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## Presidents Day: Just Another Government Holiday

CHICAGO – Presidents Day is a fake holiday. In fact, the holiday is still officially known as Washington’s Birthday, and although it can be argued whether or not it ever served a purpose years ago, its claimed meaning and value have greatly diminished since the federal holiday was established by an Act of Congress in 1879 to commemorate the birth of George Washington, America’s first president.

Since then, the holiday’s date has been changed by politicians to create three day weekends and it no longer falls on Washington’s actual birthday, February 22<sup>nd</sup>. Following the Uniform Monday Holiday Act of 1971, the meaning of the holiday has been broadened to encompass the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, and in most cases, Presidents Day has merely become a catch-all for honoring all of America’s past presidents since the mid-1980s push from advertisers and enthusiasts of glorifying government power.

Dr. Ivan Eland, Senior Fellow and Director of the Center on Peace & Liberty at the Independent Institute, isn’t impressed with the deification of America’s chief executives, either. Eland’s book, [\*Recarving Rushmore: Ranking the Presidents on Peace, Prosperity, and Liberty\*](#), systematically reevaluates the presidency based on each individual’s commitment to the Constitution. The book specifically assesses presidential policies on the basis of their actions – a policy only approach that doesn’t concern itself with personalities, like many rankings do.

This method of ranking America’s presidents – in many ways – turns traditional ranking systems upside down, but in a refreshingly unique and informative way. George Washington makes the list at number seven, although he is normally in the top three, due in part to his reliance on Alexander Hamilton’s expansive vision of executive power and employing the government to give advantages to big business. Washington also lost points in the ranking because of the dangerous precedents he set with regard to domestic and foreign policy, including the crushing of the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion – which was an anti-tax protest, not a revolt to overthrow the new federal government, and his usurpation of Congress’ role in U.S. foreign policy. Washington’s reputation is saved, however, due to other precedents he set, including the fact that he limited himself to serving two terms in office, whereas cabinet members and citizens, like Alexander Hamilton, would’ve been happy to see Washington become King of America – for life.

The top four presidents, as ranked by Eland according to their fealty to the Constitution and actions taken to promote peace, prosperity, and liberty, are presidents John Tyler, Grover



# TEF COMMENT



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Cleveland, Martin Van Buren, and Rutherford B. Hayes. Notice that none of these four men engaged in horrendous wars or are known for their grand proclamations or actions. They are all rather dull by the standards set by those who long for a hyperactive executive branch, instead these men acted as referees to ensure that rights were upheld and no special privileges were granted – exactly as prescribed by the Constitution, and nothing more.

The bottom of the list also reflects Eland's innovative method of ranking the presidents, as it is populated with leaders who normally rank much higher on standard surveys of the presidency. From *worse* to *the worst*, those presidents are William McKinley, Harry S. Truman, and Woodrow Wilson, respectively. It is no coincidence that each of these three men expanded the power of their office, cracked down on civil liberties, negatively impacted the U.S. economy, and engaged in incredibly costly military conflicts, from McKinley and the Spanish-American War, to Truman and the nuking of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to Woodrow Wilson and that horrible conflict the world is still reeling from today, World War I.

Pick up a copy of this book and make an effort to study its rankings before your Presidents Day weekend of 2017. Readers might disagree with the author's reasons for ranking the presidents as he does, but it is certainly a worthwhile and intellectually stimulating exercise that sharpens one's arguments for and against the leaders of America's executive branch. Perhaps after absorbing Dr. Eland's arguments, readers will reflect on the holiday once known for America's first president and reassess whether or not the modern manifestation of this holiday is worthwhile, or simply just another government holiday.

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