*(**Editor's note:** The following is Andrew P. Napolitano's closing argument on his FreedomWatch Presidents Day special, which featured Tom DiLorenzo and Tom Woods. It is reproduced with Napolitano's permission.)*

Does the government work on behalf of the people, or do the people exist for the benefit of government? Is history a recollection of things that have actually happened, or a narrative deployed to legitimize power and the crimes that led to the acquisition of that power?

In the last hour, we've heard that some of the presidents often billed by historians and the public as "the greatest" were anything but. To be fair, it's difficult to be a great person when your job is to head an organization such as the state that is rooted in deception, theft, and murder. And we know from Lord Acton that no great man is a good man.

From the beginning, any claim that the American government is good because some Americans are exceptional does not make any sense. The individual virtues of human beings cannot possibly extend to the government. By definition, the government lies, cheats, and steals. After all, it has no resources of its own, only those it appropriates from the people. No one may lawfully compete with it. We are forced to pay its bills and accept its so-called services. There is no escaping it. The ideas behind a nation may be exceptional, but they are not manifested by the government. And, of course, we must never mistake the government for the people it claims to represent.

So why does the official history of our presidents seem like so much mythology and legend when viewed side-by-side with what really happened? Is history being deliberately manipulated to whitewash the crimes of the past and manufacture the consent of the people? Or is the whitewashing of history simply a natural reaction by a people and a culture that would rather not come to terms with their not-so-rosy past? It's both. It is human instinct to trivialize the dark and the wicked in us and to elevate the good and the honorable in us. But, indeed, the history transmitted to you and your children in government schools has whitewashed all the presidents but a few. And make no mistake about it: They are government schools, because they all exist at the pleasure of the state so that the government's version of history becomes the popular version of history. Napoleon understood this when he remarked that history is not the record of what has happened before us; it is the record of what people think has happened before us. The government understands this, too.

Franklin Roosevelt manipulated the United States into World War II for years prior to a declaration of war. The Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, was not only not a surprise, but was facilitated by FDR. Abraham Lincoln was a racial supremacist who wanted blacks forcibly removed to Africa. Woodrow Wilson arrested people for speaking German in public. If these facts were as well known as the fiction that has surrounded them, then the information that the government wishes us to accept uncritically about the present-day state of affairs would be more vigorously challenged. So here is the lesson: The government has mythologized the past in order to lull us into accepting its version of the present; and the essence of that mythology is the presidency.

When Lincoln stated at Gettysburg that government is of the people, by the people, and for the people, that was government propaganda. The government is not of the people, and it shares none of the characteristics and traits of the people themselves. No less a president than George Washington told us that government is not reason; it is force. Government is a tool, a powerful and a dangerous tool. And so it must be wielded carefully and only when moral, constitutional, necessary, and proper. Government officials are not performing a public service, and they do not regard themselves as public servants. They regard themselves as our masters.

Under the Constitution and the law, as I've said time and again, they are employees of the people and ought to serve at our pleasure. When we lionize our government officials, be they presidents or postal workers, when we mythologize and deify them, when we build temples to worship them, we violate the nature of the service they ought to be performing. Jefferson would be scandalized at the temples we have built for him. Lincoln and FDR would no doubt welcome theirs. If we want to take our government back, we must begin by taking an honest account of what our government has done, ostensibly in our names, and reject the untrue narratives it instead foists upon us. The truth shall set us free.

All presidents but Jefferson have argued that their first job was to keep us safe. All presidents but Jefferson were wrong. If you read the Constitution, you will see that the President's first job – as Jefferson understood well – is to keep us free.

Andrew P. Napolitano , a former judge of the Superior Court of New Jersey, is the senior judicial analyst at the Fox News Channel and the host of FreedomWatch *on the Fox Business Network. His latest book is* Lies the Government Told You: Myth, Power, & Deception in American History

(Nelson, 2010). His next book is
It Is Dangerous to be Right When the Government Is Wrong: The Case for Personal Freedom
, coming in September.