge, Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt. These men unloosed formidable Mencken’s barrage of invective and name-calling.

To begin with, Wilson was a “Puritan”—“the worst sort—highfalutin, hypocritical, and knavish.” Wilson was also a “dictator”...“who looked like a respectable Sunday school teacher and witch burner, and was.” At the hands of this president, who was “a demagogue,” the Constitution itself “went to pieces.” Mencken wrote: “Of all the men who lived in my time the most repellent to me was Wilson—the archetype of every human trait that I detest and despise.” [This comment was made before Franklin Roosevelt appeared on the political scene.]

Warren Gamaliel Harding, “the archetype of the Homo boobus” who emerged as a candidate for the presidency from a smoke-filled room, was “an igno-ramus.” Mencken concluded that Harding, “a near cipher,” was “an extremely ignorant man, and his long career as a newspa-

per publisher in a small town pretty well purged him of courage and self-respect.” In some measure, Mencken evidently pitied Harding: “he speaks bad English, but he has a heart.”

Calvin Coolidge, an “obscure and unimportant man,” left an almost “blank record” as president, wrote Mencken: “No one remembers anything that he did or anything that he said.” Coolidge’s “chief feat...was to sleep more than any other President—to sleep more and to say less.” Mencken concluded that “Silent Cal” was “a great deal worse than I ever made him out—nay, a great deal worse than I ever, in my most despairing moments, suspected.” Finally, upon Coolidge’s death, Mencken observed: “there were no thrills while he reigned, but neither were there any headaches. He had no ideas and he was not a nuisance.”

Herbert Hoover, “a Republican only as an afterthought,” was not Mencken’s favorite in 1928; his choice was the “Happy Warrior,” Al Smith—“an honest and worthy man.” Mencken derided “Dr. Hoover,” with his thirty honorary LL.D.’s, whose intelligence was “vastly overrated” as “one of a class of shiny, shallow, go-getters.” As president, Hoover was “a pitiable object” and as “the head of state shows almost complete incompetence to rule.” Mencken himself appeared blind to the Great Depression confronting Hoover and the nation, noting near the end of Hoover’s term that his “chief problem” was dealing with the “unconscionable politicians—clerical and lay, who run the Anti-Saloon League.”

Franklin D. Roosevelt was welcomed by Mencken (indeed, he voted for FDR). Only later, with the introduction of “the

Braintrusters” and the unfolding of the New Deal, did Mencken unleash his vitriol on “Roosevelt Minor.” The New Deal’s role, “to increase and prosper the criminal class,” was anathema to the well-off Mencken and to him, Roosevelt personified the New Deal. Its effect, “ostensibly trying to put an end to unjust and irrational forays by the haves, only opened the way for unjust and irrational forays by the have-nots.” Of the man himself, Mencken saw Roosevelt as “an idealist,” but “I can’t rid myself of the suspicion that he may also be a jackass”; moreover, he was “the greatest fraud this country has ever known. An amusing and charming fellow, but a man entirely without a conscience.” Gullible voters responded to the “hooey” of “vague and gaudy promises” from Roosevelt, who was “a sort of mixture of poet and evangelist, with overtones of the opera singer.” Roosevelt’s concept of government, as Mencken saw it, was likened to that “of a milch cow with 125,000,000 teats.”

Mencken was clearly out of tune with the nation’s economic troubles and public opinion regarding government’s role. “Roosevelt II,” Mencken concluded, “came near being the purest demagogue recorded in history...His whole politics consisted in attempts to arouse class against class, people against people.”

Harry S Truman, after he succeeded FDR, Mencken saw as little more than a torchbearer for the New Deal (as indeed, Truman saw himself) and dismissed him: “He doesn’t know what it’s all about and believes that he has to be faithful to Roosevelt.” When Truman won the 1948 Democratic nomination, Mencken described him as “a ward heeler under the Pendergast gang, and he still shows all the

childish qualities of a shoe-string politician...howling his hollow demagogy.” Mencken knew that Truman was no Pendergast tool. Truman’s record, as senator and president, proved that he wore no man’s collar. Truman announced his own “Fair Deal,” and his artful recall of the “do-nothing Eightieth Congress” had not been the “flop” that Mencken derided. After Truman’s unexpected 1948 election triumph, Mencken wrote “the country jolly well deserves it.” This was Mencken’s last newspaper pronouncement on any president.



MENCKEN harbored little hope in the ability of the people to elect any first-rate president. In 1920 he predicted a moron would eventually occupy the White House. Writing of the contest between Senator Harding and Governor James M. Cox, HLM held each candidate in low regard: Harding was “simply a third-rate political wheel-horse” and Cox had a “gift for bamboozling the boobs” with a “touch of the shyster in him.” Furthermore, neither man was a “gentleman.” Both men were newspaper editor-publishers, which may have colored Mencken’s perceptions of their morals.

Mencken wrote that “The presidency tends, year by year, to go to such men. As democracy is perfected, the office represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. We move toward a lofty ideal. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart’s desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.”

Ten years later, Mencken lamented: “It is no longer possible for a man to be put into the White House by anything properly

described as the popular will.” In one of his last newspaper commentaries Mencken made another dire prediction after witnessing 1948’s presidential candidates—Truman, Thomas E. Dewey, Henry A. Wallace, J. Strom Thurmond and Norman Thomas. Wrote Mencken: “It is my firm conviction, reached after long experience, profound pondering and incessant prayer, that no man who is worth a hoot will ever be president of the United States hereafter. We are doomed to suffer an endless procession of quacks—until that is, the Republic itself blows up.”

THE NATION may have experienced a share of presidential quacks and morons, but the Republic prevails. Mencken disliked many

presidents, but had his favorites among the also-rans—Al Smith, Norman Thomas, and Alf Landon, all of whom he described as “honest men.” None were destined to be assessed as president. Moreover, Mencken was not especially gifted as a seer. His crystal ball failed him when he flatly predicted that John W. Davis would not be nominated in 1924; that FDR would fail in a bid for a second term; and Truman’s win in 1948 astonished Mencken. An incomparable political commentator, Mencken was correct, more often than not, in exposing the charlatans in the body politic. The First Amendment no longer allows the license he enjoyed (indeed, no reputable newspaper would publish his comments). We the people are the poorer for that void.

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