

MOST DANGEROUS JOB IN AMERICA

By Michael Ventura

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The first Gore/Bush debate was followed the next night by the season premiere of *The West Wing* ... and there we were, Hannah and I, five minutes into *The West Wing*, laughing at something that's hardly laughable, laughing like the blues instructs: to keep from cryin'. For we realized we care far more for the fictional president James Bartlett (Martin Sheen) than for Gore and Bush put together. We *feel* something for Bartlett. We like his frank, fierce eyes. (Gore's eyes look like things he takes out and polishes before bed; Bush's have the air of someone recently arrested for exposing himself.) We agree more with Bartlett, and he expresses complex positions with more clarity and passion than Gore/Bush. And Bartlett's staff is so human and funny and smart, they have such integrity, they're exactly the kind of people we want in the White House. It's as though John Kennedy never died -- the John Kennedy that lives in our imaginations, not the one who was mostly ineffectual and lied a lot. As though we finally have the president Americans have been wishing for since November 22, 1963, the day we lost the president we had but were brutally put in touch with our longings for the president we want.

So there we were, Hannah and I, an accurately targeted audience, happily being pandered to, indulging the cheap luxury of trust in a fictional White House ... and I thought of the last hundred years of the presidency and what a rotten, scary, soul-eating job it really is. Take it administration by administration:

William McKinley (Republican), elected in 1897 with the only popular majority since the re-election of Grant in 1872 (yes, it's nothing new for presidents to be elected without a majority) ... a businessman's president if there ever was one, his "acquisition" (cute term) of the Philippines began America's status as a world power ... died in office of an assassin's bullet in 1901 at the age of 48.

Theodore Roosevelt (Republican) took over at the tender age of 42 ... regulated the railroads (the most powerful businesses of the day), set government standards for food and drugs, created our National Parks system, built the Panama Canal ... his second term ended in 1909, ran as a third-party candidate and suffered an embarrassing defeat in 1912, and during that campaign survived an assassination attempt.

William Howard Taft (Republican), a one-termer of no noticeable accomplishment ... humiliated in his attempt for a second term by the worst defeat ever handed an incumbent.

Woodrow Wilson (Democrat), elected 1912 ... his Federal Trade Commission and Federal Reserve Act are felt still, he viciously suppressed American radicals, promised to keep us out of the First World War and didn't, tried to create an effective League of Nations and couldn't ... the strain was such he suffered a stroke in office in 1919 at the age of 62, was almost completely incapacitated, and his wife illegally ran the White House until 1921. Died of having been president in 1924, age 67.

Warren Harding (Republican) ... the most corrupt administration of the century, even by today's standards (two of his people committed suicide to escape prosecution) ... the strain took him too: died in office of an embolism in 1923 at the age of 67.

Calvin Coolidge (Republican) declared "the business of America is business" and governed that way, won re-election, was very popular but for some mysterious reason wouldn't run again. Maybe he knew what was coming.

Herbert Hoover (Republican) took office in 1929 ... the Great Depression hit that October and he was utterly inept in the face of it ... he did little, and none of that worked ... tried for re-election anyway in 1932 but was humiliated by:

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Democrat), with cousin Teddy one of the two 20th-century presidents deserving of the word "great" -- but he couldn't get elected now because he governed from a wheelchair (a fact kept from the public until after his death). Social Security is only one of his lasting achievements; coddling Southern racist Democrats in order to hold his power is only one of his shames; but no president's impact is still felt more, and he led well through World War II ... survived an assassination attempt, and again the strain proved too much: died in office of a stroke in 1945 at the age of 63.

Harry Truman (Democrat) dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, allowed McCarthy's witch hunts to thrive, but instituted the Marshall Plan that saved a war-ravaged Western Europe and the GI Bill that started college education for the masses ... then (illegally) got us into the Korean War, and was so unpopular by 1952 he decided not to run again.

Dwight D. Eisenhower (Republican) ... expanded social services, created the interstate highway system ... instituted Cold War tactics that governed U.S. policy until 1989, began our involvement in Vietnam, began atomic stockpiling, let the CIA run roughshod and unsupervised anywhere it pleased ... again, the strain: survived a heart attack in office at the age of 67 ... left office oddly warning America of the threat from within by "the military industrial complex," a phrase he coined and an institution he helped establish.

John F. Kennedy (Democrat) ... elected partly through lying about a "missile gap" that didn't exist, stupidly handled the Bay of Pigs, brilliantly handled the Cuban Missile Crisis, concealed his medical frailties and sexual adventures from the public, enormously increased "defense" spending, started the space program, fudged and hedged on civil rights, illegally sent thousands of troops to Vietnam ... assassinated in office in 1963 at the age of 46.

Lyndon Baines Johnson (Democrat) ... the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts were great and brave achievements, the "Great Society" program was a true attempt to strengthen the lower classes, but he escalated the illegal, pointless, gruesome war in Vietnam, knew he couldn't win in 1968 and declined to run, leaving office an old man at the age of 60, died of the pent-up strain at the age of 64.

Richard Nixon (Republican) ... a war criminal, massively bombing countries with no legal authority ... utterly corrupt and illegal campaign practices ... his vice president,

Spiro Agnew, had to resign and was convicted for taking bribes ... his attorney general, John Mitchell, had to resign and was convicted of various crimes, as were many of his White House staff ... finally he resigned too rather than face impeachment and sure conviction.

Gerald Ford (Republican) ... appointed by Nixon after Agnew resigned, took over and pardoned Nixon ... pledged not to seek re-election, changed his mind, got whupped. No noticeable achievements. Survived two assassination attempts.

Jimmy Carter (Democrat) ... though his party controlled Congress, he couldn't get much legislation passed ... couldn't handle the oil crisis or the hostage crisis ... started the massive "defense" build-up Reagan would continue ... the Egypt-Israel Camp David agreements were his big achievement ... humiliated in his attempt to be re-elected. Went out whining.

Ronald Reagan (Republican) ... savaged social programs, massively increased the national debt ... illegally invaded Grenada, bombed Libya, undermined Latin American governments ... negotiated an important arms treaty with the Soviet Union ... most of his top aides resigned over the Iran-Contra scandal; when questioned under oath about this he said either "I don't know" or "I don't remember" 130 times ... but America loved him anyway. Survived an assassination attempt that put two bullets in the chest.

George Bush (Republican) ... former CIA chief, promised no new taxes, broke the promise, organized an illegal war against Iraq, supposedly won although Saddam is still in power ... went from the highest popularity rating of any postwar president to humiliation, losing his re-election bid to an upstart no one had heard of before the campaign.

Bill Clinton (Democrat) ... oh let's not even get into it ... oh, well ... moved the Democratic party to the right of Nixon (whose social programs were liberal by comparison) ... rode a technology-driven economic boom to popularity in spite of a sex scandal so dumb, so pitiful that ... oh, well ... exposed in more lies than any contemporary politician ... impeached but not convicted ... the thinnest legacy of any two-term president in our history.

Let's see ... that's 18 men ... two assassinated in office ... four escaped attempted assassinations (one wounded) ... one dead in office by stroke, one by embolism ... one incapacitated by stroke ... one weakened by heart attack ... one resigning in disgrace ... two resigning in effect by not running again, because they became so disliked ... one appointee humiliated in bid to be elected ... four one-termers humiliated in bids for re-election ... one impeached, disgraced but not convicted. Of the 13 who are deceased, eight didn't live to be 70, and six didn't live to their 65th birthday. In terms of on-the-job safety, physical/mental health, and reputation, it's the most dangerous job in America. Only one (Coolidge) appears to have escaped the office unscathed -- though that's about the sum of his achievement. Poor Al Gore. Poor George W. One of them is gonna be

caught in this meatgrinder. Neither seems up to it. While President Bartlett governs our fantasies, and we laugh to keep from crying.

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