The Presidents: The Bad and the Less Bad
Guest: Ivan Eland
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***Ivan Eland is senior fellow and director of the Center on Peace and Liberty at the Independent Institute. He is the author of* Recarving Rushmore: Ranking the Presidents on Peace, Prosperity, and Liberty.**

WOODS: Now this book of yours, *Recarving Rushmore*, was a project that, I'm pretty sure you'll agree, needed to be done a long time ago. You actually did it. This is a very important service for all of us, what you've done.

Today is a very appropriate day to be thinking about the presidents and ranking them and so forth. I want to hone in on some of the more controversial ones or some of the more controversial judgments you've made, because where would be the fun in doing it any other way?

Let's say you had to give your three best and your three worst presidents. Give the listeners a sense of where you're coming from by telling us who those would be.

ELAND: Well, some the best are I think John Tyler, Grover Cleveland, and Martin Van Buren would be the top three. And as we go up from the worst, Woodrow Wilson, most of the war presidents, I think are probably the worst. You find Woodrow Wilson is the absolute worst and then people like Harry Truman (for a lot of reasons), William McKinley, they're all down there, James Polk, people who started unnecessary wars, etc. I don't know if I got that order quite right at the bottom there because I don't have book in front of me, but those are some of the worst presidents and Woodrow Wilson is the worst.

WOODS: Well, Woodrow Wilson *the worst*.

All right, there's lots to talk about in just the list you gave, but let's focus in on that. What is it that makes Woodrow Wilson worse than FDR, or worse than Truman? What's so bad?

ELAND: Well, I think that people focus on FDR as having vastly expanded the government, and he certainly did, but Woodrow Wilson really set the precedent. And many people, many libertarians and others don't focus on the fact that war is the biggest cause of big government in human history and also in U.S. history.

Certainly, permanent big government got started under Woodrow Wilson, because FDR brought back many of the same people, just changed the names of the agencies that were created, etc. And the plan of a war-type economy was transferred into the New Deal, and FDR even said he was doing that. So I think this command-type economy was first patented by Wilson during World War I.

And World War I was a totally unnecessary war for the United States. If the United States had stayed out of it, as it had with most of Europe's wars up until that point, and certainly if Germany had won that war, the boundaries would have been redrawn just a few hundred miles east or west and that would have been it. But, of course, the United States changed the war. And, of course, Woodrow Wilson let the Allies stomp all over Germany after the end of the war, declaring them the villains for the war, which was actually caused by many things. There's a new book out which is saying, and others have said this before, that perhaps Russia and Serbia were more to blame for the war than Germany. But anyway, Woodrow Wilson helped lead to the abdication of the Kaiser—he demanded that. And that, of course, with the depression after the

war in Germany and heavy reparations that Wilson allowed the two allies—Britain and France—to extract from Germany, all that led to Hitler, World War II, and also, I would argue, the depression after World War I. And, really, the Cold War because Wilson invaded, with Britain and France, Russia which then was the Soviet Union, and of course that really led to hostility with the Soviet Union for a long time to come. So you could even blame the Cold War on Wilson, since the U.S. entry into the war caused the Russian government to stay in the war, leading to the Bolshevik Revolution. Lenin said that without World War I they would never have taken power in the Soviet Union.

So, you can blame a lot on Wilson and, in fact, I say he ruined the twentieth century and is now working on the twenty-first because, of course, the Iraq war. Iraq became a country after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and it was divided by the colonial powers. And that's one of the legacies. Wilson knew there was a plan to divide the world after the war, between Britain and France. He went ahead and supported the war because he wanted the U.S. to play in the postwar settlement.

WOODS: Okay, let's talk about a decent president just to balance the scales a bit. You mentioned in your list Martin van Buren. I was persuaded of this myself after I heard Jeff Hummel give a paper on this in the late 1990s. I thought, "He's made a pretty good case for a president I'm sure many Americans haven't even heard of."

What's so great about Martin van Buren?

ELAND: Well, he is a big proponent of van Buren and I think rightly so because he says—and he's certainly more of a banking expert than I am—but he says, and I would agree with him, just looking at it from a more cursory point of view, that this was the best banking system that the U.S. had ever had under van Buren. Andrew Jackson, who was van Buren's mentor, talked the talk about liberty and not centralizing power so much, but Andrew Jackson was a centralizer and he did a lot of unconstitutional things. Even in trying to get rid of the Second Bank of the United States, which he successfully did, he did it sort of unconstitutionally.

Martin van Buren, on the other hand, he really walked the walk of liberty that Jackson talked, and he was for really small government. And this banking system that was superior to anything we've ever had, before or since, it was based on more of a free-market approach to things. Certainly, there was a big recession during van Buren's time and he patented the idea that the market would eventually correct, which it did. And he took a big hit politically.

Many of my presidents, they didn't get re-elected or even re-nominated because, in some cases, of the courageous stances they took against expanding government and the expanding executive branch. And Martin van Buren was also for a restrained executive within the limits of the Constitution, whereas Andrew Jackson, his predecessor was not.

And I think that really a key of the book is that you can't really judge people by their party labels or by their rhetoric because their policies often differ from that. You have to look at the policies. That's what my book does. It tries to avoid the pitfalls of historians.

Historians on the Left, and historians on the Right, surprisingly come up with the same list of best presidents. My book differs from that because it tries to not get duped by charismatic presidents like Teddy Roosevelt, or activist presidents like Woodrow Wilson or FDR, which everyone thinks are good. And, of course, the last category that historians get duped by is if you're president during wartime you get big points even if you caused the war or did nothing to stop it. So it's a different sort of criteria for rating the presidents.

WOODS: Right. Historians are not interested in presidents who are just humbly executing the law; you have to have some type of broad program, domestic or international. Jeff Hummel likes Martin van Buren not only because of the Independent Treasury, which came as close to the separation of bank and state as we've ever had, and then for 20 years afterwards, except for the fairly mild Panic of 1857, you had a pretty stable monetary system. But also because he avoided wars with Britain and Mexico.

ELAND: Right, right, and John Tyler also avoided a couple wars as well, and those two presidents are sort of

parallel.

WOODS: Yeah, tell us something about Tyler. I wanted to ask you to follow up on Tyler.

ELAND: Well, it's the same sort of thing, I mean, he actually didn't get re-nominated by his own party because at the time the Democratic Party was the party of small government and the Whigs were the forerunners of the Republican Party, the party of big government. John Tyler was a Whig, but he was only a Whig because—the Whig Party started in part because people were opposed to the imperial rule of Jackson, and so he was just kind of anti-Jackson, but a Democrat at heart. And he was limiting the government, stayed within the bounds.

No president is perfect and Tyler annexed Texas using somewhat unconstitutional means. But if you go through all presidents there's always something in their past that isn't perfect. Tyler's certainly not perfect, but I think he's probably the best that we have given what he did. And of course, because he fought the big government programs that Henry Clay and all these other people, Whigs from his own party, were trying to institute, he ran afoul of the party bureaucracy and everyone hated him.

And of course, he had no support from the Democrats because he wasn't a Democrat, so it was kind of a suicide mission on his part, but nonetheless he did it anyway and he certainly was a principled sort of president.

WOODS: Just to situate these presidents—I'm sure we have an educated audience and so forth, but not everyone off the top of his head will know so I'll just say: when we talk about Martin van Buren we're talking about the election of 1836. And then Tyler comes in as vice president in 1840 and then very, very shortly thereafter takes over as president.

I want to talk to you about the one president who is a real lightning rod for libertarians, in particular because some of them have a kind of sympathy for him and yet others have no patience for him whatsoever. And you probably know who I mean. I'm not talking about Lincoln, actually. I'm talking about Ronald Reagan. When I was growing up in the 1980s, I was very drawn to Reagan because I liked his entrepreneurial rhetoric, I liked that he didn't apologize for the free-market system, I thought that he was right that under Carter there had been a retreat from the moral certainty of the free society over communism. And, come what may, he was going to tell the truth about the communist system. And I liked that. This was a robust American and so on and on.

Now this was back when I was just entering adolescence, so you can understand that. But what are the drawbacks of Reagan, from your point of view?

ELAND: Well, I think that Reagan was mostly rhetoric. I mean he ruled California the way he ruled when he was president. And that is: his policies were much less libertarian than his rhetoric. And also, he was very bad on setting the climate where a nuclear war almost happened. A crisis that almost rivaled the Cuban Missile Crisis, not quite as bad, but his overheated rhetoric against the Soviet Union really does matter and that's where rhetoric really does matter.

What you had there was the United States and NATO did a nuclear command-and-control exercise that was called Able Archer 1983. The Soviets were so scared by Reagan's rhetoric that Andropov put the Soviet nuclear forces on alert. I think this actually sobered up Reagan a bit, and it's one of the reasons why he was so prone, and to his credit, to negotiate with Mikhail Gorbachev eventually.

The other big problem that I have with Reagan is his rhetoric. Actually, Bill Clinton and Eisenhower reduced the government per capita, I mean government spending, and he increased it, contrary to his rhetoric.

He also had what I would call fraudulent tax cuts. He focused on the individual tax rates and increased spending at the same time. Well, if you do that you're going to have to raise taxes in the future at some point, which Ronald Reagan did probably four or five times surreptitiously in other, less visible parts of the tax code. Also, you have to pay a lot of interest in the meantime, or you have to print money, which is even worse. I think George W. Bush picked up from Reagan that tax cuts were the most important, but actually I think that reducing spending is much more important than rolling up debt like that.

The third problem was the Iran-Contra problem, which I believe is the worst political scandal in American history. You have corruption scandals like Harding and Grant had, but they were mainly cabinet members sticking money in their pockets, which is certainly not good for good government, but Watergate and Iran-Contra stand out as constitutional scandals. I think that Iran-Contra was even worse than Watergate simply because they ran a secret war. Congress had told them not to do it and they did it anyway. They went around Congress' appropriation power and, of course, that's one of the few remaining powers that Congress has after you strip away the war power, which has been stripped away over time. And so I think that was very serious. He also broke criminal laws by selling arms to a terrorist-supporting nation, Iran, to try to ransom some hostages, which is always a bad idea to ransom any sort of hostages.

His rhetoric was, of course, much different on all three of these than his actual policies. So I think his policies leave a lot to be desired.

WOODS: There's one other president that I want to talk about, but before we get to him, I'd like to get your judgment on where you think historians—obviously not yourself, because you disagree with historians about the ranking of the presidents—are going to end up ranking Obama? Today there is still some lingering enthusiasm for him that when people look back on it soberly 50 years from now will no longer be present. So, just looking at it dispassionately, just looking at his actual record, not the excitement, not the speeches, not the rhetoric, but looking at his actual record – where do you think he winds up? Obamacare had some serious problems to the point that a lot of Democrats acknowledge them. The economy has stayed really bad. But, on the other hand, if he manages to make peace with Iran, that secures him a spot in the history books. How do you sort all this out?

ELAND: Well, also, I think he'll have positive accomplishments in ending Iraq and also ending Afghanistan eventually. I think historians will probably focus on that rather than his interim escalation of that war for no reason.

Now I would rate him similar to Bush, maybe a few improvements in getting rid of torture and getting out of Iraq and that sort of thing, but he also had some drawbacks from Bush. The Libyan war, expanding Bush's drone war to various countries unconstitutionally, so I wouldn't rate him that highly a president, but historians may.

They like activist presidents. They have a bias towards activist presidents, so he may fare better in history for getting out of Iraq, you know, cleaning Bush's mess up, so to speak. The way Gerald Ford might be rated more highly than he should be because, after all, he made the nation feel good again, but I would say at the expense of rule of law for pardoning Richard Nixon unconstitutionally before he was convicted of any crime. So that's the same situation you are in with Obama. Bush left a legacy of war, a bad economy, profligate spending on domestic and war spending, massive deficits, that sort of thing, and Obama may get some credit for cleaning that up by historians, but certainly will probably be overrated because I think he's maybe slightly better than Bush, but that's not really saying much, certainly. But I think over time he'll probably get a reasonably good rating, unfortunately.

WOODS: All right, one more president I'd like to look at because he's one that a lot of libertarians will pick out. If they don't pick out van Buren, they'll pick out Grover Cleveland. And you also identified Grover Cleveland. So what are libertarians seeing in Grover Cleveland?

ELAND: Well, I think he was a very good president. Of course, he had a couple of drawbacks as well, but basically was for small government. He was probably the last president that believed the executive was supposed to do what the founders had originally intended. And that's what my book tries to really do. Obviously the founders aren't here, but I've tried to put myself in the founders' shoes and say, "How would they rate these people?"

And of course, the original conception was for the executive to have a limited role and simply execute the laws that Congress passed and Congress was in the driver's seat. In the late 1800s, after the Civil War, Congress was in the driver's seat until we got to William McKinley. And of course, that's where all the wars started. There's sort of a correlation. Once you get into the twentieth century, you have McKinley, Wilson, and Teddy Roosevelt, FDR, that sort of thing. We go down the road to war.

Whereas Grover Cleveland tried to have a restrained executive. He felt that he was just supposed to execute the laws that Congress passed, and that was a very narrow view and that's really what the founders had envisioned. Even in foreign policy and national security they gave most of the powers to Congress. And, of course, Grover Cleveland abided by that.

And he was pretty much a free-market person—and that was the end of the Democrats' small government wing. When he left office, the Democratic Party moved to also be a big government party, which the Republican Party already was, I would argue. And then we got Woodrow Wilson, in the Democratic Party, who was of course for activist government, and the Democratic Party flipped into the big-government sector where it's been ever since. So, we've had two big government parties and, with the exception of Harding and Coolidge, I think the Republicans have always been a big government party, in my view.