

A Gallery of Presidents

Background on the Posters

This guide provides additional information on the twelve posters making up the MindSparks poster set, "A Gallery of Presidents." The information presented here identifies each U.S. President portrayed in the poster set, that President's dates in office, a brief description of the historical context of the editorial cartoon, and any additional information needed to understand the cartoon itself. You may wish to copy the text in this guide and include it along side the posters when you display them in class.

Poster 1

Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809)

"The Providential Detection"

George Washington chose Thomas Jefferson as his Secretary of State, even though Washington himself favored the Federalist ideas of Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton wanted a strong government backed by the wealthy and empowered to promote trade and industry. Jefferson wanted a weak government that would let a largely agricultural nation develop on its own. Jefferson and Hamilton soon became bitter foes. By 1800, Jefferson was leading the Democratic-Republicans and was running for President that year against John Adams. The Democratic-Republicans accused Adams and the Federalists of favoring England, monarchy, and a wasteful government in the hands of bankers and merchants. The Federalists accused Jefferson of admiring radical France and military dictators like Napoleon, and favoring a war between the rich and the poor. In this Federalist cartoon, Jefferson is shown sacrificing the Constitution on an "Alter to Gallic (French) Despotism." He holds a piece of paper labeled "to Mazzei." This refers to a letter he wrote to an Italian friend, Philip Mazzei, accusing the Federalists of backing despotism.

Poster 2

George Washington (1789-1797)

"The Present State of Our Country"

This poster of our first President, George Washington, is second here because it was actually printed in 1810, long after Washington's death in 1799. In this cartoon, a casket labeled "Liberty and Independence" rests on three pillars — "Federalism," "Republicanism," and "Democracy." A Democratic-Republican (in favor of war with England) is shown pulling down the "Federalism" pillar while a Federalist (opposed to war with England) is pulling down the "Democracy" pillar. George Washington looks down from heaven and longs for the days when party strife was not so bitter. The cartoon shows that by 1810, Washington's era had already come to be seen as far more peaceful and harmonious than it actually was. The drawing also shows how political ideas were changing by 1810. For example, it is unlikely that Washington himself would have seen "Democracy" and "Federalism" as equally desirable pillars of American liberty. He was more of a Federalist and less of a democrat than that.

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Poster 3
Andrew Jackson
(1829-1837)
"King Andrew the First"

Andrew Jackson used his veto frequently to overrule acts of Congress. And he asserted his independence of Congress in other ways as well. He was the first President elected with a sizable popular vote. This may have led him to see the President as the person speaking for all the people — as opposed to individual members of Congress, who speak only for certain states or sections. Those who admired Jackson said he had to be a strong President in order to defend ordinary Americans against the rich and powerful. But others saw him as this cartoon does, as a dangerous tyrant trampling on the Constitution and on the rights of the states in his fights over tariffs, the U.S. Bank, and other matters.

Poster 4
Abraham Lincoln
(1861-1865)
"The Rail Splitter at Work"

By early 1865, after four years of the Civil War, the South was in ruins and close to surrender. President Abraham Lincoln began to talk about how best to restore the rebellious states to the Union. This 1865 cartoon portrays Lincoln in a more favorable light than many others had earlier, especially during his 1864 presidential campaign against General George McClellan. In this cartoon, he and Vice President Andrew Johnson are sewing the nation back together again. Lincoln is shown as the rail splitter, a favorite image conveying his humble frontier background and plain-spoken style. Lincoln had freed the slaves in states that were still in rebellion. But as this cartoon suggests, he wanted to see the Union restored without punishing the South too harshly.

Poster 5
Grover Cleveland
(1885-1889; 1893-1897)
"The President's Grip"

After the Civil War, America industrialized rapidly. A coast-to-coast railroad system was completed. Huge corporations developed. Cities grew rapidly, creating enormous problems of sanitation, housing, transportation and crime. Immigrants poured into the country and challenged older ideas of what it meant to be an American. Yet in the 1870s and '80s, presidential politics rarely dealt with these problems. Instead, attention centered on a more narrow concern: honesty in government. Corruption during Grant's Presidency led to calls for civil service reform — that is, for the hiring of government workers according to their merit or ability, not party loyalty. The three Presidents following Grant backed some changes. But the biggest champion of civil service reform was Democrat Grover Cleveland, first elected in 1884. He was widely admired for his efforts to end the political "spoils system." As this cartoon suggests, respect for Cleveland rested in large part on his willingness to offend both Republicans and Democrats equally in his fight for honesty in government.

Poster 6
Theodore Roosevelt
(1901-1909)
"Good Trusts, Bad Trusts"

Populism, a mostly rural reform movement, swept through many states in the 1890s. By 1900, it was fading. But other reformers soon took up many populist ideas — and altered them so as to reach more urban and middle class voters. No one caught the spirit of this new age of "Progressivism" more than Republican President Theodore Roosevelt. In Roosevelt's view, greater government power was needed to check the "trusts," those big combinations of corporations that seemed to control entire industries. Roosevelt ended an era of weak Presidents and drastically changed the way Americans thought about the Presidency. He was no enemy of big business; he actually had great faith in large-scale industrial organization. He simply wanted government to control and guide it. While he acted to break up certain trusts, he only did this when he thought their power would harm the entire country. This cartoon shows him destroying "bad" trusts while taming those whose operations he saw as helpful.

Poster 7
Calvin Coolidge
(1923-1929)

Coolidge's Swimming Hole

Vice President Calvin Coolidge took over as President in 1923, after Warren G. Harding's death. Coolidge was so honest that his efforts to clean up government kept the scandals of the Harding years from hurting the Republicans. This, plus the prosperity of the twenties, made Coolidge popular. Under the slogan "Keep cool with Coolidge," he won election in 1924 by a huge landslide. Most Americans seemed to agree with his view that government's role in the economy should be limited — that "the business of America is business." In the 1920s, a few Progressive reforms, such as women's suffrage and Prohibition, finally became law. Railroad regulation was tightened, as well. Meanwhile, a consumer society was born. Mass produced cars, refrigerators, radios and other appliances brought a comfortable life within the reach of millions. Moral standards seemed to relax; it was "the Jazz Age." And yet, many Americans longed for a simpler age. A revived Ku Klux Klan, fears about communism, and strict limits on immigration indicate that change frightened many. The 1920s were in fact a time of intense cultural conflict. But as this cartoon suggests, many Americans approved of Coolidge's ideas about the limited role of the Presidency in dealing with the nation's problems.

Poster 8
Franklin Delano Roosevelt
(1933-1945)

"Win the War"

Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal programs offered relief to millions during the economic crisis of the 1930s. But even by 1939, the Great Depression had still not ended. Some New Dealers, such as those in this cartoon, wanted FDR to keep his focus on economic problems at home. But by then, Roosevelt was more concerned about another threat. In Europe and Asia, the Depression helped bring to power two terrifying military dictatorships, in Japan and Germany. Most Americans hoped to stay out of the wars these two nations started. But Roosevelt decided that neutrality could not work. In 1940, he won an unprecedented third term as President. After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the nation rallied around FDR again. This cartoon's comparison of the old New Deal donkey to FDR's snappy new "Win the War" car is apt in a way the artist may not have intended. For on the home front, war production and the draft quickly put an end to unemployment in a way the New Deal never could. The cartoon also captures the optimism FDR again inspired as he led the nation to victory in the most terrible war in history.

Poster 9
Harry S. Truman
(1945-1953)

"Strength to Your Arm,
Mr. President"

On April 12, 1945, with World War II coming to an end, at least in Europe, FDR suddenly died. Hearing this, Vice President Harry Truman said, "When they told me yesterday what had happened, I felt like the moon, the stars and all the planets had fallen on me. I've got the most terribly responsible job a man ever had." This cartoon expresses sympathy for Truman. Many awesome challenges waited for him just over the gloomy horizon shown in the cartoon. For example, President Truman would soon have to decide whether or not to use the atomic bomb to end the war against Japan. He would then have to guide the nation through the difficult transition to a peace-time economy. And soon, he had to deal with a new international showdown, this time with a hostile Soviet superpower. This developing "Cold War" would present Truman and the nation with a new and frightening atomic age confrontation.

Poster 10
Richard Milhous Nixon
(1969-1974)
“His Own Worst Enemy”

Richard Nixon won election in 1968 and 1972 in part by convincing Americans he could end the long war in Vietnam with honor. And in 1973, the last American troops were withdrawn from Vietnam. But by then, the nation was already turning its attention to the scandal that would force Richard Nixon from power. The scandal began with a 1972 break-in at Democratic Party headquarters in the “Watergate” office building in Washington, D.C. Nixon won his election that year by a landslide. But his constant denials of involvement in the Watergate break-in turned a minor burglary into a major crisis. This cartoon suggests it was the President himself who was to blame for his troubles. In 1973 Congress and a special prosecutor both began investigating Watergate. Later it was learned that Nixon had secretly tape-recorded his conversations in the White House. When the Supreme Court finally forced him to turn over the tapes on Watergate, those tapes proved he had been hiding the truth about the break-in all along. On August 9, 1974, facing impeachment, Richard Nixon became the first U.S. President to resign.

Poster 11
Ronald Reagan
(1981-1989)
“Dr. StrangeBudget”

By 1980, prices were rising rapidly, unemployment was at 7.5 percent, and interest rates had skyrocketed to 20 percent. Meanwhile, revolutionary Iran had seized American diplomats and embassy workers in Teheran. And the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan had destroyed whatever was left of the spirit of “detente.” Ronald Reagan had little trouble winning election that year on a promise to cut taxes, rebuild U.S. military strength, and restore America’s faith in itself. Reagan’s cheerful personality and sense of optimism gave him great appeal. He said that even if tax rates were cut, economic growth would still produce more government revenue. Tax rates were cut, and revenue did go up — but not enough to cover rapid growth in both military spending and entitlement spending (Social Security, Medicare, etc.). As a result, government deficits soared. Some called Reagan’s ideas “voodoo economics.” This cartoon conveys the view many had of Reagan as reckless both in domestic and foreign policy.

Poster 12
William Jefferson Clinton
(1993-2001)
“Reinventing the Alligator”

In 1992, few voters were excited about either major-party candidate. Republican George Bush was out of favor, in part because he had gone back on his promise of “no new taxes.” Democrat Bill Clinton was not well known. And many had doubts about how trustworthy he was. In this mood of discontent with party politicians, voters gave third-party candidate Ross Perot 19 percent of the vote. Clinton became President, with 43 percent. But he did so in part by calling himself a “new Democrat,” one who did not share his party’s long-time faith in government as a way to solve social problems. Instead, he promised to “re-invent” government — that is, make it more effective and less costly. This cartoon shows little faith in his ability to do that, however. It shows Clinton as a tiny cowboy riding along on the very monster he pretends to want to tame.

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