

A packed auditorium listened to the April 30 presentation of the Leon Panetta Lecture Series: "The American Presidency and the American Dream --- The Role of Leadership." The Panettas invited two heroes of the press: Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, whose stellar work brought down the corrupt Nixon presidency. The third guest was Reince Priebus, the longest-serving chair of the Republican Party and briefly President Trump's White House Chief of Staff.

Leon Panetta is a great example of responsible leadership, having served as a congressman, then as Chief of Staff for President Kennedy and CIA and Defense Department chiefs in the Obama administration. This son of poor immigrants from impoverished southern Italy has shown how far intelligence, talent, and honorable diligence can take an American. The Panetta Institute has continued his good work, giving us all opportunity to think about issues that we must consider if our democracy is to survive. In addition to the public programs, the Institute helps educate young men and women to lives of public service. These future leaders need to understand the public policy issues that are essential to our nation's wellbeing.

Panetta, as moderator, the two journalists, and Reince Priebus, all agree that the Trump presidency is an outlier among most presidents. Panetta worries that Trump does not represent who we are as a people, trashing institutions, sowing chaos, and rejecting several centuries of norms. The journalists agree, but say that by focusing too much on this president, we are ignoring an underlying issue: that many of his voters were responding to societal disfunctions caused by changing economics, dying industries, and transformations for which they are unprepared.

Reince Priebus, however, defended President Trump, claiming that critics do not credit Trump with having an incredibly successful career and is now having an incredibly successful presidency because he is "doing it his way." Priebus believes that our traditional governance had grown stale and ineffective.

Missing from this discussion is a historic analysis of other flawed presidents and divisive hatreds that have plagued our country. Jon Meacham has just published a new book: *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*. Meacham's overall view is that our history moves two steps forward and one step back over time, but the general trajectory is for the better. President Lincoln, one of our best presidents, was followed by one of our worst: Andrew Johnson, who worked to undo Lincoln's Reconstruction programs. (I would go back further to the presidency of Andrew Jackson, who has my vote for the worst, mean-spirited and vulgar president until today.)

Meacham reminds us that many good presidents had to overcome dark and divisive periods, such as Teddy Roosevelt's attack on the robber barons and promotion of fairness to America's working men and women. Franklin D. Roosevelt faced every dark demon that the 1930s and 1940s brought to us: the Ku Klux Klan, rising fascism, the Depression (consequence of bad governance during the 1920s), and a war that isolationists inveighed against. Roosevelt presided and prevailed over the most dangerous potential of America going either fascist or communist. He saved capitalism.

One of our most upright presidents, Harry Truman, faced a nasty congressional proto-fascist, Senator Joseph McCarthy, who used "red-hunting" as an excuse for trashing democratic institutions. He roiled the country for four years, but was ultimately brought down by a good journalist and a better informed public.

Lyndon Johnson, a son of the south, rose to greatness by taking on one of our country's most divisive issues: segregation. His appeal to our better angels has made us a better country than we were before. We have changed for the better.

Meacham is convincing, as is Panetta, in regarding President Trump as an outlier among our presidents, but not unique. They have reminded us of the value of norms, courtesy, intelligent and thoughtful policies, that have really made America a great example to the world.

We and our leaders must all defend democracy, decency, and the common good. If history is any indication, we will survive this dark period too.

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