

Jon Meacham, *The Soul of America: The Battle For Our Better Angels*,
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Reviewer: Laina Farhat-Holzman

Jon Meacham, a Pulitzer Prize winning presidential biographer, had already written books about George Herbert Walker Bush, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and books about the Founding Fathers, the relationship between FDR and Winston Churchill, and the Civil Rights movement. The election of a most unusual president, Donald J. Trump, in 2016, spurred him to give us a perspective on the American presidencies, the best and the worst. This current book seems to be weighing in on the better ones, or those who rose to fill this enormous task. This does indeed provide perspective on what we ask for and receive from our top elected leaders.

Franklin D. Roosevelt noted: "The Presidency is not merely an administrative office. That's the least of it. It is more than an engineering job, efficient or inefficient. It is pre-eminently a place of moral leadership."

Lyndon B. Johnson, a son of the South who became president upon the assassination of John Kennedy, noted: "Nothing makes a man come to grips more directly with his conscience than the Presidency. The burden of his responsibility literally opens up his soul."

These are just two of our presidents who could have surprised us: Roosevelt could have become a dictator, which he did not, because he believed in his moral responsibility. Johnson could have adhered to his southern roots in regard to our national history of racism, but as president, he did not. He said that he was President of the entire United States, not just Texas or the South.

The best of our Presidents are able to discern the big picture at the time they are serving: the need to encourage hope, decency, and often to make the people who elected him stretch. These presidents appeal to our better angels. The worst presidents do the opposite: evoke the demons that are always among us, the resentments, hatreds, fears, and violence. Our country's history is a balance of these two issues: our better and our worst instincts.

He also reminds us that Presidents are human beings, capable of error at times, but if morally strong, capable of rising above sometimes very frightening issues.

He notes: "This book is a portrait of hours in which the politics of fear were prevalent---a reminder that periods of public dispiritedness are not new and a reassurance that they are survivable. In the best of moments, witness, protest, and resistance can intersect with the leadership of an American president to lift us to higher ground. In darker times, if a particular president fails to advance the national story---or worse, moves us backward---then those who witness, protest and resist must stand fast, in hope, working toward a better day."

Swedish economist, Gunnar Myrdal, writing in 1944, called the "American Creed" a belief in the principles of liberty, self-government, and equal opportunity regardless of race, gender, religion, or national origin. Indeed, it is a unique thing in the world to forge a unified country not based on blood, religion, or long-time ancestry. All we require of our citizens is that they accept this creed.

But Meacham has gone beyond considering the American Creed: he writes about the American soul, noting that there is a big difference between believing in a creed and acting on it. "The war between the ideal and the real, between what's right and what is convenient, between the larger good and personal interest is the contest that unfolds in the soul of every American."

The better day, according to Meacham, is that we can progress as a nation, to the point that all Americans can realize the full promise of Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. American progress has been slow and painful. Too many generations of women, African Americans, Immigrants, and others have been denied the full promise of America's best visions and rights. Although progress has not moved in a straight line, it has moved forward more than it has stepped back. "The United States has long been shaped by the promise, if not always by the reality, of forward motion, of rising greatness, and the expansion of knowledge, of wealth, and of happiness." As a whole, Meacham thinks that the trajectory of the country has been more forward than backward.

The Presidencies he features begin with Lincoln, who faced the possible division of the country into two, one of them a slave country. President Theodore Roosevelt departed from his upper-class loyalties to take on the inequity of power residing in millionaire industry owners with unjust treatment of the working men and women. He promoted the "fair deal." He was also the first to recognize that the beauties and wonders of our natural world should be available to everybody (birth of the National Parks).

President Franklin Roosevelt faced a national catastrophe that could have plunged us into a dictatorship, either fascist or communist. He saved Capitalism thereby.

The loss of the Southern Confederacy to the Union in the Civil War did not end the country's tragic history of black slavery. The South devoted its energies to reviving the "lost cause" by creating the Ku Klux Klan to terrorize new Black citizens and with the aid of a bad President (Andrew Johnson) did much to reverse the Reconstruction, a program to incorporate Black citizens into the rights guaranteed to us all.

President Wilson was an example of a genuine intellectual, a university president, who should have been an excellent president who would promote progress and equality. Instead, as a war-time president, he reverted to a dictatorial model, and he never overcame his Southern prejudices against Black citizens, actually re-segregating Washington for the first time since the end of the Civil War. Under his Presidency, the Ku Klux Klan had an enormous revival, roiling the country until the Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Much space is given to the Presidency of FDR, who faced the crisis of the old order, the Great Depression, the "America First" movement of isolationism (and proto Nazism), but who gave the country the New Deal, hope, and shepherded us through World War II.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, the great general who led the US forces in World War II became the first Republican elected to the Presidency after Roosevelt and Truman. He determined, however, that he would be president of everybody, not just Republicans, which set many teeth on edge in his party. His administration was devoted to making everyone middle class, using the GI Bill to pay for college, bringing many from lower to middle class. Despite America's prosperity, the country was facing another Red Scare, the possibility of nuclear war and Communism taking over, which gave rise to another of America's perennial demagogues: Senator Joseph McCarthy. It took four years, but America's better angels finally took hold. McCarthy was asked: "Senator, have you no decency?" The answer for all to see was that he did not.

Lyndon Johnson asked, when he became accidental President after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, why he was offending all the Southern voters by promoting Black integration. Johnson said that he was no longer a Texas senator; he was President of everybody, and "What the hell is the Presidency for if not to do the right thing?"

Meacham's final chapter is on the duties of the voting citizen. We certainly want a president who gives us hope, promotes decency, and has a progressive vision of how we can be a better nation. But voters get the president they elect. If, as in the 2016 election, many people do not see fit to vote and many others yield to a pied piper who promotes the cults of resentment, racial and gender hatreds, believing that the country's very institutions need to be "shaken up," we get a period of stepping back from our better angels.

Great presidents cannot do it alone. We are a representative republic and much depends upon voting wisely and really believing in the American Creed. Today, America's soul needs feeding.