

PREFACE

One of the most ubiquitous images for those growing up in the United States is that of four Presidents of the United States carved into Mount Rushmore. All American children are also initiated into the power of money from an early age; after all, that is how they acquire toys and candy—by trading the shiny coins and crumpled bills for those fun and flavorful objects. And who is it that is depicted on the coins and bills? For the most part, “illustrious” Presidents of the past. Are these men that have held the highest office in the land, though, really worthy of being lionized or, if you will, idolized?

Along with Lincoln (who, though certainly not perfect, seems to have been in a class by himself among Presidents), Mount Rushmore depicts two slaveholders (Washington and Jefferson) and a white supremacist (Theodore Roosevelt). The slaveholders and the racist were in “good” company. By that I mean they had a lot of it, among their fellow Presidents.

Probably none of the Presidents were quite as bad as their worst enemies make them out to be. Certainly none of them are as good as their most star-crossed devotees would have you believe, either. No, not even Lincoln: depending on your precise definition of the meaning of the label “white supremacist,” he could be placed in that category, too.

Other books focus on the positive aspects of the Presidents; this one emphasizes their failures and foibles.

In recounting the misdeeds of the various United States Presidents in this book, I do not presume to know the motives of these men. I simply report what they did—in other words, I report their actions, not their intentions. Perhaps Harry Truman really thought he was doing the right thing in bombing Japan in 1945. Maybe Bill Clinton felt that sanctions against Iraq were, in the long run, a morally upright position to take. Surely Andrew Jackson thought it was the right thing to do to take deliberate aim and shoot Charles Dickinson dead in their 1806 duel.

Regardless of the exigencies or rationalizations involved in these decisions, the results were: the (often agonizing) deaths to hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians; the deaths of great numbers of Iraqi men, women, and children, the vast majority of whom had absolutely nothing to do with Saddam Hussein's belligerent stance and corrupt regime; and the death of a man for an offensive remark. Granted, Dickinson was no “innocent victim,” seeing that he was regarded as the best shot in Tennessee, and had just missed Jackson's heart by mere millimeters before Jackson fired his round.

Oddly enough, of all the malevolent acts mentioned in the subtitle of this book (lying, stealing, treachery, adultery, and murder), there is a dichotomy regarding this last one (murder). On the one hand, murder is probably universally considered the most egregious of all the enumerated failings, but on the other hand, it also seems to be the one that is most easily justified. In the specific events listed above, cases have been made that in the long run

more people lived/less people died because of the decision to bomb Japan; that more people would have a chance to live better lives if the sanctions imposed on Iraq had succeeded; and that "honor" required the extinguishing of Dickinson's life by Andy Jackson. Then again, deaths caused by decisions made to go to war or to carry out certain campaigns in war are not normally considered to be murder in the first place.

Some of the other sins, serious but less heinous than killing people, bear up to no such rationalization. For who could claim that the reason they committed adultery was for humanitarian purposes, or stemmed from selfless urges? Who would be able to convince others that the reason they owned slaves was for anything other than their own material benefit and/or a cowardly failure to stand up to the dismay and even scorn of their neighbors had they simply done what was plainly the right, ethical, and just thing to do (liberate their slaves)?

If men were judged, not on their appearance, rhetorical skills, and acting ability, or even on their IQ, but rather on their *CQ* (Character Quotient), how would they stack up? Sad to say, it seems that many if not most of the men profiled in this book, when judged on the content of their character rather than the color of their skin and their clever repartee, would rank as low in a *CQ* test as an imbecile would on an IQ test. They seem to be, all in all, "special" people in that sense.

Or are we all this bad?