

Ranking the Presidents Once More

by Conrad Black



C-SPAN's consultation of a rather large and randomly selected number of historians to rate the presidents of the United States produced an often whimsical result when it reported its findings last week. Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and Franklin D. Roosevelt are, as they deserve to be, immovable at the top of the list of America's greatest presidents. They have occupied those places certainly since the first list that I saw 60 years ago, which was the effort of a smaller number of historians.

Now as then, however, the liberal and accordingly Democratic bias of the academic community leaps from the page and affronts the sensibilities of the objective historian. In the 1961 list—a consultation, as I recall, of the American Historical Society—after the Big Three came Woodrow Wilson,

Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson, three staunch Democrats. Those three in this list have been bumped down to, respectively, 13, 7, and 22.

There have been no particular revelations about any of them, and what has evolved is an appreciation of the status of African-Americans and to a lesser extent native people. Jefferson paid in his ranking for his condition as a slaveholder in a way that Washington did not, presumably because Jefferson, unlike Washington, did not emancipate his slaves in his will, and his standing may have suffered from the attention that has been paid in the intervening 60 years to his relations with his slave Sally Hemmings, with whom he apparently had as many as seven children.

Nothing has occurred which would alter perceptions of Woodrow Wilson, except the fact that as a Virginian he had a traditional and bigoted view of African-Americans—a fact widely known 60 years ago, and which has not led to any of his policies being examined differently now than they were then. He remains the person who, when forced to enter World War I, sought to make it a “war to end all wars” and to “make the world safe for democracy.” He was the first person to inspire the masses of the world with a vision of enduring peace.

Andrew Jackson has taken the greatest tumble of all because not only was he an active defender of slavery but he also violated the Indian treaties and removed hundreds of thousands of Indians to the West to make way for a greater slave population in cotton-producing areas of the South. The forced transfer of the natives caused a tragically high death rate due to their susceptibility to certain viruses. It is appropriate that this should be taken into account, but it seems to me the factors that made those three men such outstanding presidents in their times have been diluted

unjustly. Jackson's suppression of the Doctrine of Nullification saved the Union for nearly 20 years until the Compromise of 1850.

The passage of 60 years also demonstrates how partisanship recedes in these assessments: in 1961, Theodore Roosevelt was rated seventh and Dwight D. Eisenhower was 22nd out of only 30 presidents. (John F. Kennedy had just started his administration, and President Grover Cleveland, for these purposes, obviously is counted only once although his terms were nonconsecutive. William Henry Harrison and James A. Garfield were not rated because of their brief tenures—one month and six months, respectively.)

This year, TR and Ike rank fourth and fifth. Similarly, Ulysses S. Grant was then rated a failure with Warren Harding, 29th out of 30th. But in this list, Grant has risen to 20th position (out of 44). It seems to be the practice that as each presidency ends, the outgoing president enters near the back of the queue in historians' esteem if they are Republicans, and well forward if they are Democrats, but then move gradually up or down as they are seen in a historical rather than a contemporary context.

Kennedy for some time was seen as an outstanding president, naturally on the basis of the universal sympathy for him as a tragic historic personality. President Obama has profited from a related phenomenon and enters the list at the implausibly elevated position of America's 10th greatest president, presumably because he is an attractive and intelligent man who rightly occupies an immense position in America's quest for racial peace and equality. In fact, his actual record depends on Obamacare, the Paris Climate Accord, and the nuclear arrangement with Iran. These were, successively, very inadequate, mistaken and ineffectual, and a disaster. As time passes and perspective is gained, Obama should gravitate to around the midpoint of the country's first 45 presidents.

The same phenomenon over rising and settling has been demonstrated in the slow but steady progress of Richard M. Nixon. For decades after his resignation as president, the hob-nailed jackboots of liberal academic hostility were on his neck. Gradually, as cant and emotionalism subside, historians take note of the fact that there is still no conclusive evidence that Nixon himself broke any laws, though some people in his entourage did. And on revisiting his presidency, each year the Watergate controversy will be less important in comparison with his achievements in normalizing relations with China, negotiating and signing the greatest arms control agreement in history with the Soviet Union, extracting the United States from the Vietnam War while maintaining a non-Communist government in Saigon, working to end school segregation while avoiding the bussing of tens of millions of schoolchildren out of their neighborhoods as the courts had ordered, founding the Environmental Protection Agency, ending the draft, and ending the violent demonstrations that plagued the country relentlessly in the last year of his predecessor Lyndon B. Johnson's administration. This record will eventually put Nixon in the top 15 presidents, up from 31 in this survey, and about 40th in 2001.

It is also pleasing to see Lyndon Johnson rise as the memory of Vietnam recedes; his contribution to civil rights vastly transcends his limitations as a war leader and the design errors in his Great Society program. Ronald Reagan has also risen to the ninth position, but his successes in ending the Cold War satisfactorily and producing an immense noninflationary economic boom should qualify him as a great president just behind the Big Three.

President Trump's status at number 41 is utterly nonsensical. His achievements in reducing illegal immigration by 95 percent, eliminating unemployment, generating higher percentage income gains in the lowest rather than in the highest income brackets, solid advances in Mid-East peace,

taming North Korea, and shaping up the NATO alliance will eventually be seen as far more important than stylistic infelicities when the current tide of partisan zeal and snobbery has ebbed.

I modestly offer my own rating, as I, along with many important historians such as Ron Chernow, Sean Wilentz, H.W. Brands, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and Michael Beschloss seem not to have been consulted (though there is some evidence that their books have been read).

I would add Reagan to the Big Three as a great president. In the category of unusually capable, I would put (chronological order from here on) Jefferson, Jackson, Polk, Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson, Harry S. Truman, Eisenhower, and Nixon. In the next category of above average, I would put John Adams, James Monroe, William McKinley, Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Gerald Ford, George H. W. Bush, and Trump. Average: James Madison, John Quincy Adams, Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, Chester Arthur, Grover Cleveland, William Howard Taft, Calvin Coolidge, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama. Below average: Martin Van Buren, John Tyler, Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Benjamin Harrison, Harding, Herbert Hoover, Jimmy Carter, and George W. Bush.

Not rated for brief tenure: Harrison, Garfield, and Joe Biden.

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