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Ranking the Presidents—A New Look at the Best and the Worst

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In October 2000, The Federalist Society and The Wall Street Journal gathered "an ideologically balanced" group of 132 academics teaching in the fields of law, history, and political science, and asked them to rate the presidents on a 5-point scale, "with 5 meaning highly superior and 1 meaning well below average." Seventy-eight scholars participated in the rankings, and they considered 39 of America's chief executives. Due to their brief terms in office, William Henry Harrison and James Garfield were left out of the rankings, and the survey was conducted before the election of George W. Bush. The remaining 39 presidents were ranked in terms of effectiveness in office and character in leadership. The results are both reassuring and surprising.

A comprehensive guide to the rankings can be found in *Presidential Leadership: Rating the Best and the Worst in the White House*, edited by James Taranto of The Wall Street Journal and Leonard Leo of The Federalist Society. This new book, released the very week of President Ronald W. Reagan's death, underlines the historical importance of those who held the nation's highest office.

In order to ensure ideological balance, the organizers chose scholars representing both the political left and the right. "Our goal was to present the opinions of experts, controlling for political orientation," commented James Lindgren, Professor of Law at Northwestern University. As such, this study sought to correct the imbalance represented by previous rankings undertaken by groups of mostly liberal scholars, or mostly conservative scholars, but not both together.

The scholars were asked to rate each president on a 5-point scale and then to identify the most overrated and underrated presidents. In the end, most of the presidents ranked somewhere in the midsection of the rankings. "The plain fact is that over half of our presidents have been mediocrities," noted historian Robert Rutland.

Those presidents rated as "average" include William Taft, John Quincy Adams, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton, among others. "Above average" presidents ranged from Grover Cleveland and John Adams to James Madison, Lyndon Johnson, and John F. Kennedy. Of course, the greatest interest is found at the top and bottom of the rankings.

Out of the 39 presidents, only three ranked as "great." George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt stood head and shoulders over other presidents in these rankings. As Professor Lindgren remarked, "Being president is a tough job. Only one president in each century is rated high enough for us to call him 'great'."

Ranking as failures were Andrew Johnson, Franklin Pierce, Warren Harding, and James Buchanan. Those listed among the failures were judged by the scholars to have been incompetent chief executives whose inability in office threatened the very institution of the presidency. The Civil War, for example, erupted under the presidency of James Buchanan, whose vacillating personality led him to attempt a separation between the moral and legal aspects of slavery.

“What is right and what is practicable are two different things,” Buchanan argued. That logic led to civil war, and at the end of Buchanan’s administration the very future of the republic was in doubt. As Christopher Buckley commented: “It’s probably just as well that James Buchanan was our only bachelor president. There are no descendants bracing every morning on opening the paper to find another headline announcing: ‘Buchanan Once Again Rated Worst President In History’.” It is worth noting that presidential greatness is often inserted between mediocrity or worse. The presidents immediately preceding and succeeding Abraham Lincoln are both rated as failures, while Lincoln scored second place in the pantheon of presidents.

Listed in the “below average” rankings were presidents who, in the main, had lofty ambitions for themselves and the nation, but lacked the ability to fulfill those aspirations. Some, like Herbert Hoover and Jimmy Carter, were ranked in this category due to perceived lack of competence. Others, such as Richard Nixon and Ulysses Grant, find their place in this rank because of a devastating loss of character in themselves or their subordinates.

The “above average” presidents were characterized by acknowledged competence in office and boldness in leadership. Grover Cleveland reestablished a sense of integrity to the office of president, even as John Adams, James Madison, and James Monroe helped the young nation to assume its rightful place in the world. Presidents such as Lyndon Johnson and John Kennedy were ranked as “above average” due to the boldness of their domestic policies and their response to the critical issues of their times.

This sense of historical timing plays an important part in the ranking process. Those who achieved the “near great” ranking generally served in times of national trial. Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and Ronald Reagan led the nation during a time of war or international conflict and were largely identified with the issue of national defense in a time of crisis. Andrew Jackson redefined the presidency as a public office, embodying the national will. Thomas Jefferson, James Polk, and Theodore Roosevelt brought ambitious plans for national expansion to their administrations, redefining the nation and asserting American leadership in the world arena.

The three presidents ranked as the greatest stand in a unique place in the nation’s history. The presidency was largely defined by George Washington, who in a very real sense was the singular individual around whom the framers of the constitution conceived the office. As Richard Brookhiser reflected, one of Washington’s greatest acts of leadership was to stand at the inauguration of his successor, John Adams, demonstrating to the nation and the world that the presidency is not a monarchy. Abraham Lincoln [ranked at 4.87 compared to Washington’s 4.93] is credited with saving the nation and preserving the union. More books have been written about Lincoln than about any other individual American. As historian Jay Winik judged Lincoln: “He instinctively understood the moral burdens he had to shoulder; he appreciated the high seriousness of the crisis; he grasped its tragic dimensions while never losing sight of the good that could somehow be made out of this awful conflict. And he did this with both a human empathy and a steely resolve that, even now, history has trouble fully sorting out or explaining.”

Franklin D. Roosevelt places among the greats because of his inspiring and effective leadership during a time of incredible national crisis, with the nation’s survival at stake due to both domestic and international challenges. Robert H. Bork presents an honest assessment of Roosevelt’s leadership, noting his combination of enthusiasm for an activist government and his vision for America as a force for liberty in the international sphere. Though criticizing his record, Bork acknowledges that “Roosevelt’s unwavering public optimism had sustained America through its trials.” That was no small gift to the nation.

Ronald Reagan’s place among the “near great” puts him in good company, between Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower. Harvard Professor Harvey C. Mansfield acknowledges the success of Reagan’s domestic policies, but places his true greatness in the international arena. “Reagan’s claim to presidential greatness is that by deliberate but energetic policy and with peaceful means, and against the advice of the experts and the obstruction of partisan opponents, he won the Cold War that America waged for 45 years against one of the three worst regimes known in human history.”

Presidential Leadership is a fascinating volume sure to please and infuriate most readers at some point. The rankings pose an intellectual challenge to the reader, even as the chapters on individual presidents offer thoughtful analysis and historical interpretation.

In his foreword, William J. Bennett offers a good framework for historical analysis and appreciation. “Our nation’s presidents have their warts, to be sure. But they have far more than warts. Whatever is said of the worst of them, it must

also be remembered that, at the very least, they submitted themselves—and their character—to public scrutiny and public service.”

The office of President of the United States represents one of the central and essential institutions of American democracy. The very fact that each of these men held the nation’s highest office ranks them as persons of worthwhile interest and reflection. Readers will make their own judgments about the rankings, but in a week that finds the nation mourning its beloved 40th president, this reminder of presidential significance is well timed, and well done.

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