



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on November 16, 2009

In Government, Nothing Succeeds Like Failure

In politics, it seems, nothing succeeds like failure. The most successful men in American political history are its most spectacular failures. Consider that the most important responsibilities that a President has are preserving our liberties and keeping the peace. Yet the Presidents we celebrate the most are those who led the nation into war and expanded the power of the state.

Perhaps only George Washington among our 43 Presidents should be considered one who succeeded by success, so naturally, his counsel about staying out of foreign wars and entangling alliances is studiously ignored in our time. Even in his own day, Washington's warnings against factionalism went unheeded.



John Adams presided over the Alien and Sedition Acts, which not only failed to keep the domestic peace, but failed in their primary purpose, which was to crush or at least silence opposition to the Federalist Party and get John Adams reelected.

Thomas Jefferson was a liberal who believed in limited, constitutional government, but he tossed all that aside when he made the Louisiana Purchase, since there is no provision in the Constitution for the government to acquire land. Jefferson neglected the nation's defense needs, letting the shipbuilding industry go to pot and passively inviting aggression and piracy on the high seas. Madison nearly lost several states of the union when some of the Northeast states talked seriously of secession during the War of 1812. Andrew Jackson's presidency was highlighted by an ultimately losing war against the national bank and by his brutal treatment of American Indians. Semi-honest Abe Lincoln gets credit for preserving the union, but in fact, he had to destroy the union in order to save it, to paraphrase an American military man in a much later war. William McKinley tried to keep us out of war and ended up leading us into the Spanish-American War and a new age of imperialism, annexing former Spanish territories, and the Kingdom of Hawaii. Woodrow Wilson was reelected in 1916 on the slogan, "He kept us out of war!" That didn't last long.

Warren G. Harding did not really give us a return to normalcy, but you could say he died trying. Immediately prior to the Great Depression, Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover thought their legacies would be unending prosperity. Franklin Roosevelt promised a more frugal government with balanced budgets and missed that target so completely that the American people reelected him three times. Running for a third term, Roosevelt promised "again and again and again" that he would not send American boys into a foreign war. His Republican opponent, Wendell Willkie, dryly observed that if Roosevelt's promise to keep us out of war proved as reliable as his promise to balance the federal budget, the boys were as good as on the troop transport ships already. Willkie was prophetic, but Roosevelt won another election.



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Harry Truman failed to get most of his agenda passed by Congress, but that failure came with a consolation prize. When it came time to run for reelection, Truman reminded everyone that the Congress obstructing the

"reforms" of his Fair Deal was a "do nothing" Republican Congress. And while that Congress managed to implement some reforms of its own, it failed to get reelected. Truman and the Democrats won both the Congress and the White House in 1948 and had failures of their own to deal with.

But railing against "do nothing" Republicans caught on in America, and after eight years of the mildly and vaguely conservative Eisenhower administration, a young and energetic John F. Kennedy convinced the country it was time to "get America moving again." Motion is not necessarily progress, but an electorate is not much given to philosophical reflection. America entered into an era in which if one spending program didn't solve the problem for which it was a proposed solution, and if in fact the problem only got worse, the only lesson to be drawn therefrom is that more money and more programs are needed. Again, nothing succeeds like failure.

Or, as William F. Buckley once put it, liberals tend to profit from the failures of their own prescriptions. John Kenneth Galbraith, Buckley noted at the end of the 1960s, had grandly announced a few years earlier that New York City had no problems that could not be solved by a doubling of the city's budget. When the city's budget was thereafter doubled, its problems grew apace and of course, Galbraith's prescription was for a greater increase in city spending.

The same phenomenon is even more evident on the national level. Despite the collapse of Lyndon Baines Johnson's "Guns and butter" strategy, his successor, Richard M. Nixon, perpetuated the Vietnam War and increased the size and scope of the federal budget, allowing domestic spending to overtake military spending for the first time in U.S. history. Indeed, Nixon's alleged conservatism inspired the aforementioned Galbraith to write a book entitled "Who Needs the Liberals?"

Hindsight, it is often said, is 20/20, but it isn't always so. Richard Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld were both with President Gerald Ford when all our efforts to save South Vietnam fell apart in 1975. Yet they led President George W. Bush into the same type of quagmire in Iraq and Afghanistan.

So now like the drunk in a temperance melodrama, we find ourselves saying: "Despite all our good intentions, here we are again." We used to believe in America that the federal government had a limited role, and it should do well the few things assigned to it. Then we started adding more things the government should manage and "improve," activities and enterprises for which it had no demonstrated aptitude, like agriculture, education, alcohol, tobacco, and firearms. Now we appear on the verge of turning the healthcare of 300 million Americans over to the national government. And how smart is that?

Well, when government schools began assuming the awesome responsibility of sex education, a liberal educator suggested that if the schools would make sex as interesting to the students as they had made history, math, science, and literature, the human species would be extinct within a few generations. And in fact the birth rate in the United States has dropped below replacement level (our population is increasing quite quickly, however, because of prodigious immigration). And thanks to "progressive" views of birth control and abortion, marriage and procreation, abortions are beginning to rival in number live births in the United States. And births out of wedlock rival the number of children born to married parents.

Now we might ponder this: if the federal government has as much success with healthcare and



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education as it has had in balancing the budget, keeping the peace or winning our wars, and in defending our borders and the value of the dollar, we are sure to have significantly more disease and much shorter life spans. But we will be too ignorant to know it.



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