

Trump on Jackson and the Civil War: Historical ignorance and the decline of the American presidency

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In recent comments on American history, President Donald Trump conflated the era of Andrew Jackson with the Civil War and insisted that the latter, known then and since as the “irrepressible conflict,” could have been avoided.

“Why was there the Civil War? Why could that one not have been worked out?” Trump asked in his May 1 interview on Sirius satellite radio. He went on to assert that the Civil War upset his hero Andrew Jackson—who had been dead for 16 years at the war’s outbreak.

Trump said: “I mean, had Andrew Jackson been [president] a little later, you wouldn’t have had the Civil War.... He was really angry that he saw what was happening with regard to the Civil War. He said, ‘There’s no reason for this.’”

It hardly seems necessary to correct Trump’s false statements, which follow February 1 remarks revealing that the president does not know who the famed abolitionist Frederick Douglass was. As for his assertion that the Civil War was a calamitous error—in other words, that there was nothing historically necessary about the bloodiest war in American history, the “Second American Revolution” that ended slavery—this is a reactionary and discredited interpretation with its own sordid history.

There is a more salient point: The president of the United States is completely ignorant of the basic facts and chronology of his own country’s history, including its most significant event, the Civil War.

From this troubling fact other inescapable conclusions must be drawn. It is clearly impossible for Trump to draw, in any meaningful way, on the experience of history. He cannot possibly place current events in any broader political and historical context. And if American history is so foreign to him, one can be certain he knows nothing of the history of the countries he menaces with trade war or military attack: Mexico, Germany, North Korea, Iran, China, Russia, etc.

In a narrow sense, Trump’s ignorance is unsurprising. Like the billionaire and multi-millionaire investors and “entrepreneurs” he represents, and for whom money-making is the true and only God, the real estate swindler and reality television personality-turned commander in chief surely sees

little use for the past. To the extent that he turns to history, it is transactional. Much like the sale or purchase of a hotel, to Trump every historical event is a unique episode to be selected and interpreted impressionistically from the standpoint of immediate gain.

In a broader sense, however, Trump only epitomizes the long-term decline of historical knowledge in the American ruling class. Consider his predecessor in the White House. While it may be true that Barack Obama did not make such clamorous factual errors as Trump, one will search his speeches in vain for a single memorable or profound reference to the past.

Obama’s knowledge of history was hardly less superficial or dishonest than Trump’s. How could it be otherwise? How could the president who, in the bailout of Wall Street, oversaw history’s greatest transfer of wealth from the working class to the wealthy honestly equate himself to Lincoln, who, in the emancipation of the slaves, carried out the largest seizure of private property in world history prior to the Russian Revolution? How could a president who proclaimed his “right” to assassinate without trial those he alone claimed to be terrorists appeal to the democratic legacy of Jefferson and Madison, the authors of the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights, respectively?

To put such names in the same paragraph—Trump and Obama on one side; Lincoln, Jefferson and Madison on the other—is to be reminded of the breathtaking decline in the personnel of the American presidency. Lincoln, though largely self-taught, was an assiduous student of Shakespeare, mathematics and history. Jefferson and Madison ranked among the great thinkers of their day, their huge and well-used libraries filled with volumes on science, philosophy and classical antiquity.

The decline after Lincoln has been steep and protracted. There has not been a real student of history in the White House in the half century since the truncated administration of John Kennedy (1961-1963), who, like Franklin Roosevelt (1933-1945) twenty years before him, was at least able to convey the *appearance* of an individual at ease speaking about the past. Before them, in the Progressive Era, Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) and the professor-turned-president

Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) wrote volumes on history and were named presidents of the American Historical Association after their years in the White House.

These presidents' use of history was always in the service of an American ruling class, whose revolutionary days had died with Lincoln. For example, Wilson, in his historical scholarship, promoted the myth that the Civil War was a mistake—a false interpretation that Donald Trump now embraces. Wilson did so as part of a larger academic project that sought to bury the revolutionary and egalitarian significance of the Civil War. This was done in the context of the emergence of the US as an imperialist power waging bloody colonial wars abroad while conducting industrial warfare against the working class at home.

Even so, Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt sought to promote the idea that their policies were the outcome of the progressive development of US and world history, a process in which they imagined American capitalism and its governmental forms would go on playing a special, even messianic role. They mustered their idealistic interpretations to contend with scientific socialism, whose materialist approach to history, discovered by Karl Marx, attracted intellectuals, artists and growing numbers of workers and youth.

For these and other reasons, presidents in an earlier period promoted the study of history in the classroom. Not so today. It is not just that the White House in more recent decades has been occupied by individuals ignorant of history, including some whose ignorance was of historical dimensions. The presidency is now a “bully pulpit” in the attack on the teaching of history, as well as art and music, in the elementary and high schools, colleges and universities.

Compare Theodore Roosevelt's remarks on teaching history and art, delivered at the American Historical Association annual conference in 1912, to Obama's insipid comment on the same subject, delivered in 2014.

Roosevelt: “History, taught for a directly and immediately useful purpose to pupils and the teachers of pupils, is one of the necessary features of a sound education in democratic citizenship... few inscriptions teach us as much history as certain forms of literature that do not consciously aim at teaching history at all. The inscriptions of Hellenistic Greece in the third century before our era do not, all told, give us so lifelike a view of the ordinary life of the ordinary men and women who dwelt in the great Hellenistic cities of the time as does the fifteenth idyll of Theocritus.”

Obama: “[A] lot of young people no longer see the trades and skilled manufacturing as a viable career. But I promise you, folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree... I'm just saying you can make a really good living and have a great career without getting a four-year college education as long as you get the skills and the training that you need.”

It is not that Roosevelt overlooked the necessity of industrial work. But he paid lip service to the ideal, and backed it up with a degree of government funding, that broad access to history and culture was a positive good. In word and in deed, the recent presidents—Trump, Obama, George W. Bush, etc.—attack the teaching of history and the idea of a liberal education. Educational “reforms” such as Obama's “Race to the Top” have brought layoffs for tens of thousands of social studies teachers and blocked a generation of history, literature, music and art majors from finding work.

Here it must be added that the attack on history has also been waged from within the walls of the Ivory Tower. Highly paid practitioners of postmodernism and identity politics, many of them the leading “theorists” and most highly compensated professors at elite universities—not only in the US, but also in Great Britain, France and Germany—insist that there is no objectively understandable history at all. It is all simply a “narrative” that one creates or discards for present purposes. The archival record left behind by past generations is treated in the most cavalier manner and the pursuit in history of objectivity, facts and truth—terms that are inevitably placed within quotation marks in postmodern texts—is treated with contempt.

If the postmodernist premise about history is true, then why should Trump's deeply false “narrative” of American history be less valid than any other? Or, for that matter, German historian Jörg Baberowski's “narrative” of twentieth century history, which relativizes the crimes of the Third Reich? How is Trump's argument that the Civil War was all a big mistake fundamentally different from that of the advocates of identity politics, such as Michael Eric Dyson, who view American history as a story of unchanging and unending “white racism?”

It might appear ironic that as history closes in on the ruling class, its understanding of its own history erodes, a process embodied in the American presidency itself.

It is not at all ironic. History is a most unwelcome guest at the lavish banquet where the rich gorge themselves at the expense of the working masses. Its most basic lessons must fill the billionaires and their politicians with dread: That times change and at certain points the oppressed revolutionize their times, that masses of people can learn from history and assimilate its strategic experiences, and that the richest and seemingly most timeless oligarchies have fallen—among them the Capetian dynasty of the *ancien regime* in France, the Romanov dynasty of Tsarist Russia, and, of course, the old slave-owning elite with which Trump so identifies.



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