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by Marcus A. Stadelmann, PhD

Professor of Political Science at the
University of Texas at Tyler

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Introduction

Over the last 231 years, 44 men have dominated U.S. politics and history. Although almost every American can name the current president, less than half can tell you the name of the vice president or the Senate majority leader. No other office within the U.S. government has received as much attention as the presidency.

The successes and failures of the chief executive have become a staple of U.S. culture. Every year, the media spends thousands of hours disseminating information on their virtues and shortcomings. Their biographies become best sellers. The public marvels at their childhood plights and adult accomplishments. Stories about their personal lives and office conduct have become ingrained in American culture and literature. The public revels in the presidents' personal shortcomings and failures, and eagerly laps up scandals involving them. From Jefferson's affair with a slave, to the corruption of the Grant and Harding administrations, to Bill Clinton's and Donald Trump's sex scandals, the public is mesmerized by the presidents and their activities.

From humble beginnings, the presidency has evolved over time to become the dominant institution in the U.S. government. People look to the president for guidance in times of crisis. He (and so far, all of our presidents have been men) is held responsible for the problems the country faces and is expected to resolve these problems. In addition, the president symbolizes the United States abroad. Other countries judge the United States by what kind of president is in power. A bad president reflects poorly on all U.S. citizens.

About This Book

Most books on the U.S. presidency are either textbooks, which are usually boring and tedious, or autobiographies. Although autobiographies are interesting reading, they provide you with information on just one president — and face it, who has time to read 44 biographies?

This book is neither a textbook nor a biography — it combines the best elements of both. It won't bore you with little tedious facts or a lot of narrative. It doesn't shower you with a mass of statistics that prove to you what you already know.

The information on the presidents gets to the point, highlighting only the major events of each presidency.

The book covers all 44 U.S. presidents in chronological order. Some presidents have a whole chapter to themselves; others have a section in a chapter that covers several chief executives. I detail some basic personal information for each president, and I also cover the major events that took place during each president's administration.

I designed this book to give a solid foundation on the presidents, whether you're studying political science, writing a paper, or reading for pleasure. I tried to make the book entertaining by including little-known tidbits. So, whether you're a history buff, a student, or just someone interested in America's presidents, this book is for you. My hope is that this book will prove one point: The history of our presidents is fascinating and fun.

Conventions Used in This Book

To avoid repeating certain procedures, facts, and ideas, this book uses certain conventions. For example, I use the common abbreviations *WWI* and *WWII* to refer to World War I and World War II, respectively. I also use familiar presidential initials, such as *FDR* for Franklin Delano Roosevelt and *JFK* for John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

The information in some sidebars is relevant to more than one chapter. When this is the case, the book refers to these sidebars by the title of the sidebar and chapter number. For example, Andrew Johnson was the first president to face impeachment proceedings. So I include a sidebar, "How to get impeached," explaining impeachment when I cover Johnson in Chapter 11. Most people know only too well that Andrew Johnson wasn't the last president to have impeachment charges brought against him. You'll find references to this sidebar in chapters that cover Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, and Donald Trump.

I also provide some information in a consistent format. Early in a president's section or chapter, I include a sidebar that talks about his early years — when he was born, where he lived, what schools he attended (if he attended school at all!), and whom he married. (First ladies sometimes crop up in other places, but the facts about them are usually in these sidebars.)

Icons Used in This Book

As you read and enjoy this book, you will discover five different icons that alert you to specific aspects of America's 44 presidents. The five icons are



PRESIDENTIAL
LORE

This icon presents little-known information, or trivia, on the 44 presidents. Many of the presidents coined terms or set precedents for the presidency and the country. This icon alerts you to this type of information.



IN THEIR
WORDS

This icon alerts you to famous statements or quotes made by the presidents. Some quotes you may be familiar with, and others you may not know. Some may shock you, and others may amuse you.



POLITICAL
STUFF

Politics is at the heart of the U.S. presidency. This icon highlights political conflicts and positions. It covers the personal views of some presidents and the controversial issues of the day.



REMEMBER

This icon points out important information you should be aware of as you read the section, the chapter, or the book. This icon covers only the most important events, people, and issues.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Historical information including treaties, important bills, strategic doctrines, and other relevant material or events have this icon beside them. This information is included for the history buff, so feel free to ignore these paragraphs if you're not interested.

Beyond the Book

In addition to what you're reading right now, this book comes with a free access-anywhere Cheat Sheet that includes key dates in U.S. Presidential History. To get this Cheat Sheet, simply go to www.dummies.com and type **U.S. Presidents For Dummies Cheat Sheet** in the Search box.

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Now you're ready to go! You can come back to the practice material as often as you want — simply log on with the username and password you created during your initial login. No need to enter the access code a second time.

Your registration is good for one year from the day you activate your PIN.

Where to Go from Here

Feel free to start with any chapter and any president that interests you. Keep in mind that all the chapters are nonlinear, so you can start with any topic in any chapter.

1

Understanding U.S. Presidents

IN THIS PART . . .

Discover the constitutional powers of the president, such as the veto power, and also some informal powers such as the power to manipulate public opinion. In addition, find out about the evolution of the presidency from a weak ceremonial post to the imperial presidency of modern times.

Examine the way we evaluate and rank presidents and their administrations. Uncover academic rankings of our presidents and look at upward and downward movement of some presidents.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Setting up a government for the United States
- » Understanding the influence of the president
- » Seeing how the president shapes public opinion
- » Looking at the president's many roles

Chapter 1

Presidents and the Presidency

This chapter looks at the U.S. presidency. It talks about how the U.S. system of government was established. It also discusses the Constitution and the evolution of the presidency from a weak ceremonial post, such as the presidency of James Madison, to the imperial presidency of FDR. Today we find a stalemate between the presidency and Congress, resulting in much bargaining and compromising and the occasional government shutdown. In addition, the chapter covers formal powers the president possesses, such as the power to cast a veto. Finally, the president has been granted or assumed some special, informal powers, especially the power to manipulate public opinion. The discussion of these informal powers rounds out the chapter.

Establishing the First U.S. Government

In 1774, 12 colonies (Georgia refused to attend) agreed to get together and set up a united legislature, or *Continental Congress*, to speak with one voice against British oppression. The Continental Congress turned into a national legislature during the Revolutionary War and stuck around after independence was declared, assuming the functions of a new national government.

In 1781, the Congress passed the *Articles of Confederation*, creating a confederation between the 13 former colonies. After the states agreed on the Articles of Confederation, the Congress renamed itself the *Congress of the Confederation* and became a weak federal legislature — it was without real powers, including the power to tax or the power to create a national army. The real power remained within the 13 states.

The Congress survived until the Constitution created a new form of government in 1789, and the Congress of the United States replaced the Congress of the Confederation.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

A *confederation* is a form of government where power rests at the state level and not at the national level.

Facing problems

The confederation system caused immediate problems for the new country:

- » Without the power to tax, the Congress could not support a large military, which was dangerous with the British, Russian, and Spanish empires still in North America.
- » The war bonds sold to finance the war against Britain presented another problem. With the war over and the national government unable to tax, nobody redeemed the bonds. Many patriotic people who bought war bonds to support the war for independence lost their life savings when they couldn't redeem the bonds. Not surprisingly, people complained.
- » Trade became a problem, with the states treating each other like they were foreign countries. How can a united country be established when its members impose trade restrictions against each other?

Writing a constitution

By 1785, many prominent politicians in the United States were worried. They felt that the new country was in serious trouble and that the new government, created by the Articles of Confederation, was not working. For this purpose, a national meeting in Philadelphia was called to change or revise the Articles of Confederation. This meeting, also referred to as the *Constitutional Convention*, began in May 1787. Its original purpose was just to change the Articles of Confederation, not to write a new Constitution. The convention lasted until September 1787, when the delegates actually overstepped their authority and voted to approve a new constitution for the country.

Instead of revising the Articles of Confederation, the delegates created a brand-new document — the Constitution of the United States. They felt that a revision of the Articles of Confederation would not accomplish the task of creating a strong, united country. So they wrote a brand-new document instead, abolishing the Articles of Confederation and setting up a new form of government. The Constitution called for the following:

- » The creation of a federal republic, where the states and the national/federal government shared powers
- » A bicameral Congress with two chambers — the House of Representatives (selected by the people) and the Senate (equally represented by the states, with each state sending two senators)
- » An executive, or president, elected by an Electoral College every four years
- » A Supreme Court nominated by the president and ratified by the Senate

Drawing up the presidency

During the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, the hottest topic was what kind of executive to have. Some wanted a strong executive, even a king. Others wanted a weak executive at the mercy of Congress. Some even proposed multiple executives, with more than one president serving in the various areas of government.



REMEMBER

James Wilson, a delegate from Pennsylvania, was responsible for the presidency we have today. During the debate, he based the modern presidency on the New York and Massachusetts state constitutions.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

One of the big questions at the Constitutional Convention was whether to create a parliamentary system or a presidential republic. In a *parliamentary system*, the legislature, not the citizens, selects the executive. Chosen by the majority, the executive's party always controls the legislature. In a *presidential republic*, voters choose the president. This can result in a divided government, with one party controlling the legislature and the other the presidency.

A presidential system, such as the form the United States adopted, creates moderate policies, involving lots of compromise, because the executive and Congress have to bargain with each other to be successful. In a parliamentary system, the executive always gets what he or she wants, because it controls the legislature.

Being unique

The system of checks and balances is a feature unique to the United States. The delegates at the convention wanted to make sure that the president wouldn't dominate the new government. So they implemented many checks on his power. Congress and the Supreme Court can check the president in the areas the delegates considered the most important, resulting in this system of checks and balances. These areas included treaty-making, war-making and especially the power to declare war, which was given to Congress. Congress and the Supreme Court further received the power to override a president's veto and to remove him from office if necessary.

THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

The Electoral College, established by the Constitution, consists of electors who have the power to choose the president and vice president.

The first Electoral College, which met in 1789, consisted of representatives from all the states that ratified the Constitution. Depending on the state, either the people or the state legislatures chose the respective delegates for the Electoral College. In the Electoral College, each delegate cast two ballots. Whoever won the most votes became the president of the United States; the runner-up was named the vice president.

This system led to confusion. In 1800, Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr received the same number of votes, even though most electors favored Jefferson for president and Burr for vice president. The electors had to cast two ballots without being able to differentiate between president and vice president. The 12th Amendment fixed the system in 1804 by mandating separate ballots for the president and vice president.

In 1961, the 23rd Amendment allowed the District of Columbia to cast three votes in the Electoral College, even though it doesn't have statehood. Today, the electors in the Electoral College represent all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The electors, in turn, are chosen by their respective state legislatures. (Each party, Democrats and Republicans, draws up a list of electors. Whichever party wins the state in the presidential election gets to use its list in the Electoral College. The only exceptions to this rule are found in Maine and Nebraska, where one electoral vote goes to the winner of each Congressional district in the state and two votes go to the winner of the state itself.) The number of electors representing each state equals the number of members of Congress (members of the House of Representatives plus the two senators) for each state. Today, there are 538 total votes in the Electoral College, and a candidate has to win 270 to become president. If nobody has a majority in the Electoral College, the vote goes into the House of Representatives.

Today, the president is the most powerful politician on earth, but he has to share a lot of his powers with Congress.

Over the next two centuries, the power and influence of the presidency developed and changed.

Granting formal presidential powers

The Constitution, even though a brief document, sets aside Article II to discuss the presidency. Article II outlines the Electoral College and the powers of the president. The Constitution formally mentions the following powers in Section 2 and Section 3 of Article II of the Constitution. The powers are listed in the order found in the Constitution:

- » **Commander in chief of the armed forces:** This power has caused much controversy. Many presidents have interpreted it to mean that they have the power to make war. Congress, on the other hand, has the constitutional power to declare war. The War Powers Act of 1973 (discussed later in this chapter) further contributes to the controversy surrounding this power.
- » **Granting reprieves and pardons:** The president has the power to pardon anyone for federal offenses. The only exception is impeachment. The president cannot pardon someone who has been impeached.
- » **Making treaties:** The president has the power to negotiate treaties with foreign countries. All treaties have to be approved by the Senate with a two-thirds majority.
- » **Appointing Supreme Court Justices and ambassadors:** The president has the power to appoint justices of the U.S. Supreme Court and ambassadors. In both instances, the Senate has to approve his choices.
- » **Convening Congress to special sessions:** In emergency situations, the president has the power to call Congress into a special session.
- » **Receiving ambassadors:** The president has the right to receive foreign ambassadors and other foreign dignitaries to discuss policy with them.
- » **Ensuring that the laws are faithfully executed:** That's all the Constitution says about this power. Today, presidents interpret it as the power to make policy, as outlined in the annual budget the president submits to Congress.

Vetoing legislation

Additional powers of the president are found in Article I, Section 7. Even though Article I deals mainly with Congressional powers, it does discuss the veto power of the president. According to Section 7, the president possesses the power to veto

legislation passed by Congress. He has ten days to veto a bill and has to explain to Congress why he cast the veto. Congress then has the option to override a president's veto. This requires a two-thirds majority in both houses of Congress.

If Congress passes a bill within ten days of adjourning, the president can cast a *pocket veto*. All he has to do is let the bill sit on his desk until Congress adjourns, and the bill has been vetoed. Pocket vetoes cannot be overridden, because Congress has no chance to vote on the veto. Most vetoes stand, or are not overridden by Congress. Less than 4 percent of all vetoes in U.S. history have been overridden.

Interpreting presidential powers

The Constitution is not very specific on presidential powers. Many are vague and open to broad interpretation. For example, does to “faithfully execute the laws” mean that a president just observes Congress and then makes Congressional legislation law? Or can the president make laws himself? As commander in chief, is the president just some kind of super-general reacting to Congress, which has the power to declare war, or is he the supreme war maker in the United States? It is thus left up to the president to define his role.

Different men who have held the office have interpreted their powers differently. For example, in 1861, after President Lincoln took office and before Congress reconvened, Lincoln unilaterally reacted to the attack on Fort Sumter by the Confederacy (see Chapter 10). He defined the role of commander in chief by taking over the war effort himself. In addition, he single-handedly freed the slaves in the Confederacy with the Emancipation Proclamation. He felt his actions were justified by the emergency of the Civil War. Lincoln's predecessor, James Buchanan, however, believed that his powers did not extend to preventing the Southern states from leaving the Union. So he refused to act when the first Southern states left the Union and created the Confederacy.

Examining Presidential Influence on the Presidency

Just as the president is a living, breathing person, the presidency is a living, breathing institution. The men who have so far filled the office have put their own unique stamp on the office, for better or worse. The following sections give you some examples.

During the period from 1789 to 1824, most U.S. presidents were prominent men known to most U.S. citizens. They included many of our founding fathers and others who had served their country valiantly in the Revolutionary War. With the exception of John Adams, each of the first five presidents served two terms, bringing a measure of stability to the young country.

They legitimized the new government, or in other words, they created public support for the new form of government. Even if one disagreed with the new form of government created by the Constitution, how could one oppose George Washington as president? These presidents set the foundation for the United States. However, during this time period, Congress dominated and made most decisions for the United States. The president was considered to be a caretaker, and his job was to implement policies passed by Congress.

Challenging Congress: Andrew Jackson

When Andrew Jackson assumed office in 1829, he believed that he had a mandate from the people and that it was his job to not only implement policies passed by Congress but to make his own. He saw himself as a guardian of the people, with a mission to protect them from the excesses of Congress. He challenged Congress and vetoed major congressional legislation. Jackson actually vetoed more legislation than all of his predecessors combined.

Jackson's interpretation of a powerful president disappeared with him. His successors perceived their role as one of reacting to Congress.

With the exception of Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson, all presidents for the next century subordinated themselves to Congress. Congress made policy for the United States, and the presidents passively endorsed it.

Creating the imperial presidency: Franklin Roosevelt

With the Great Depression hitting the country hard in 1929 and World War II (WWII) starting in Europe in 1939, the U.S. public looked for strong leadership.



REMEMBER

They found it in Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Starting with his election in 1932, FDR single-handedly created the imperial presidency. The term *imperial presidency* was the title of a book by historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., published in 1973. In the book, Schlesinger argues that the presidency has become too powerful and has usurped powers from Congress. The term stuck and is still used today.

FDR was responsible for the New Deal programs, which greatly enhanced the powers of the presidency by establishing a large federal bureaucracy over which the president presides. Roosevelt put a massive welfare state in place (see Chapter 16) and had government take an active role in the economy. FDR made it the business of the president to take care of the U.S. public.

Foreign policy also came to the forefront when FDR took over in 1933. He moved the United States to support the Allies during WWII. During the war, he met with Allied leaders and hammered out major agreements. The subsequent Cold War further involved the United States in global affairs.

The trend of the president dominating foreign policy continued, and presidents today are the foreign policy leaders in the United States. By the time Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency in 1963, Congress was reacting to the president, who now made both domestic and foreign policy for the country.

Dethroning the imperial presidency: Richard Nixon

In 1974, Richard Nixon destroyed the imperial presidency with the Watergate scandal and its aftermath. Congress saw the executive position weakened and took this chance to restore some of the power it had lost to the president.

The most visible changes Congress imposed were in the areas of foreign policy and budget policies, when Congress passed the War Powers Act in 1973 over President Nixon's veto and the Budget Reform Act in 1974. These acts brought Congress back into the realms of war-making and budgeting.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

The War Powers Act of 1973 was a direct challenge to the president and the president's powers to commit U.S. troops into combat. The act severely restricted the president by calling for the following:

- » The president has to inform Congress in writing within 48 hours after he commits troops into a hostile situation.
- » Within 60 days after committing troops into a hostile situation, Congress has to declare war or authorize continuous commitment. This gives Congress the power to recall the troops.
- » Congress, at any time, can pass a *concurrent resolution* (a resolution passed by both houses of Congress) to recall the troops. The president cannot veto this resolution.

Suddenly Congress had the power to recall troops that a president committed into a hostile situation. It didn't have to stand idly by while a president fought a war. Both institutions, Congress and the president, again shared war-making powers.



REMEMBER

Ironically, every president affected by the act — beginning with Nixon and including Presidents Obama and Trump — has claimed that the War Powers Act is unconstitutional and has refused to be bound by its terms. The Supreme Court has so far refused to rule on the constitutionality of the act.

The Budget Reform Act of 1974 is another example of how Congress reasserted itself. Presidents had given themselves the power to refuse to spend money appropriated by Congress for certain programs. Most presidents, beginning with Jefferson, used it frequently.

This power was absolute until the Nixon era. In 1974, Congress passed the Budget Reform Act, which stated that the president can refuse to spend or delay the spending of money, but he has to tell Congress about it. Congress then has the option to pass a resolution calling for the spending of the money. After the resolution passes, the president has to spend the money. Suddenly, Congress could force a president to spend money allocated for programs the president opposed.

Restoring the imperial presidency: George W. Bush

George W. Bush was able to restore the imperial presidency after the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. With the country in shock, he acted swiftly and with bipartisan congressional support launched attacks on Afghanistan in 2001 and then Iraq in 2003. In the name of fighting terrorism, the Bush administration authorized warrantless wiretaps, the kidnappings of suspected terrorists, and interrogation techniques such as waterboarding. These measures were explained to the public as necessary to keep the country safe. Congress stayed quiet, and Bush's successor, Barack Obama, would enjoy similar discretion in foreign policy when it came to the fight against terrorism.

Bush's successors, Presidents Obama and Trump, continue the imperial presidency. A good example of the imperial presidency today is the frequent use of executive orders. Executive orders are a nice way to circumvent Congress and can only be repealed by a president.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

The power to issue executive orders has been used by all presidents with the exception of William Henry Harrison (1841). An executive order is a directive by the president ordering the federal government to carry out a certain task. A president can modify executive orders or even make exceptions to them. And, only a president can cancel an executive order. Some of the more infamous executive

orders issued by presidents include executive order 9066 issued by President Roosevelt, which resulted in the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII, and the more recent executive order 13769 issued by President Trump, which prohibited entry to the United States to citizens of seven Muslim countries.

President Roosevelt issued the most executive orders, 3,522. President Trump so far has issued 120 executive orders.

Perfecting the Power to Shape Public Opinion

The greatest power a U.S. president has is not found in the Constitution. It is the power to persuade and convince the U.S. public. If the president can get the public behind him, he becomes unstoppable. Congress cannot and will not oppose him if he can show Congress that the public supports him on a certain issue. For this reason, the power to shape public opinion is a great one.

Persuading the people

Theodore Roosevelt was the first U.S. president to take advantage of the power of public opinion. He used the presidency as a *bully pulpit* — a forum to use his influence to promote his causes — and preached to the U.S. public in an attempt to gather public support. When Congress began to stifle his progressive reforms (see Chapter 13), he toured the United States and attempted to convince the public of the integrity of his programs. With the public behind him, Congress had a tough time not agreeing to his agenda.

Woodrow Wilson, a political scientist, recognized this power and continued in Roosevelt's tradition. He, too, traveled around the country to rally support for his policies. In addition, Wilson established the tradition of holding regular press conferences, and addressed Congress directly by giving his State of the Union address in person to Congress. Wilson transformed the State of the Union address into the public spectacle it still is today. He set the precedent of using the media to disseminate his speeches to the U.S. public.

Making use of the media

With the invention of the radio, and later television, the power to persuade, or shape public opinion, gained new importance. Radio made it possible to reach the U.S. public easily, without ever leaving the White House.

The first president to take advantage of this was Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s. A week after presenting his first inaugural address, FDR began addressing the U.S. public directly over the radio with his famous fireside chats, which he used to explain his policies and foster trust and confidence in the public. Roosevelt continued this practice throughout his presidency, delivering a total of 27 fireside chats.

John F. Kennedy used television for similar purposes. He became our first television president. Kennedy and his advisors had figured that the best way to reach the public was through television appearances heavily laden with political messages. Nothing was more successful in gaining the support of the U.S. public than a well-timed, well-written, and well-delivered speech.

Kennedy was also the first president to allow his press conferences to be covered on live television. (Eisenhower had his press conferences taped and reserved the right to edit them before they were broadcast.) Kennedy delivered 64 live press conferences before he was assassinated.

Today, using television to reach the public is common. Inaugural addresses, State of the Union addresses, and press conferences are all designed to reach out to the U.S. public and convince people that the president's policies merit their support. Clearly, a well-written and well-delivered speech can sway public opinion in a president's favor. This in turn facilitates his dealings with Congress.

While television is still the major tool to communicate with a majority of Americans, social media has become more prevalent. It was first widely used by President Obama, who started an AMA (ask me anything) thread on Reddit to target young and minority voters. The strategy was so successful in both the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections that it has been copied by every candidate running for higher office. Who could imagine President Trump not using Twitter? Today, campaigns use social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and even Instagram and Snapchat, to target specific groups of voters. Studies have shown that the use of social media can increase voter turnout and impact political opinions, especially for millennials (18 to 24). Older voters are more immune to social media messages.

With social media being so successful and so much cheaper compared to television, it would not be surprising to see it overtake television as the major campaign tool in the future.

Performing Many Roles: Today's President

Today the president performs many roles in society. The president has become the preeminent politician in the United States. Some of his roles include:

- » **Head of state:** The president symbolizes the United States. Other countries judge the United States by what kind of president the U.S. public elects.
- » **Commander in chief:** The president heads the U.S. military. The public looks to him to commit troops into combat. The public also holds him accountable for the successes or failures of military operations.
- » **Chief foreign policy maker:** The president is expected to make foreign policy, meet foreign leaders, and negotiate treaties. The public holds him responsible for successes and failures in foreign policy.
- » **Chief executive:** The president is in charge of the federal bureaucracy, which includes the cabinet departments, the Office of Management and Budget, and the military — more than 4 million people altogether.
- » **Chief legislator:** Today, the president is responsible for most major legislation. He proposes the budget and uses his veto power to shape policy. The president acts, and Congress usually reacts to his policies.
- » **Crisis manager:** Whenever crisis strikes the country, the U.S. public looks to the president to act. After the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001, the public expected the president, not Congress, to react. It was George W. Bush and his advisors who explained to the public and Congress what had happened, as well as what measures the government would take.
- » **Leader of his party:** The public, as well as party supporters, look at the president as the leader of his party. If the president does well, the public will usually reward his party in the elections. If he performs poorly, the public will usually punish his party, especially in *off-year* (non-presidential) elections.

Today, the president is the chief politician in the United States. However, he still has to share his powers with Congress on many occasions, and Congress can keep his power in check, if necessary.

- » Seeing how presidents are evaluated
- » Reviewing two presidential rankings

Chapter 2

Presidential Rankings and Evaluations

This chapter looks at how U.S. presidents are ranked by experts, such as academics. I present one survey: which asked experts, mostly historians, to rank the presidents and then discuss how presidential rankings can fluctuate over time.

There are differences between academic and public survey of our presidents. The public is aware of the founding fathers and major presidents who served during crises, such as Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. This knowledge comes mostly from school and the emphasis that the media places on these important presidents. But when was the last time you saw a special on Rutherford Hayes or read a new biography of Millard Fillmore? On the other hand, you can choose among several movies or books about Franklin Roosevelt or Abraham Lincoln.

Polls show that most U.S. citizens know about the presidents in office during their lifetime but don't know much about the presidents of the past, especially the lesser-known executives. Therefore, the public ranks current presidents and famous presidents higher than lesser-known presidents. Academics who study presidents, on the other hand, have a better historical perspective — not too many recent presidents rank high on their scale.

Over time, the standing of a past president may change within the rankings of the U.S. public and academics, providing for renewed interest in his life and actions in office. Some presidents are highly regarded after they leave office, only to end up being considered disappointments in the long run. Andrew Johnson had this fate. Other presidents, such as Harry Truman, may be considered failures shortly after the end of their administrations and then become popular heroes later.

This chapter looks at the academic rankings of U.S. presidents, as well as the issues and characteristics used to evaluate presidents. Chapter 28 presents my personal ranking of the ten best presidents, and Chapter 29 lists my picks for the ten worst presidents in U.S. history.

Evaluating the Presidents

U.S. presidents are evaluated in many ways. The major characteristics polls use to evaluate the 45 U.S. presidents (actually there were 44 presidents; Grover Cleveland was the only president to serve two nonconsecutive terms in office) vary from survey to survey, but the main standards remain fairly consistent.

It is important to keep in mind that times change and presidential rankings reflect this. Early in U.S. history, the United States was isolationist, so foreign policy wasn't a factor in presidential evaluations. Foreign policy became much more important in the 20th century.

Media scrutiny is a recent phenomenon. During most of the 19th and 20th centuries, the media did not delve into presidents' lives. It was considered taboo to report on private presidential scandals — the public didn't know much, if anything, about Franklin Roosevelt's or Harding's extramarital affairs. A president's private indiscretions didn't factor into how he was judged as president. This code of silence held well into the 20th century — the media didn't report on John F. Kennedy's legendary affairs in the White House, even his well-known liaison with movie star Marilyn Monroe.

The Watergate scandal in the 1970s changed things. Suddenly the media believed that it had an obligation to be a watchdog over the presidents. This new role allowed the media not only to check presidents for public mistakes and policy failures, but also to report on private wrongdoings. This role for the media won't change as long as juicy scandals continue to garner large audiences. Future presidents have to expect to have their lives scrutinized and any minor wrongdoing reported. In the 2000 election, George W. Bush figured that a 20-year-old conviction for drunk driving wouldn't be a big deal and wouldn't be reported. Boy, was he wrong. When the story came out days before the election, it almost cost him the presidency.

Policy leadership

A president has to make policy, domestic and foreign, for the country. The president outlines his policies in his inaugural address, his annual State of the Union addresses, and especially his budget. The president has a tough battle to conquer: He has to mobilize public opinion to gain the upper hand with Congress.

The president has to be careful when dealing with Congress. If he is pushy and takes a heavy-handed approach, Congress may resent him, and he is not likely to be very successful. Andrew Johnson and Richard Nixon found this out the hard way. If a president is willing to lobby Congress and bargain and deal with its members, he can be very successful. George H. W. Bush saw most of his legislation pass, even though the opposition, Democrats, controlled both houses of Congress.

Leadership skills are necessary for the president to succeed. The more skills a president possesses, the more likely Congress will pass his policies. This is one way that a president is judged and evaluated. The more his policies get passed, the higher his ranking.

In modern times, a president's legislation has been judged according to the impact his policies have on social equality in U.S. society. Policies that benefit minorities and the poor enhance a president's ranking in the polls.

Crisis management

The U.S. public looks to the president as its political and economic leader. He is held responsible for the political and economic climate, whether times are good or bad. A successful president has to have a program ready to stimulate the economy if necessary, and he has to be able to pass it. If he fails, he will not win reelection. Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush are recent presidents who lost their bids for reelection due to economic decline. At the same time, a booming economy can get a president reelected even if he is facing personal scandals, as Bill Clinton demonstrated in 1996.

Crisis management also refers to international crises. The way a president reacts to major foreign crises, such as a war or a terrorist attack, greatly impacts his standing with the public and his rankings in the polls. Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, two presidents who always rank in the top five, rank high mainly because of their crisis-management skills. Lincoln reacted forcefully during the Civil War and kept the Union intact. Franklin Roosevelt guided the United States through World War II and turned the country into a superpower.

Lyndon Johnson, on the other hand, couldn't deal with the conflict in Vietnam. This inability lowers his ranking, despite his major domestic accomplishments. More recently, President George W. Bush, who was not doing well in the polls as late as August 2001, turned himself into a great crisis manager after the terrorist attacks in September 2001. His handling of the situation brought new life to his presidency.

Presidential appointments

Presidents are also measured by the people they appoint to public office. This area of evaluation includes appointments to the Supreme Court and the presidential cabinet.

Presidents Harding and Grant destroyed their presidencies with inept, corrupt appointments, and their rankings reflect this. Appointing good, skilled people reflects positively on a president. George C. Marshall and Henry Kissinger, both Secretaries of State, reflected positively on the presidents who appointed them, increasing Truman's and Nixon's standings, respectively.

Today, diversity has become an issue. Presidential appointments should reflect the ethnic composition of the country. The more minorities, including women, a president appoints to high-level positions, the higher his ranking. Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and especially Barack Obama have done well in this area, with their cabinets containing a fair amount of minorities. President Trump so far has scored very low in this area.

Foreign standing



REMEMBER

Foreign policy is a recent addition to the criteria for ranking U.S. presidents. Most 19th-century presidents can't be ranked on this issue because, during that time period, the United States was isolationist and didn't get involved in world affairs. But since Theodore Roosevelt and his active participation in international affairs (see Chapter 13), foreign policy has been a major part of the presidency. Today a president deals with many other nations: How he deals with these nations, as well as how these nations perceive him, contribute to his ranking.

Major foreign policy success can make up for domestic failure. President Nixon ranks low on many lists, but he had major accomplishments in the area of foreign policy. These accomplishments elevate him into the middle of the presidential pack. President George H. W. Bush was a great foreign policy president: During his term, the Soviet Union collapsed, the Gulf War was won, and major arms control took place. These accomplishments push him into the top 20 of U.S. presidents.

Respect from foreign nations is very important. President Nixon was widely respected by foreign nations. After his resignation, he continued to be treated as a successful president by most of the world, which led to a rise in his rankings.

Character and integrity

The attributes of character and integrity are important when judging presidents. A president who promotes corruption, lies to the public, or is involved in scandals will obviously be ranked lower than an honest president.

President Nixon single-handedly destroyed his presidency and his place in history with the Watergate scandal. President Clinton undermined a successful presidency with many personal scandals, including lying to the public. President Harding destroyed what was left of his presidency with continuous political scandals, such as the Teapot Dome Scandal.

At the same time, a president who wasn't very successful in office, such as Jimmy Carter, can restore his reputation and rise in the rankings for being a true humanitarian and an honest person. James Polk made it into my top ten list of presidents in this book for being an honest, dedicated individual. He worked so hard that it cost him his life. There were no scandals during his presidency, and he even kept his campaign promise not to run for reelection.

Public persuasion

The ability to persuade the public to his point of view is one of the most powerful weapons a president possesses. It's also one he most needs to succeed. How a president uses this power, and how successful he is with it, impacts his standing in the ranks of presidents. Some of the masters of public persuasion are

- » **Theodore Roosevelt**, who used his position and influence as president to persuade citizens to his point of view. He was able to get much of his legislation passed, despite having to deal with a hostile Congress.
- » **Franklin Roosevelt**, who went straight to the public with his fireside chats and not only reassured the public after the Great Depression, but also gained support for his New Deal legislation.
- » **Ronald Reagan**, who is known as the "Great Communicator" because he possessed a special ability to connect with the U.S. public.

The public loved Reagan and the way he dealt with the average person. This adoration translated into support for his policies. Congress enacted a large part of Reagan's agenda because the public backed him — not necessarily because Congress agreed with him and his proposals.

Other presidents haven't fared as well. Jimmy Carter had a tough time connecting with the public. For this reason, much of his presidential agenda never made it through Congress, even though his own party controlled Congress. Richard Nixon failed in similar fashion. He couldn't relate to the public. By the time the Water-gate scandal came around, it was too late to gather public support for his presidency.

Presidential vision

Some presidents come into office without a vision of what they want to accomplish as president: This usually results in a failed presidency. Without a master plan, a president is at the mercy of Congress, which can then take over and make policy for the country.

The more successful presidents have a vision. They want to use the office of president to change the United States. Franklin Roosevelt wanted to bring about changes to protect the average citizen from the brutal effects of the Great Depression. Reagan wanted to restore the United States to greatness and decrease the size of the federal government. With a vision to guide them, presidents tend to be active, as they try to implement their agenda. Even if they're not successful, they still get credit for having a vision.

A president without a vision accomplishes nothing, because there is nothing he wants to accomplish. Without a vision, a presidency results in failure.

The most successful presidents in U.S. history all had a vision of how they wanted the country to look and act. By the time they served out their terms, they had made a difference and changed the United States according to their plan.

Ranking U.S. Presidents

One of the best academic evaluations of U.S. presidents was released in 2017. C-SPAN (National Cable Satellite Corporation), a network created to show public affairs programming, conducted a survey of 91 historians and other experts on the presidency in the United States and asked them to rank the presidents. Sadly, the network has discontinued its polls on the American public's ranking of U.S. presidents. Public opinion polls ranking all of our presidents have become rare; they are expensive and there is not much demand for them. Most presidential polls today only contain the post-WWII presidents.

I present the CSPAN survey in Table 2-1. (President Donald J. Trump is not ranked because his presidency is ongoing at this time.)

TABLE 2-1**Presidential Rankings**

President's Name	2017
Abraham Lincoln	1
George Washington	2
Franklin D. Roosevelt	3
Theodore Roosevelt	4
Dwight D. Eisenhower	5
Harry S. Truman	6
Thomas Jefferson	7
John F. Kennedy	8
Ronald Reagan	9
Lyndon B. Johnson	10
Woodrow Wilson	11
Barack Obama	12
James Monroe	13
James K. Polk	14
William J. Clinton	15
William McKinley	16
James Madison	17
Andrew Jackson	18
John Adams	19
George H. W. Bush	20
John Quincy Adams	21
Ulysses S. Grant	22
Grover Cleveland	23
William Howard Taft	24
Gerald R. Ford	25
Jimmy Carter	26
Calvin Coolidge	27
Richard M. Nixon	28

(continued)

TABLE 2-1 (continued)

President's Name	2017
James A. Garfield	29
Benjamin Harrison	30
Zachary Taylor	31
Rutherford B. Hayes	32
George W. Bush	33
Martin Van Buren	34
Chester A. Arthur	35
Herbert Hoover	36
Millard Fillmore	37
William Henry Harrison	38
John Tyler	39
Warren G. Harding	40
Franklin Pierce	41
Andrew Johnson	42
James Buchanan	43

Source: CSPAN 2017 Poll

In the C-SPAN survey, the 43 U.S. presidents were ranked on ten different characteristics and then put in order. The ten criteria included public persuasion, crisis leadership, economic management, moral authority, international relations, administrative skills, relations with congress, vision/setting agenda, pursued justice for all, and performance within contexts of times.

To this day, the C-SPAN surveys are the most comprehensive surveys available to the public. You can find more information on the website at www.c-span.org/presidentsurvey2017/?page=overall.

Explaining results

Experts, such as academics, rank presidents such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson higher than the public for their accomplishments in domestic policy. There is also a political bias among academics. Academics tend to be

more liberal than the general populace, so they tend to rate liberal presidents higher than the public does.

The public doesn't have this ideological bias. The public considers Ronald Reagan one of the top ten presidents. They remember Reagan fondly, and they really don't care about the Iran-Contra scandal, which academics hold against him. The public also ranks George H. W. Bush and his son George W. Bush higher than academics do.

It is interesting to observe that Richard Nixon doesn't make the five worst presidents anymore. Right after the Watergate scandal, he was considered one of the worst presidents in U.S. history. But he was able to regain some of his stature in the last two decades of his life, mostly due to his foreign policy accomplishments. (See Chapter 21 for coverage of President Nixon.)

Changing rankings over time

Presidential rankings change over time. This fluctuation especially affects recent presidents. It takes time to evaluate a presidency and to see the long-term impact of a president's accomplishments or failures. Actions that may have been considered a big mistake at the time can turn out to be a stroke of genius decades later. At the same time, a courageous move may turn into a disastrous mistake when viewed with the benefit of hindsight. So, you can expect the more recent presidents to move up and down the rankings ladder in years to come. Most of the earlier presidents, on the other hand, are unlikely to improve or worsen in the standings.

Moving up the ladder: Truman

When Harry Truman left office, many considered his presidency a failure. Contemporaneous observers believed that he was one of the worst presidents in U.S. history. He wasn't able to win the war in Korea, and his civil rights and social programs were stalled in Congress.

Decades later, the perception of Truman changed. People looked at Truman's foreign policy and recognized what he accomplished. Truman implemented the policy of containing communism, not allowing any more European countries to go communist: The Truman Doctrine, providing aid to countries fighting communist uprisings, saved Greece and Turkey from communism, and the Marshall Plan, providing economic aid to Europe, restored European economies and prevented communist parties from coming to power in Europe after World War II.

Truman also faced the toughest decision a person could make: Should he drop nuclear bombs on Japan? Truman did what he thought was best for the country.

He wanted to end World War II as quickly as possible to save U.S. lives. He did this by having U.S. bombers drop atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Truman also integrated the armed forces by executive order. He could have accomplished even more if he hadn't faced a hostile Congress.

Today Truman is considered a great president, consistently ranking in the top ten in academic surveys. (For in-depth coverage of Truman, turn to Chapter 17.)

Reevaluating Eisenhower

When Eisenhower left office, his presidency was considered boring and bland. People thought he hadn't done much. Decades later, people looked at his presidency differently — not doing much might be a good thing. Today, surveys show that President Eisenhower is considered one of the best U.S. presidents, consistently making the top ten lists of presidential rankings.

Eisenhower ended the war in Korea and kept peace around the world. As Eisenhower proudly proclaimed, communism didn't gain an inch of territory during his tenure, and he accomplished this without shedding any U.S. blood. Not bad for a quiet, boring president.

At home, the economy was booming. Eisenhower built the U.S. interstate system and sponsored civil rights legislation. He stood up to the Southern states and enforced the Supreme Court's decision to integrate U.S. public schools. Eisenhower proved that you don't have to be a flamboyant, controversial individual to be a great president. Chapter 18 gives you more reasons to like Ike.

Moving down the ladder: Andrew Johnson

Many, especially in the South, admired Andrew Johnson when he left office. He stood up to a Republican Congress that was trying to punish the former Confederate states. People thought that he was a true believer in states' rights. They also believed that he adhered to the Constitution during his short-lived presidency.

Today, Johnson is considered a horrible human being whose presidency was a massive failure. Johnson was a stubborn individual, unwilling to compromise on any issue. He tried to circumvent Congress and bring the Southern states back into the Union by himself. He was a blatant racist who didn't care at all about former slaves. He even vetoed the 13th Amendment, which made former slaves U.S. citizens. Had it been up to him, African Americans would have never had any political rights.

Johnson truly deserves to be listed among the worst presidents in U.S. history, but it took time to recognize this.