American Presidents and Their Attitudes, Beliefs, and Actions Surrounding Education and Multiculturalism

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Fourth Installment: Examining Presidents George Washington, James K. Polk, and Franklin D. Roosevelt

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Introduction

Understanding the Presidents of the United States, their actions, beliefs, and contradictions, is constructive in understanding our nation's complex societal issues. As a society we inherit the problems, challenges, and legacies of these leaders. Multicultural education and multicultural education theory offer an alternative lens from which to analyze and interpret the actions and inactions of the Presidents.

This lens allows for additional recognition of the roots of contemporary struggles. Geneva Gay describes a primary characteristic of multicultural education: "Multicultural education is essentially an affective, humanistic, and transformative enterprise situated within the sociocultural, political, and historical contexts of the United States" (Gay, 2004, p. 39).

This historical component, which has been whitewashed to the advantage and preservation of the dominant white culture, becomes increasingly important in order to address the presidential administrations of George Washington, James K. Polk, and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

There are several major considerations in terms of multicultural education that can be addressed through a presidential study. First, the actions, policies, and administrative decisions of the presidents have influenced and determined the fate of the citizenry in terms of equality, racism, discrimination, and attitudes about groups. Second, the historical legacy and glorification of these same men in educational texts, and the failure to include the often-devastating significance of their actions towards certain groups in historical accounts, has further distorted societal attitudes about multiculturalism in our country.

James Banks argues that it is imperative that "…the curriculum is reconceptualized to help students understand how knowledge is constructed and how it reflects human interests, ideology, and the experiences of the people who create it" (Banks, p. 23). A strange paradox emerges. The same men that we look to as embodiments of the ideals of freedom, leadership, democracy, and equality, are men, who in the cases of Washington, Polk, and F. D. Roosevelt, personally and publicly were unable to live up to the values for which they are idolized.

Because of these inconsistencies, and the impact of their administrative policies on all cultural groups in the United States, we are seeking to use a multicultural lens to analyze and historicize in an effort to understand the power of history and historical interpretation in shaping the beliefs and attitudes of a people.

> We often speak about American history as if it were something real. But I do not believe in American history: I only believe in American histories…I object to the way history has been constructed, sanitized, and glorified. (Saenz, p. 137)

This sanitization effect is ever present in our schooling regarding the presidents. Do our textbooks ever really delve into the aristocratic nature of Washington? The assimilistic desires of Polk? Or the neglect of racial issues by F. D. Roosevelt? Moreover, are students of history, in all grades, encouraged to connect the personal attributes of the presidents and executive decisions they made to the complex multicultural dilemmas of their time?

A historical *revisitation* of our Presidents allows for scrutiny and deeper understanding of their administrations thus helping to situate and contextualize our current racial, ethnic, and cultural dilemmas in education and society at large. Loewen, in his argument surrounding the acquisition of new historical knowledge states, "Understanding our past is central to our ability to understand ourselves and the world around us. We need to know our history" (p. 13). The problem arises when

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historical characters, such as the Presidents, are over-glorified and over-simplified, resulting in the furthering of the myth of President as infallible icon; this myth undermines our historical understanding.

It also makes the negative historical events, traumas, and tragedies appear to have occurred in a vacuum. There is no causality or responsibility, no burden of guilt placed on our leadership even in historical representations to account for the misdeeds of the past. For example, "George Washington has become so shrouded in legend that it is difficult to retrieve the man behind the marble exterior" (Smith, 1993, p. 9).

The purpose of this article is to present additional information about Presidents Washington, Polk, and F. D. Roosevelt so that their contributions, oversights, and silence regarding multicultural matters and education during their presidential administrations can be understood in a deeper way. Furthermore, "Critical multiculturalists in all domains must reunite memory and history in order to address the ideological distortions that daily confront us in various expressions…" (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997, p. 241).

Why the presidency and why these presidents? The president is the embodiment of leadership in this country. Because of the ambiguity of the Constitution in relation to the chief executive, the president has the power to frame, implement, and transform government (Schlesinger, 2002; Baptiste & Sanchez 2003). Washington, Polk, and F. D. Roosevelt were chosen because these three presidents all served during periods of tremendous growth, literally and ideologically; the ideas of Manifest Destiny and nationalism surfaced during all three administrations. Yet all three remained stunted in terms of creating policies affecting groups of color such as Native Americans, African-Americans, Mexican Americans, and Japanese Americans (Wiencek, 2003; Ferling 1988; Bergeron, 1987; Zinn, 1997; O'Reilly, 1995; Freidel, 1990; McJimsey, 2000; Warren, 1999).

Historical understanding is a complex endeavor. The goal of this article is not to simplify and deduce an argument about multiculturalism or racism regarding the presidents that is not contextual. Rather, we are attempting to introduce the factors associated with race, diversity, and multiculturalism that added to the complexity of the office and in turn, to the political and social climate of the nation. With multicultural education theory in mind, the goal is to offer educators additional information that will help them teach a more insightful and connected history.

George Washington: Setting the Example as First President

> President Washington would not tell Congress that he thought slavery wrong. He declined to lend his name or his office's prestige at a time when the words of the Declaration of Independence ("all men are created equal") were still resonate… (O'Reilly, 1995, p. 16)

Social Currency

George Washington was greatly influenced by his upbringing among Virginia plantation owners. He was born in Virginia in 1732, his family owned large tracts of land that would later become his. The power and status granted to southern plantation farmers was profound during this time. Many plantation owners were able to amass so much wealth because they had ready access to education, political office, and public position. Economic dependence on England was also a defining feature of colonial society (Smith, 1993).

The southern states had remained largely agricultural and rural by the time Washington was born. Although cities in the north were quickly becoming more cosmopolitan and refined, the south was based on agriculture (Wills, 2003). What separated the farmers of the south from homestead or substance farmers was the desire to farm large tracts of land. Such large farms or plantations relied on the use of slave labor to function and prosper economically (Hirshfeld, 1997). Slavery was a dominant force in the lives of plantation farmers like the Washingtons.

George Washington became a slave owner at age 11 when he "inherited ten slaves" upon his father's death (Hirshfeld, 1997, p.11). The practice of slavery was further protected since "the Constitution expressly provided for the continuations of that practice" (McDonald, 1974). George Washington inherited his family estate in 1752, nearly 37 years before he would assume the presidency. His upbringing among slaves and his own economic tenacity and greed would render him dependent on slave labor for the remainder of his life.

The seemingly endless amounts of land available for farming also shaped the American psyche during this period. In Europe, the agricultural system had perpetuated a certain hopelessness and feeling of drudgery for working the land (McDonald, 1974). The bounty of rich farming land in the new country presented a world of possibility for settlers and farmers. Large amounts of land coupled with the acceptance of slave labor offered the opportunity of economic prosperity to a greater portion of the public than the colonists were used to in Europe (McDonald, 1974). Washington and his contemporaries were well schooled in gentility and civility. This ordered lifestyle dictated controlled responses, personal manners, and public behaviors (Ferling, 1988, McDonald, 1974).


George Washintgon

Societal Values and Background

Early American society was likely recovering from shock at the whirlwind of change that occurred in a short time. The Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitutional Convention had imbedded certain values into the new America (McDonald, 1974; Smith 1993; Ferling, 1988; Brookhiser 1996). Economic autonomy, personal independence, self-governance, individual ambition, and fear of tyranny were some of the resulting values of the period.

The Constitutional Convention and the subsequent adoption of a Constitution were profound in shaping the values of early American society. The delegates to the convention had painstakingly outlined the powers of the legislative branch of government (McDonald, 1974). This process had secured the fate of representative government.

The role of the Executive was also being questioned and scrutinized. Many were concerned that the President would acquire too much power and become tyrannical like a monarch. Early colonial government did not even include an executive because of

the dislike of the actions of British rule (McDonald, 1974). "Executive power had been the object of distrust in America for a long time" (McDonald, 1974, p. 2).

The continued fear of a strong executive affected Washington insofar as he too had been exposed to the tyranny of a domineering leader (McDonald, 1974). His actions would be cautious, and largely symbolic, during his presidential terms in spite of the fact that constitutionally the president had a great deal of power, equal to that of the legislative and judicial branches.

Educational Background

George Washington was born into a prosperous Virginia family. This stature allowed him the luxury of both formal and informal educational opportunities. His formal education included studies in reading, writing, mathematics (specifically geometry), poetry, and the social graces necessary to a person in his social strata (Ferling, 1988). He received formal education as a student in private academies and he was also tutored privately (Ferling, 1988).

He was also taught about farming and planting by his family. Among his family he also learned about the government and parish life. "George was literally schooled in the mechanics of government and plantation management in his early teen years…His exercise book from that period survives, containing… 'forms' all of which were legal or financial documents of one kind or another" (Wiencek, 2003, p. 26).

George Washington was self-taught in the area of gentility. He constantly worked to polish his mannerisms and behaviors. George studied the desirable traits by reading, and he "Copied them (axioms for behavior) from a book called *The Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation*" (Wiencek, 2003, p. 37). He studied conversation and expression by reading books on the subject and by observing his fashionable and elegant brothers. His desire to imitate the grandeur of his brothers prompted him to study music and fencing (Ferling, 1988).

His extensive study of geometry prepared him as a surveyor. As a member of a surveyor team, George Washington had the opportunity to travel and learn about the geography of the new western areas (Smith 1993; Ferling 1988). Serving in the Revolutionary War was influential in Washington establishing himself as a leader (Jones, 2002; Smith, 1993; Ferling 1988).

Actions, Policies, and Political Decisions

The early part of Washington's presidential career was devoted to carving out the exact role and purpose of the president. The colonies had been operating under a congressional system of government for some time, but the presidency, on the other hand, had no history or similar example (Brookhiser, 1996). Washington was influential in modeling how a chief executive could use, supervise, direct, and work with a cabinet of individuals who could help with important affairs. "In day-to-day practice, Washington supervised the activities of his department heads closely" (McDonald, 1974, p. 40).

The new country had many challenges; one of those had to do with national finances and banking. Alexander Hamilton had been active in many of the early decisions of the new country. Hamilton designed the financial structures to guide the new country, and Washington allowed him to do so. These financial policies included the creation of a national bank and a tax on whiskey, which would prove to be very unpopular with citizens (Brookhiser, 1996; McDonald, 1974; Ferling 1988).

"Finally, the nationalistic implications of Hamilton's program appealed to Washington far more than its anti-agrarian implications might have upset him" (McDonald, 1974, p. 65). This acceptance of the Hamilton proposal demonstrated Washington's strong desire to unite and strengthen the national government. However, Washington agreed to many of the policies without thinking about the far-reaching, long-lasting implications. In his second term he was left to deal with the fallout from the economic policies of the first term (Brookhiser, 1996).

George Washington was also challenged to develop a Native American policy. He felt it would be better for all if the Native Americans assimilated into the dominant culture. Washington hoped that Westward expansion would occur at a slow pace so that the Native Americans could assimilate into the agricultural farming system of the Euro-Americans (Ferling, 1988). In an effort to protect the Native Americans from Westward frontiersman, Washington developed a policy to police the boundaries with the military (Ferling, 1988).

Washington ended up protecting the frontiersman, despite his knowledge that they were unduly provoking the Native Americans and encroaching on their land (Ferling, 1988). His policy developed into one of containment, by allowing the military to use force in Native American issues and disputes. In New York State, for example, "during Washington's administration a treaty was signed with the Iroquois of New York: [stating that] 'The United States acknowledge all the land with the aforementioned boundaries to be the property of the Seneka nation…'" (Zinn, 1997, p. 386). Treaties such as this one demonstrate that sometimes Washington did designate some land to the Native Americans, but to give land that the Europeans had unlawfully obtained was a minimal colonialist gesture.

Slavery was still a major force in political and economic life in the 1790s. In his role as President, Washington was reluctant to voice any opposition to slavery though he had "spoken privately about the evils of slavery " (Ferling, 1988, p. 474). In 1793 Washington advanced one law regarding slavery. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 granted permission to slaveowners to "cross state lines in order 'to seize or arrest' runaway slaves" (Ferling, 1988, p. 475). This law was a public display by Washington favoring the rights of slave owners.

In another important decision regarding slavery, Washington, along with his political cronies Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, secured the site for the nation's capital with slavery in mind (Wills, 2003). Early American political life had centered in Pennsylvania. However, by the time Washington became president, many Quakers and abolitionists were living in the north, especially in Pennsylvania (Randall, 1997). During the Constitutional convention these groups had advocated against the use of slavery but they were outnumbered (Wiencek, 2003).

Washington, supported by Jefferson and Madison, decided that a location in a more isolated and southern position would help secure slavery and the culture of slavery for other plantation operators such as themselves. This insulated position would protect the interests of the slave owning community.

> But Washington (the capital) was placed where a diverse cultural life would pose no challenge to its sleepy southern folkways. No professors from a major university, no benevolent Quaker merchants, no sophisticated financial operatives would rub up against the Maryland and Virginia slaveholding natives. No major harbor would give a cosmopolitan air to the place. (Wills, 2003, p. 213)

This act was loaded with implications for a new government. It allowed slavery to continue without the intense scrutiny that would have occurred had the capital been placed in Philadelphia or another northern cosmopolitan city. This act also demonstrated that Washington was willing to use his power as president to perpetuate the oppressive, racist, and problematic institution of slavery. From a le-

gal standpoint, Washington failed to make any political decisions during his presidency that would benefit the slaves, or discourage the institution. The few times he did enact policy with regard to the slaves it was to their determent, as in the Fugitive Slave Act and in the placement of the capital to insure slave practices.

Privately, Washington made sure that his own slaves were never in a free state long enough to be granted freedom (Ferling, 1988). When one slave did escape, "Washington would not even advertise for an escaped slave" (Wills, 2003, p. 209). Washington's reluctance to actively and visibly search in the North for escaped slaves was a demonstration of his personal admission of the ethical problems of slavery.

Multicultural Perspectives and Impacts

Throughout his life, from his work as a landowner and a farmer, to his Presidential years, Washington operated within the privileged and racist system of the day. While Washington might have struggled with some of the moral aspects of slavery, even to the extent of willing his slaves free after his wife's death, his political and public acts exacerbated, excused, and even encouraged slavery in the new country (Hirshfeld, 1997, Smith, 1993,p343). Washington is proposed by some authors to have been a deeply religious Christian who deplored slavery; however, this did not exalt him to publicly speak out against the institution of slavery (Marshall & Manuel, 1977, 1986).

> His silence on the slavery question was strategic, believing as he did that slavery was a cancer on the politic of America that could not at present be removed without killing the patient. The intriguing question is whether Washington could project an American future after slavery that included the African-American population as prospective members of the American citizenry. For almost all the leading members of the Virginia dynasty, the answer was clear and negative. Even those like Jeffer-son and Madison, who looked forward to the eventual end of slavery, also presumed that all freed Blacks must be transported elsewhere.
>
> Washington never endorsed that conclusion. Nor did he ever embrace the racial argument for black inferiority that Jefferson advanced in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. He tended to regard the condition of the Black population as a product of nuture rather than nature—that is he saw slavery as the culprit, preventing the development of diligence and responsibility that would emerge gradually and naturally after emancipation. (Ellis,2000, p.158)

Washington was aware of his political clout. He was also aware of the tremendous amount of public support he held as a "…national leader and a prominent world figure…" (Hirshfeld, 1997, p. 236). With this in mind he had to be aware that his own political and private acts regarding slavery would be an open encouragement of slavery. Washington modeled the role of president as silent bystander "in the name of order and stablility" (O'Reilly, 1995, p. 17) though personally his moral objections to slavery existed. His objections were demonstrated when he wrote in his will that his personal slaves were to be freed upon his wife's death (Dusinberre, 2003).

Washington's attitude about Native Americans was based on their assimilation. He wanted them to adopt the practices of the new Americans. When he realized that his own citizens were not going to allow for or encourage assimilation, he caved and allowed for the forceful submission of the Native Americans to the frontiersman (Ferling, 1988).

James K. Polk: Manifest Destiny President

> If the president of the United States was spending every spare penny of his plantation profits in buying children as young as ten years old….so that he could amass a substantial force of enslaved laborers to support himself in gentlemanly style during his retirement, this fact must be hidden from the public. (Dusinberre, 2003, p. 171).

Social Currency

James K. Polk was born into a landowning family, and a slaveholding family. His parents moved to Tennessee from North Carolina, where they were able to become wealthy. His father was in the business of "land speculation, managing slave plantations, selling merchandise, running banks, and developing transportation projects" (Dusinberre, 2003, p. 13).

James Polk was afforded the luxuries of education, which contributed to his success in politics. Coming from a land-owning family was important in other ways. "Polk was acculturated by a lifelong reliance on slave labor in a racist agrarian society" (Seigenthaler, 2003, p. 85). Polk continued in the farming practices of his family and he relied heavily on slave labor to reap the greatest profits (Dusinberre, 2003).

The government of the United States at the time was burgeoning with party politics and, as a young politician, Polk was able to use the competing interests of party politics in his favor. At the 1844 Democratic Party convention, Polk attended to support candidate Martin Van Buren for president. As a supporter of the annexation of Texas, Polk was able to gain the party's nomination (Bergeron, 1988). His family's status had prepared him for political maneuvers that led to his power. He also understood how to take the issues of the day, such as the annexation of Texas, conflicts with Mexico, and slavery, and turn them into political bargaining tools (Bergeron, 1988; Dusinberre 2003, Seigenthaler, 2003).


James K. Polk

Societal Values and Background

In the mid 1800s a new expansionist value was beginning to develop in the United States. The desire for westward expansion into the territories was quickly becoming a political, economic, and social issue. This movement, known as Manifest Destiny, was significant in that the general citizenry began to feel and believe that the country had a divine right to acquire and develop the country westward to the Pacific Ocean.

This movement set a precedent of the government masking its conquering of new lands by "the presumed altruistic notion of extending liberty and freedom (American style, of course)" (Bergeron, 1987, p. 4). Transportation and industry development were the industrial advancements that aided and abetted the expansion into the territories (Bergeron, 1987). Immigration was also creating a "nativist" feeling in the country. Many new immigrants were Roman Catholics. Immigrants during this period

(1840s) were arriving by the 100,000s each year. A result of this influx was the desire by some in the country to preserve traditions and morals (Bergeron, 1987).

Increasing tensions over slavery also marked this pre-Civil War period. The southern states were retreating into their own region, while the northern states were gaining opponents on the issue (Bergeron, 1987). Opposition to slavery was becoming more organized and vocal because of anti-slavery associations. Above all, the anti-slavery movement wanted slavery completely abolished. During this time, since that goal seemed unattainable, the movement worked to prevent the spread of slavery in the territories (Bergeron, 1987).

Educational Background

James Polk was born in North Carolina and moved to Tennessee during his childhood. There he studied both formally and informally in the care of his family. Polk was allowed to attend a local religious school to pursue his formal studies. He then moved on to study at an academy. These schools instilled the virtues of Calvinism into Polk. He believed that with hard work he would be able to attain any of his goals (Bergeron, 1987).

Because of his academic potential and the status and financial standing of his family, Polk was fortunate to have the opportunity to study at the University of North Carolina. At the University Polk worked to polish his public speaking skills. He was a student leader and an excellent student (Bergeron, 1987). After graduation he began a law apprenticeship in Tennessee (Dusinberre, 2003; Bergeron, 1987). Polk was only in his mid-twenties when he began practicing law (Dusinberre 2003).

As a young professional, Polk's education continued through his work as a lawyer. He got an early start in politics when he received a job as a Senate clerk. Polk also served in Congress for 14 years, during which time he focused on advocating for the needs of the people of Tennessee (Bergeron, 1987). These professional work experiences were valuable in educating Polk about the nature of politics. He also learned the art of persuasion. His work ethic, which had been influenced early on by his Calvinist teachers, aided in his quick ascension from law clerk to Congressman (Dusinberre, 2003; Bergeron, 1987).

Actions, Policies, and Political Decisions

Polk was a territorial expansionist working under the ideology of Manifest Destiny (Dusinberre, 2003; Bergeron, 1987, McCoy, 1960). Polk has been described as "favoring the acquisition of territory for the sole purpose of acquiring a renewed basis for slavery" (McCoy, 1960, p. 155). Polk began his Presidential term in 1845. One of his first major actions was to allow Texas into the Union. Texas came into the union as a slave state. This measure had been planned before Polk officially took office, but it was a party issue that he inherited (Seigenthaler, 2003, O'Reilly, 1995; Sellars,1966; Brown, 1980).

In other areas of United States expansion, Polk worked to arrange for a treaty with Great Britain regarding control of the Oregon Territories. The result was that Oregon became under the official control of the United States. Positioned on the West Coast, Oregon became a symbolic and real example of Manifest Destiny (Bergeron, 1987; Morrison, 1967; Foos, 2002). In 1846 the treaty was signed and it was agreed that the United States would control Oregon up to the Canadian boundary.

Early in the administration, Polk's opponents offered up a piece of legislation that would limit slavery in all acquired lands from Mexico. The Wilmot Proviso sought to prohibit the expansion of slavery, and northern Democrats were eager to protect the territory (Morrison, 1967). This Proviso was never fully accepted. With the wheels of Manifest Destiny turning, Polk continued to aggressively pursue the acquisition of more Western territory (Zinn, 1997; Foos, 2002).

Polk first tried to buy California and New Mexico for $20,000,000. This offer was insulting not only because of the amount offered and the location of the land, but it would have been a political disaster for Mexican leaders to accept the proposal. Polk sent troops to the Rio Grande area, supervised by General Zachary Taylor, to pressure the Mexicans. This act initiated the Mexican American War (Zinn, 1997; Foos, 2002). The War was declared by Congress even though it did not have the full support of the United States. The Mexicans eventually lost the war. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed into law. As a result of this treaty Mexico lost half of their territory to the United States for the price of $15,000,000 (Zinn, 1997).

All of these events did not come about without resistance from the Mexican Americans who had established themselves throughout the Southwest. "One of the persistent myths of American Western historiography has been that Mexicanos happily greeted American soldiers, offered little resistance to their domination, and allowed the conquest to occur without spilling a drop of blood" (Gutierrez, 2004, p.. 265). The Mexicanos did resist. Many were vehemently opposed to the domination of the United States.

Multicultural Perspectives and Impacts

The multicultural implications of Polk as a slavemaster are similar to those created by Washington. Polk's continued use and support of slavery both personally and publicly upheld the practice and dehumanized slaves in the process. Polk used his power as president to secure slavery. "He claimed that the federal government had no power to touch slavery, not even in the District of Columbia or the territories" (Dusinberre, 2003).

Slavery was so ingrained in the minds of the people that it greatly influenced Polk's policy of Manifest Destiny. If more land could be acquired as slave-owning land, the institution would continue and its future would be secured (Zinn, 1997, McCoy, 1960, Dusinberre, 2003).

Manifest Destiny not only pertained to acquisition of land, in addition racial Manifest Destiny was also at work. The power elite felt that in obtaining New Mexico and California, the ideals of freedom and democracy could be spread. "This was intermingled with ideas of racial superiority, longings for the beautiful lands of New Mexico and California, and thoughts of commercial enterprise across the Pacific" (Zinn, 1997, p. 116).

It was also an example of the spread of United States imperialism and domination to people of color. The people who lived in these regions, the Mexicans and Indians, would be civilized by the domination of the United States (Zinn, 1997). The historical legacy of this administration lies in the oppression of groups and the assumption of racial assimilation through the power of racial Manifest Destiny.

"The idea of everyman as conqueror pressured volunteers from the lower and middling classes to look for a new social order which would extend to them the full privileges of herrenvolk, that is, personal dominance over 'inferiors'" (Foos, 2002, p. 58). Thus, the expansionist mentality managed to transform into power roles that would encourage whites from different social classes to assume a position of superiority (Foos, 2002).

Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Silent on Race

The question asked by a black reporter had to do with segregation in the Army; the president's response could be applied to any race issue in that he concluded

> the problem was intractable not because of his administration's reluctance to confront it head on but because racism was too ingrained in too many Americans. (O'Reilly, 1995, p. 143)

Social Currency

Franklin Delano Roosevelt did not have to deal with the issues of slavery, as Washington and Polk had. However, because of his aristocratic background, he had lived a life insulated from African-Americans and other people of color (McJimsey, 2000). As an aristocrat, families that had acquired wealth in mining, technology, and industry surrounded Franklin. "His world was filled with people who were used to getting their way" (McJimsey, 2000, p. 9).

Franklin Roosevelt was confined to a wheelchair because of an illness suffered during his youth. Because of his physical limitations, Roosevelt also had to battle public opinion about his disability. People who were confined to wheelchairs were not common as leaders of countries. Some of Roosevelt's own personal power may have stemmed from his interaction with the world as a man with a disability (Davis, 2000; Gallagher, 1999).

Societal Values and Background

The Great Depression had set in before Franklin D. became president. Banks nationwide had closed. The stock market had crashed. The financial structures of the country were in disarray and the unemployment rate was skyrocketing. Homelessness, hunger, and lack of personal savings compounded the effects of the depression for millions of citizens. These economic hard times resulted in feelings of desperation and hopelessness among the citizens (McJimsey, 2000, Davis, 2000). Private and public charities tried to offer assistance to as many people as possible.

Educational Background

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was born into a wealthy New York family that was able to offer him boundless formal education opportunities. He attended a prestigious academy called Groton Academy as an adolescent (McJimsey, 2000; Jenkins, 2003). He later studied at Harvard. After his marriage to Anna Eleanor, Franklin decided to continue his education. Franklin chose another prestigious university to continue his studies. He chose to study law at Columbia University (McJimsey, 2000).

Like Polk and Washington, F. D. Roosevelt also received years of education on the job as a politician. He served in the New York State Senate. He also continued

Franklin D. Roosevelt

to learn about politics as a presidential appointee to the post of Assistant Secretary to the Navy. His term as Governor of New York in 1928 enabled him to learn to manage party politics and become a charismatic leader (McJimsey, 2000; Gallagher, 1999).

Actions, Policies, and Political Decisions

Most of F. D. Roosevelt's policies and political decisions stemmed from two major events. The first was the Great Depression which led to the creation of economic aid measures meant to stimulate the economy. The second event was World War II. Because F. D. Roosevelt served four consecutive terms as President, his impact was profound and long-lasting (McJimsey, 2000; Gallagher, 1999; Davis, 2000).

Many of his economic policies are legendary. The New Deal consisted of a legislation package that Roosevelt began immediately upon his presidency. Included in this package were programs to create jobs for out of work citizens, to develop agricultural subsidies, and to develop a domestic infrastructure (McJimsey, 2000; Gallagher, 1999; Davis, 2000). "Roosevelt also favored plans to spur the economy over the short term, especially plans that rejected government spending to restore prosperity" (McJimsey, 2000, p. 43). A greater desire of the economic plan was "…to reorganize capitalism" so that the economy would regain stability (Zinn, 1997, p. 285). These economic plans were also valuable in maintaining public order.

Another domestic issue was the constitutionality of Roosevelt's legislation. The Supreme Court deemed some of his programs unconstitutional (McJimsey, 2000; Gallagher, 1999; Davis, 2000). Roosevelt also enacted New Deal legislation pertaining specifically to Native Americans. "Indian New Deal" allowed tribal peoples to organize governments as long as they were representative governments, modeling "representative democracy" (Snipp, 2004, p. 324). Such policies, while granting some autonomy to Native Peoples were based on assimilation, domination, and control. In this case the deterministic policy disregarded the Native American's utilization of theocracies for governance (Snipp, 2004).

World War II held it's own challenges for the President. The United States had been in an isolationist mood after World War I and before World War II. The United States sold weapons to European forces to try and combat the Axis powers that were fighting in Europe. The United States did not officially enter the war until the Attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. However, before the attack Roosevelt had been increasing the military budget in an effort to prepare for war (McJimsey, 2000; Gallagher, 1999; Davis, 2000).

Roosevelt ordered assistance to the British for their military supply needs and small operations. The United States also launched small attacks from the ocean. The United States involvement in World War II established a new world order, one in which the United States would assume a more powerful position, yet remain relatively peaceful at home (McJimsey, 2000; Gallagher, 1999; Davis, 2000).

Multicultural Perspectives and Impacts

F. D. Roosevelt's primary concerns during his administration dealt with economic recovery and, later, the war effort. He was a champion of the working poor and he offered a great deal of attention to their needs during the Great Depression (Mc Jimsey, 2000). When it came to issues of equality and desegregation, his was a policy of silence (O'Reilly, 1995). The press, including the more liberal news reporting agencies, did not assign responsibility to President Roosevelt for the blatantly racist policies of his administration for fear of compromising the war effort (Warren, 1999).

The liberal press during this time reported on civil rights, civil liberties, and they often cited racial discrimination as a stain on democracy in America, however, they did not implicate Roosevelt as the President (Warren, 1999) Failing to assign responsibility to the negative policies of

presidential administrations has continued to be a problem. Roosevelt's lack of attention to issues of race were noticeable even in major issues like "voting rights" (O'Reilly, 1995, p. 123). He did not privately or publicly speak out against Jim Crow laws. It was not until his last year in office that Roosevelt allowed African-American reporters to be invited to his press conferences (O'Reilly, 1995).

Roosevelt did make token appointments of African-American leaders to governmental posts. At the same time Roosevelt remained silent as the lynching of African-Americans was reported on a regular basis. Eventually Roosevelt did approve of a committee to investigate the lynchings but he was cautious about implementing actual legislation or policy in that area (Freidel, 1990).

The following passage describes the sentiments of many African-Americans during this time "As for the Blacks and workers, many deplored the failure of Roosevelt to go further…" (Freidel, 1990, pg. 248). Many historical representations champion Roosevlet as a leader in the area of Civil Rights. For example, a Presidential anthology describes, "No president since Lincoln was so widely admired among African Americans as was Franklin Roosevelt" (Kunhardt, P., Kunhardt, P., Kunhardt, P. 1999, p. 192). However, this view is not supported by the policies made during his administration.

It is also not supported by an interview of one of the author's father who served in the United States Navy during World War II. He states that "African American men in the Navy were relegated to segregated quarters and only received assignments as cooks and custodians" (H. P. Baptiste, personal communication, January 18, 2004).

At the urging of his wife, Eleanor, Roosevelt did manage to meet with some African-American rights activists, but during these meetings the President paid little attention to the problems presented (O'Reilly, 1995; Freidel, 1990). The desegregation of the army was another source of contention. Roosevelt was reluctant to allow for a desegregated military. Even more disturbing was that Roosevelt, "allowed his favorite service, the U.S. Navy, to remain almost completely white." (Jenkins, 2003, pp. 140).

F. D. Roosevelt also removed Japanese Americans from their homes and had them placed in internment camps (McJimsey, 2000; Warren, 1999; Freidel, 1990). This racist act violated the civil liberties of the Japanese citizens. Approximately 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry were relocated to the camps. Incidentally, over two thirds of these people were United States citizens (Freidel, 1990).

> The consequence was to benefit certain white business and interests at the expense of suffering American citizens who had never been charged with any crime or act of disloyalty. (McJimsey, 2000, p. 219)

Roosevelt was suspicious of other groups of color as well. He established an office to investigate conflicts among groups of color. This office served as a "racial intelligence clearinghouse" (O'Reilly, 1997, p. 140). This office believed that Eleanor Roosevelt was encouraging and conspiring with African-Americans. They were never able to acquire any intelligence of significance.

Multicultural Education, Teacher Education, and the Presidents

A goal in our work as teacher educators specializing in multicultural education and critical pedagogy is to engage with students in the multifarious issues surrounding diversity and equity. Exploring the presidents and their actions enables us to fill in the gaps of our historical understanding. Multicultural education theory empowers learning and in the case of the presidents, it should focus on exposition so the real power structures that inform social and racial policy in this country are contextualized and described.

> The surface harmony heralded by the media, the government and education is merely an image in the minds of those individuals who are shielded by privilege from the injustice experienced by dominated peoples. Such a pseudo-harmony idealizes the future as it covers up the historical forces that have structured the present disharmony that it denies. (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997, pp.230)

When students in our education courses are exposed to new information about the presidents there are mixed reactions. We are often told that in exposing the facts of Washington's slave polices and practices, for example, we are taking certain parts of his life out of context. Out of context? Solely learning the heroic deeds of a person's life as we do with our presidents, is indeed actually taking portions of a person's life out of context.

When we inaccurately present historical figures by only focusing on the positive contributions and their legendary accomplishments we are failing to address the needs of a diverse population. For instance, in Washington's case most students will recall him as Revolutionary hero, first President, man of many morals. This same man stood silent while hundreds of people under his own personal power and tens of thousands of people under his political power were enslaved (Ferling, 1988, Smith, 1993, Hirshfeld, 1997). In a discussion of James Polk's presidential decisions, Dusinberre makes a poignant statement.

> We modern Americans like to distance ourselves from James Polk's world by naming it a slave society and ours a free society. We repudiate the slave system that was so important to our ancestors, but we are slower to repudiate the politics that walked arm in arm with that social system. (Dusinberre, 2003, p. 174)

Slowest of all is our reaction to implicate the leaders that perpetuated a system of oppression, injustice and dehumanization. Multicultural education allows for a dialogue of truth and liberation to transform education realities and unrealities. If we ask our students the question, "Under what circumstances would the enslavement of humans be acceptable?" how will they reply? There is not a circumstance that makes such an act acceptable. It is evident then, that Washington and subsequent presidents such as Polk and F. D. Roosevelt should not be protected because of a romantic notion of historical unity.

> There is much pain and loss in our national history, which contains powerful echoes of the pain and loss many of us feel in our daily lives. For Blacks there is the pain of slavery and the continual loss of dignity that accompanies our treatment as nonstandard citizens. (Wilkins, 2002, p. 6)

Wilkins' sentiment brings attention to the racial tensions and feelings by African-Americans in our country, and he connects those feelings to the history and the historical figures that have contributed to the oppression of a group.

As educators, especially in a diverse society it should be known that our historical investigations will not always be comfortable. We must challenge our notions of historical figures so that the complexities of race, culture, and policy can have a new meaning for students. Kincheloe and Steinberg describe,

> …it [critical multiculturalism] reveals historically how race, class and gender make a difference in the lives of individuals and how racism, class bias and sexism have played a central role in shaping Western societies. (1997, p. 41)

The presidential administrations of

George Washington, James K. Polk, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt serve as small pieces of the historical puzzle that encourages the contextualization of contemporary struggles to occur.

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Previous installments in this series of articles on Presidents of the United States and multicultural education appeared in the following issues of *Multicultural Education*:

Winter 2003 issue: Presidents James Madison, Rutherford B. Hayes, and John F. Kennedy.
Spring 2004 issue: Presidents Andrew Jackson, Woodrow Wilson, and Dwight D. Eisenhower.
Summer 2004 issue: Presidents John Quincy Adams, Theodore Roosevelt, and Harry S. Truman.

Look for additional installments in future issues of *Multicultural Education*.