

# Bad, Worse & Worst: The Short List of Vice Presidents Who Probably Shouldn't Been

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Tis the season for lists - all kinds of lists - including the best movies, top celebrities, most successful sports figures, even the dumbest utterances of the year.

In the political world, *Time Magazine* jumped the gun in August with its list of the 15 worst vice presidents. Not to be out done, Vice President-elect Joe Biden recently leaped into the fray with his provocative, but typical Biden-like assessment that Dick Cheney was the worst vice president in American history. Subsequently a CNN poll, notwithstanding the spirit of this holiday season, found that almost one quarter of Americans agreed with Biden.

We are content to let historians debate Cheney's tenure, but not so willing to leave unchallenged some of the earlier lists. What lands a particular vice president on our short worst list is less what they did in office than what they did to the office.

So, missing from this list are examples of vice presidents, such as Andrew Johnson or Richard Nixon, chiefly reviled today for what they later did as failed presidents. Also missing are vice presidents whose infamy is tied to what they did after leaving office, such as Buchanan's running mate John C. Breckinridge who managed to get himself charged with treason by both the Confederacy and the Union. Burr, Calhoun, Agnew, and others rebuked below earned their place on the list by leaving the office they occupied in worse shape - often much worse - than they entered it.

The List:

1. **Aaron Burr** - Even before he assumed the vice presidency, Burr intrigued to become president - after he and his party's presidential candidate, Thomas Jefferson, tied in the Electoral College. It took the House 36 ballots to elect Jefferson president, thanks to Burr's unbridled ambition. His national career basically shot at this point, he ran for governor of New York and lost in part because of the opposition of another powerful New Yorker, Alexander Hamilton, whom he subsequently challenged and killed in a duel. Burr was indicted for murder in New Jersey and New York. He then fled out to the southwest where he tried to set up an independent nation out of part of the Louisiana Purchase - a scheme for which he was eventually indicted and tried unsuccessfully for treason.
2. **Spiro Agnew** - Nixon's vice president was the *bete noir* of liberals and the media. His verbal assaults sent many of them both into frenzy and to the family thesaurus. He made the polysyllabic "pusillanimous" part of everyday vocabulary, and the awful alliteration "nattering nabobs of negativity?" still evokes recognition. But Agnew's critics had the last laugh. Early in Nixon's second term he was indicted on multiple charges of taking bribes during his governmental career, ultimately permitted to plead to a single count of income tax invasion, made contingent on his resignation as vice president. He resigned becoming just the second vice president to do so, and the only one to leave facing criminal prosecution.

3. **John C. Calhoun** - He served as vice president for two presidents, John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson - and served neither of them well. During the 1828 election, while still serving Adams, but supporting Jackson, he penned the infamous "South Carolina Exposition," arguing that the union was a contract among the states, and thus any state could veto or nullify any act of the federal government. This argument later expanded by Calhoun ultimately became the legal justification put forward by the South to leave the union. Subsequently elected to the same office under Jackson, Calhoun proved no more loyal. He undermined Jackson by opposing him on the tariff. Worse, perhaps, Calhoun's spouse took the lead role in the social ostracism of Peggy Eaton, the wife of one of Jackson's closest friends, leading to the forced resignation of Jackson's cabinet. Ultimately, Calhoun himself resigned the vice presidency late in Jackson's first term to become a U.S. Senator from his beloved South Carolina.
4. **Hannibal Hamlin** - A senator from Maine put on the ticket with Lincoln to provide geographic balance, Hamlin and Lincoln had never met before the 1860 election. Hamlin is a classic example of a vice president who exercised no power and no influence, managing even to lose control of the patronage for his own state. While Lincoln sometimes asked his vice president for advice, Hamlin's role was so limited he often stayed in Maine, complaining about his insignificance. In 1864 he was so bored with his job that when the Maine Coast Guard was called to active duty, he refused a deferment and made his small contribution to the Civil War as a cook. He was dropped from the ticket in 1864 and replaced by the ill-fated Andrew Johnson.
5. **Thomas Jefferson** - He is the surprise on the list. Widely regarded as a great or near great president, he was a poor vice president. During his single term he consistently undermined the president (John Adams) he served. Jefferson, along with James Madison, was responsible for creating a party system that opposed Adams on both domestic and foreign policy. This, along with Jefferson's support of a partisan press, transformed American politics and led directly to Adams subsequent failure to gain re-election. Ironically, Jefferson's maneuvering in the vice presidency helped set forth the political conditions that thrust Aaron Burr into national politics, culminating in the latter's election to the vice presidency. Jefferson is the only vice president on the list who went on to become president, and, as noted, was effective in that office.

Some may be surprised and others disappointed that the incumbent Dick Cheney doesn't make the list. And who can be sure that he won't make a future list, but it is simply too early to make that assessment. Certainly, he belongs on any list of the most powerful vice presidents. And his tenure was controversial, particularly with respect to his role in bringing on the Iraq War and his advocacy for curtailing civil liberties in pursuit of national security. But Cheney functioned less as vice president and more as a co-president - exercising powers, heretofore, believed to be exclusively presidential. It may turn out that Cheney actually had more influence and did more harm to the office of the presidency than to the office he nominally occupied.

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