

Ford: Not a Lincoln but a Hayes? A Lesson in History and Political Science

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As history or social studies teachers, we are constantly striving to make the past come alive for our students and to help them see that, not only does the past relate to the present, but it can also give us insights into the future. The recent passing of former President Gerald R. Ford provides social studies teachers with just such an opportunity. Ford's death brought his name to the attention of middle and high school students, and opens the door to teaching an important lesson on presidential history. It also offers an opportunity to have students begin thinking about the 2008 presidential election.

Discussion of the Ford presidency inevitably involves his famous self-characterization: "I'm a Ford, not a Lincoln." This statement will stir questions such as, "What did President Ford mean when he said this?" or "What do the names 'Ford' and 'Lincoln' really mean or stand for in this statement?" A comparison of Presidents Ford and Lincoln should allow teachers to broaden the discussion or lesson to include the four major theories on presidential performance from political science. The four theories are:

1. Richard Neustadt's theory that a president's power or success lies in his power to persuade, due to a lack of Constitutional power;
2. James David Barber's theory that presidential power or success is based upon a president's personality type;
3. Theodore Lowi's theory that a successful president is one who sticks to a strict constructionist

interpretation of his Constitutional powers, and, therefore, does not set up overwhelming public expectations;

4. Stephen Skowronek's theory (described in further detail later on in this article) that presidential power or success is dependent upon outside forces (social, economic, and other).

According to Skowronek's theory, it is possible to predict a current or prospective president's level of success by looking back to a time when outside forces were similar to current conditions. After seeing how president X did under those conditions, it is possible to make a similar forecast about a current or prospective president facing similar conditions. Understanding the "signs of the times," is key to applying Skowronek's theory. What is going on in society that is shaping the presidency and that the president may be attempting to re-shape? The sidebar shows the kinds of characteristics teach-

ers and students should try to identify across time periods.

Evaluating the Ford Presidency

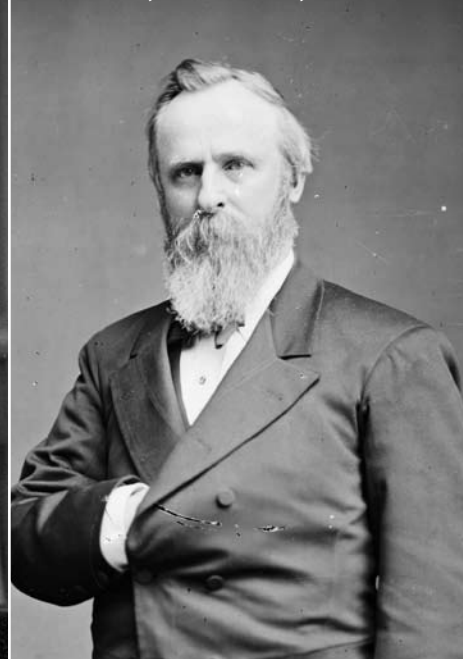
As part of the national mourning that took place following Ford's passing, various tributes and retrospectives to and about the former president expressed Ford's wish that historians remember him as a "healer," in reference to the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War. Ultimately, he has been recognized as a very humble man, and American political history and analysis seem to bear out his statement: "I'm a Ford, not a Lincoln." However, political history and analysis also seem to bear out that, while Ford may not have been a Lincoln, he may have been a Hayes—a President Rutherford B. Hayes, so to speak. Almost 100 years apart in terms of their time in office, both Hayes and Ford, to a significant extent, have been obscure figures within American political history and analysis. However, they shared a strength of political character, most notably seen in their steadfastness and stability in the face of significant political adversity.

Rutherford B. Hayes came into office in March 1877, on the heels of the contested election of 1876; the election was settled in his favor by the Compromise of 1877, in which northern, radical Republicans politically traded an end to military Reconstruction in the South with southern Democrats in return for

President Gerald Ford reads a proclamation in the White House on September 8, 1974, granting former president Richard Nixon “a full, free and absolute pardon” for all “offenses against the United States” during the period of his presidency. (AP Photo)



An undated portrait of Rutherford B. Hayes, 19th president of the United States, 1877-1881, by Mathew Brady.



(Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division [LC-DIG-cwpbh-05109])

Similar Societal Characteristics to Look to Identify Across Time Periods

1. Is there a strong or weak societal opposition toward government at a particular time?
2. (Related to number 1) Is the president having to fight against public opinion, special interests, the economy, or government itself?
3. Does the president have the ability to influence the outside forces mentioned in number 2?
4. Summary by Skowronek: “What ... political challenges face a leader at any given stage [or moment in time]? How is the quality of presidential performance [whether a president does well or poorly] related to the changing shape [of the politics of the times]?”¹

their certifying the presidential electoral vote in favor of Hayes. Hence, a cloud of public cynicism hovered over Hayes throughout his term in office—he was often referred to as “Rutherfraud” instead of “Rutherford.” Many people considered that Hayes stole the election of 1876 from Samuel Tilden. He later would say: “I am not liked as a President by the politicians in office, in the press, or in Congress.”²

Ford’s ascent to the presidency has some parallels: the fact that he had never been elected vice president or president brought out many critics who felt that Ford did not deserve the office. This image or opinion of the president became ensconced when he granted a full presidential pardon to President Nixon for his role in the Watergate scandal.

The Ford presidency is interesting in the light of any of the four theories I have mentioned. I believe, however, that the theory advanced by Skowronek is the one that offers the most insights into the challenges of the Ford presidency, and that an apt comparison can be made between the conditions facing Hayes and those facing Ford. Both Hayes and Ford faced questions over the legitimacy of their presi-

dencies. They both also faced significant adverse political forces acting upon their presidencies, making “presidential success” a nearly impossible task. Skowronek asserts that forces outside of the presidency are what determine the success or failure of a president. According to Skowronek, when you discover a nexus between the present forces acting upon the presidency and a time in the past, you can reasonably determine a prospective or current president’s chances of success or failure. This theory compares the performance difficulties faced by both presidential administrations and underlines the problems that confronted the Ford administration. Ford and Hayes each followed a president from his own party whose administration was plagued by scandals. Both Hayes and Ford lacked control of Congress in the mid-term election after becoming president; each faced significant economic difficulties, namely, inflation; and each faced the difficult task of trying to heal a nation divided in the aftermath of a long and arduous war.

“Our long national nightmare is over,” President Ford said in the wake of Watergate. Hayes might have said the same, because the Compromise of 1877,

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which brought him into office, brought an end to military Reconstruction in the South. However, for both Ford and Hayes, “the nightmare” of governing in troubled times was just beginning. As mentioned previously, Ford received notable criticism for pardoning Nixon, while Hayes had to deal with the scandal fall-out from Grant’s administration, namely Credit Mobilier and the Whiskey Ring.

Because of the public’s disenchantment with government at the time of each administration, both Hayes and Ford found themselves unable to exercise control of Congress through their own parties after the 1878 and 1974 mid-term elections, respectively. Nonetheless, Hayes and Ford still pursued the hallmark of their respective administrations—the restoration of good government. Hayes, for example, saw to legislation outlawing government workers’ participation in political campaigns, for, as he stated, “He serves his party best who serves his country best.”³ Ford, in turn, saw to the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act.

“Whip Inflation Now” (“W.I.N.”) was President Ford’s economic policy program for bringing hyperinflation during the 1970s under control. W.I.N., in fact, was to include a balanced federal budget had Ford won the election of 1976. Hayes, dealing with the financial fallout of a fluctuating economy due to the Panic of 1873, fought vigorously for the gold standard in order to stabilize the nation’s currency and economy. The gold standard debate raged on throughout the late 1800s, much as the issue of inflation plagued the nation throughout the end of the 1970s and into the early 1980s.

Although the divisive wars of their times were supposed to be over when


each president came into office, in both cases they were not entirely ended. Despite the Paris Peace Accord of 1973, fighting continued in Vietnam until 1975, when the American people saw on television Americans desperately fleeing the American embassy during the fall of Saigon. By comparison, the Civil War was effectively over when Hayes came into office; however, deep sectionalism between the North and South still existed; the South was poor, and southern Democrats, due to the Compromise of 1877, expected political favors from Hayes.

Ford, of course, was not elected president in 1976, losing out to Jimmy Carter; nonetheless, he ran a valiant campaign during which he almost closed a 30-point gap in the election polls following the Republican National Convention in late August of 1976. In his inaugural address, President Carter said, “For myself and for our nation, I want to thank my predecessor for all he has done to heal our land.”⁴ Hayes himself decided to serve only one term.

Class Activity

To evaluate President Ford according to Stephen Skowronek’s theory, students can make a T-square chart with “Ford” and “Hayes” at the top—and then break down, with teacher guidance, the historical similarities and presidential outcomes of the two presidents. Students could then be asked to look ahead to the 2008 election, at some of the leading candidates at this time, and to make their own predictions as to who would be the best presidential choice by applying one or more of the presidential power theories. Students may then track their candidates over time in debates and primaries and see if their evaluations appear accurate and

if they would continue to support their particular candidate for president. This longitudinal lesson may then culminate near November 2008, for example, in an informed mock election (as opposed to a mere popularity contest).

Political scientist Stephen Bennett of the University of Cincinnati has been advocating for years for more engaging and rigorous political and civics education at all levels. I believe that the type of pedagogy I have suggested heeds Bennett’s call to action. While neither the Ford nor Hayes presidencies will stand out in the annals of presidential history or become highlights of political science research, both presidencies can teach us important future lessons. For, as the oft-mentioned saying goes, “Those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it.” 

Notes

1. Michael Nelson, ed., *The Presidency and the Political System* 3rd. Edition (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1990), 119.
2. Joslyn Pine, ed., *Wit and Wisdom of the American Presidents: A Book of Quotations* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2001), 30.
3. Ibid.
4. Frank Freidel and Hugh Sydney, *The Presidents of the United States of America* (The White House Historical Association in association with Scala Publishers, 2006), 79.

References

1. Barber, James David. *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, 4th. ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1992.
2. Lowi, Theodore. *The Personal President: Power Invested, Promise Unfulfilled*. Ithaca & London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985.
3. Neustadt, Richard. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1990.
4. Skowronek, Stephen. *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997.

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