Presidential Ranking:  
How We Regard the Nation’s Highest Office

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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Abstract

In the fall of 2007, I participated in an Honors College colloquium based on the American Presidents. As a history major specializing in American history, I was particularly interested in how the course of history effected the administrations of our past presidents and, conversely, how the presidents shaped our history. As part of the final project, we were constructed to rank the presidents according to our own qualifications. For my personal ranking I found that I tended to favor presidents who were politically flexible and willing to go above and beyond for the good of the country. The first part of this thesis is my presidential ranking, with some changes made since I originally wrote it. The information is based off of our class discussions, video, and reading. I have included in the bibliography our textbooks and class video, all of which helped formulate my ranking. In the second half, I have divided the presidents into different groups based on the type of presidency they had, their political qualifications, or ideology. This section was more involved more outside research.

*For the purposes of the presidential ranking, William Henry Harrison and James Garfield will not be included due to their shortened time in office and lack of significant presidential contribution.

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First of all, I would like to thank my advisor, Larry Markle, for being the initial person to get my interested in this fascinating subject. His guidance and input was extremely helpful over the last two semesters.

I would like to acknowledge the forty-two men who have held this distinguished position, and the countless other persons who will hold it in the future. The study of this subject has revealed in great detail the daunting task that is the presidency. Despite the successes or failures of particular administrations, any one who rises to the challenge of this office is deserving of immense respect.
Presidential Rank

1) Lincoln
2) T. Roosevelt
3) F.D. Roosevelt
4) Washington
5) L.B. Johnson
6) Jefferson
7) Polk
8) Truman
9) Eisenhower
10) Madison
11) Wilson
12) Adams
13) G.H.W. Bush
14) Clinton
15) Kennedy
16) Carter
17) McKinley
18) Taylor
19) Jackson
20) Monroe
21) Hayes
22) Hoover
23) Coolidge
24) Cleveland
25) Taft
26) Reagan
27) Ford
28) J.Q. Adams
29) Arthur
30) Nixon
31) Tyler
32) Grant
33) Harding
34) Fillmore
35) Van Buren
36) B. Harrison
37) Pierce
38) A. Johnson
39) Buchanan
1) Abraham Lincoln 1861-1865 (Republican)

Abraham Lincoln came into the presidency facing the ultimate fight that would determine the fate of the country. Following months of inaction from President Buchanan, it was up to Lincoln to either quickly save the union or prepare for war. Though he was traditionally a moderate, he had the ability to adapt and grow to gain the necessary political flexibility he would need for the war. The first masterstroke he made was in baiting the South to attack first at Fort Sumter. This not only put the record of the initiating hostilities on the South, but it also inspired Northerners to retaliate and support the war. Though he had no significant military experience, Lincoln studied military strategy constantly in order to make informed decisions without relying solely on the advice of military advisors. He also visited the front and the army camps numerous times to see the war firsthand. In terms of slavery, Lincoln did not immediately support full emancipation. However, his opinion changed by 1863. He decided freeing the slaves would help the war effort by removing the South’s chief source of labor, thereby leading to the passing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln also managed to keep an amicable relationship with Congress because, like other nineteenth century presidents, he had no interest in shaping the domestic agenda and thus did not initiate any legislation. Publicly, Lincoln took on the role as the non-partisan leader of the people. His speeches were deliberately drafted in simple language that highlighted the values of the nation, which gave the American people confidence and the understanding that necessary changes had to be made. When Lincoln took office in 1861 he inherited a divided country. In the wrong hands this scenario could have spelt disaster for the future of the United States, but due to Lincoln’s ingenuity, flexibility, and ability to learn the country was able to survive the tumultuous years of the Civil War.

Despite his inarguable contribution to the salvation of the United States, Lincoln’s presidency was not without its negatives. Despite his non-partisan public image, he worked diligently to replace all presidential appointees with Republicans. With the loss of a significant number of military commanders to the Southern cause, Lincoln constantly struggled to find a supreme Northern commander who could compete, going through numerous generals. Another tarnish of his presidency was the infringement on First Amendment privileges of newspapers that criticized the war efforts, though this could be argued as a necessary negative to help the war. The Emancipation Proclamation, perhaps Lincoln’s greatest achievement, only freed slaves in territories not under Union control, leaving slavery in Union territories and border states.
Lincoln deserves the ranking as the greatest president not because he was in office during the Civil War, but because due to his efforts the country remained intact. Lincoln was set up to follow in the footsteps of the previous laidback presidents that came before him, but he saw the need for change not only in the country, but in his own political policies. His ability to adapt to the unprecedented situation of the Civil War is the true crowning achievement of his presidency. He was able to inspire the American people to support the war and finally face the outburst of sectional diversity that had been building up for over forty years.

2) Theodore Roosevelt 1901-1909 (Republican)

Theodore Roosevelt used the sheer force of his dynamic personality to push through his initiatives and become the most active president since Abraham Lincoln. Though a Republican, he never identified himself as a representative of party politics, believing the president should act for the American people as a whole. After the abundant corruption of the late nineteenth century’s Gilded Age, Roosevelt offered the American people a “square deal.” Believing that no one person or group should have enough power to hurt the country, he became known as the “trust-buster,” though it would be more accurate to say he regulated more trusts than he broke up. He created the Federal department of Commerce and Labor in 1903 and urged Congress to pass labor-friendly statutes such as child labor laws and compensation covering all federal employees. His Meat Inspection and Pure Food and Drug Acts of 1906 came in response to the popular outrage over the conditions in meatpacking plants presented in Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle. He was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for mediating the end of the Russo-Japanese war in 1905. Roosevelt was the first president to initiate significant protection and preservation for the environment and natural resources. He appointed dedicated conservationists and worked to increase awareness about environmental protection.

One shortcoming of Roosevelt’s time in office was his expansionist and imperialist stance towards foreign policy. His “big stick” policy set up a precedent for the United States as the policeman of the Western Hemisphere. Some of his tactics were also underhanded. In order to get the necessary cooperation to build the Panama Canal, Roosevelt first backed a revolution to overthrow the Columbian government, though he was always candid about his involvement. In terms of his fight against big trusts, he was sporadic in the companies he chose to go after. It
seems he often chose the ones that were merely the most unpopular among the people while others he settled on private agreements.

Theodore Roosevelt is probably the most dynamic president the country has ever had. And he let his vibrant personality influence his politics, with mixed results. After the long and turbulent years of the Gilded Age, Roosevelt revitalized a sleeping presidency and pushed the limits of his power to improve the nation. His impact on the presidency, domestic affairs, and foreign policy helped shape the United States into the nation it is today.

3) Franklin Delano Roosevelt 1933-1945 (Democrat)

The impact of Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency on American history is astounding. He passed unprecedented amounts of legislation through Congress in order to bring the country out of the Great Depression. Although the benefits his policies brought did little to actually help the situation, their main impact was in giving the American people a sense of progress and hope for their situation. Roosevelt’s “fireside chats” on the radio revived confidence in the country. Roosevelt also had the foresight to see the impending war that was to come in Europe. He worked subtly behind the scenes to gradually push Americans to favor of policy of intervention. Pearl Harbor provided the ultimate push for war.

Roosevelt was a master politician, and as such he was not without his own flaws. His remarkable legislative policies were not always well thought out and often cancelled each other out with their opposing objectives. With his legislative policies cooling down by 1938, he pursued the widely unpopular “court-packing” bill that would have given him more influence within the judicial system. The most infamous stain on his record is the interment of Japanese-Americans during the war. Though it was an action that probably had significant support among whites, it remains a significant blemish on American history. His decision to run for a fourth term could also be considered unwise considering his then ailing health.

Needless to say, volumes can be written on FDR’s contribution to the presidency and to the nation. He forever changed the role of the presidency, leaving behind the laid back executives of the past. His political flexibility may have weakened some of his policies, but his willingness to experiment won him support among the American people as he tried to better their situation. He did not single-handedly bring the country out of depression, but he did provide an inarguable sense of leadership that was desperately needed.
4) George Washington 1789-1797 (Federalist)

As the American forefathers were drafting the Constitution, they had General George Washington in mind for the presidency. As the first holder of the executive office, Washington was faced with the extraordinary task of developing the office of the president and holding together a tenuous new republic recovering from the failure of the Articles of Confederation. The country looked to him for leadership during this crucial time, a fact he was well aware of. He consistently worked to shape the image of the presidency knowing his actions were setting precedents. He established the standard of having a cabinet of advisors and delivering an inaugural address, neither of which were in the Constitution. During the later years of his presidency, he was alone in providing the façade of national unity amidst the factionalism of the emerging political parties.

One major negative of Washington’s presidency, according to modern standards, was his belief that it was the function of the elite to run the country because they were the only ones properly qualified. This principle was held by many of the time, but it began to erode starting with the Jefferson administration and effectively ended with the Jacksonian era. In terms of foreign policy, Washington’s support of the Neutrality Proclamation of 1793 can be seen as reneging on France, but also preventing war with Great Britain. However, hostilities with Great Britain continued until the lackluster Jay’s Treaty was accepted.

Washington’s shaping of the presidency was contradictory. He brought a more aristocratic flair by hosting state dinners and balls, while also adopting the simple title of “Mr. President.” He was aware of the crucial need to be the true leader of the people and of the new American government. This was not a simple task considering he had no example to follow and that in the wrong hands the government could have completely failed. Washington’s confidence and leadership were the major factors in establishing the stability of the new United States.

5) Lyndon B. Johnson 1963-1969 (Democrat)

Despite inheriting the presidency from the immensely popular John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson aspired to be remembered as the one of the greatest presidents. He used Kennedy’s legacy to get passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, which barred discrimination in public places and employment. Subsequently, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawed the barriers created by
white southerners to keep blacks from voting. His War on Poverty initiatives amazingly cut the number of people who lived in poverty by half. Other initiatives he promoted include Medicaid and Medicare, federal aid to education, environmental protection laws, and food stamps. Johnson was able to get much of this passed because he was a brilliant deal maker and he perfected a form of intimidation that became known as the “Johnson Treatment.” All of his initiatives were part of Johnson’s domestic vision of a “Great Society.”

Johnson considered domestic policy to be his main priority, yet it was foreign policy that would be his political downfall. He inherited the Vietnam War from Kennedy, and was advised that the only way to resolve the conflict would be through escalation. He and his advisors still feared the “domino effect” of communism and could not comprehend that the North Vietnamese could hold out against the might of the American military. He pursued escalation without the consensus of Congress or the public and did not fully disclose the total number of soldiers being deployed. By 1968, Vietnam had reached a stalemate, and Johnson had lost most of his political and public support.

Lyndon Johnson’s presidency is still somewhat divisive in American memory. Opinions are often caught between his positive legislation and his negative image held over from the Vietnam War era. Yet blame for the war cannot be placed solely on him. Upon entering office he kept Kennedy’s cabinet, and it was those same advisors who told him to escalate the war. His actions were only those of what any other president would have done in his position. Johnson’s strength was in domestic policy. His programs sought to improve the United States and bring about the formation of a “Great Society.”

6) Thomas Jefferson 1801-1809 (Democratic-Republican)

Thomas Jefferson’s takeover of the presidency marked the first time the office passed from one political party to another. It happened peacefully, a feat many thought would not happen considering the strained relations between the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans. Jefferson immediately downgraded the more elitist image of the office that had been supported by the Federalists. He promoted a small federal government and more power within the states. Jefferson’s crowning achievement was the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon, which nearly doubled the size of the country. The addition of land supported
Jefferson’s vision of an agrarian America. The purchase also meant abandoning his strictly limited interpretation of the Constitution.

Jefferson’s love of small government was both unrealistic and limiting. He downgraded the size of the military and bureaucracy while simultaneously doubling the size of the country itself. Congress granted him nearly autocratic power over the Louisiana Territory that went against his republican principles. His second term presented even more problems. The United States was caught up in the resumed Anglo-French war, and its shipping and trade industries suffered for it. Jefferson’s solution, the Embargo Act of 1807, turned out to be a fiscal disaster that both devastated the economy and sullied his presidency.

Jefferson’s two terms in office were extremely contradictory. He worked to create a smaller government while simultaneously increasing the power of the executive. He bookmarked his greatest presidential achievement, the Louisiana Purchase, with his greatest political disaster, the Embargo Act.

7) James K. Polk 1845-1849 (Democrat)

James Polk stands apart from the majority of the presidents because he made and upheld a campaign promise to serve only one term. Thus he never had the potential for reelection as a motivating factor for his policies. He also set forth a clear agenda for his term: establish an independent treasury, pass a tariff acceptable to both the North and the South, settle the Oregon boundary, and acquire California. The first three he settle relatively quickly, with the Mexican War slowing down the fourth. During that conflict he effectively blended volunteer regiments with the regulars, thus avoiding the reliance on militias that hindered the War of 1812. Polk finally won California, and New Mexico, with the capture of Mexico City in 1847. He also agreed to pay Mexico $15 million for its losses.

Polk’s term did see its share of turbulence. War broke out with Mexico in 1846 over the annexation of Texas. This conflict turned into a political nightmare for Polk and the Democratic Party. With the death of his hero, Andrew Jackson, in 1845 there was no longer a strong figure holding the Democrats together, and the party continued to fracture along sectional lines. This worsened with the proposal of the Wilmot Proviso that would have banned slavery in any territory acquired from Mexico.
James Polk tried to be the strong, independent president that Andrew Jackson had embodied. But he had neither the military reputation nor the intense personality of Jackson. His achievements instead had to come through hard work and negotiations. This and the sectional debates, fanned by the war, kept him unpopular for most of his presidency. Yet looking back at his achievements, they helped to shape the continental United States known today. Polk was also one of the most accessible presidents. He considered himself a servant of the people and established the White House as a community center. He believed in establishing a level playing field for the American people.

8) Harry S. Truman 1945-1953 (Democrat)

Franklin Roosevelt served in office for an unprecedented twelve years and his policies drastically changed the structure and course of the United States. Harry Truman was faced not only with competing with Roosevelt’s legacy but also with the end of the Second World War. The major act of his presidency came when he chose to drop the atomic bombs on Japan, rather than invade. The ethics of this decision will most likely never stop being debated, but it did bring a swift end to the war. Truman tried to initiate a domestic policy akin to that of FDR, but due to his eroding popularity and the Republican-controlled Congress, most of his directives were rejected. Truman was much more successful in foreign policy. His development of the Truman Doctrine, though it would lead to hardship later on, was widely supported. The National Security Act merged the armed forces into the Department of Defense and established the CIA and NSC. The Marshall plan allowed for the economic rebuilding of Western Europe. When the Soviet Union blockaded West Berlin, Truman resisted calls for military action and opted for allied air drops of supplies, which sustained the population of the city until the blockade was lifted in 1949. With the establishment of NATO, the United State became the dominant military leader in the Western world.

With the end of the war came a lack of unity between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and tensions soon broke out into the Cold War, atomic buildup, and the arms race. In response, he released the Truman Doctrine, which committed the country to defending any nation threatened by communist expansion. This was strengthened by the “loss” of China to communism. This tied the hands of the United States to not only get involved in Korea, but also Vietnam.
When Harry Truman took office he was not well known and was therefore not expected to make any impressive achievements. Yet he effectively ended World War II with victory and dictated the policy the United States would follow for the next forty-five years. He worked to fight communism while simultaneously being criticized for not doing enough. Truman presented a confident and decisive image, appealing to Americans reeling from both the end of the war and the Great Depression.

9) Dwight D. Eisenhower 1953-1961 (Republican)

Dwight Eisenhower was pursued for the presidency, and only obliged because he felt the country needed him. He took office to preside over an administration dedicated to keeping the peace and postwar prosperity abundant in the nation. One of his most significant achievements was the Federal Highway Act. He also sent in troops to uphold the decision made in Brown v. Board of Education in Little Rock, AR. He otherwise distanced himself from the decision, believing that the country was not yet ready for integration. He worked with the United Nations to reach a cease-fire in the Suez Canal Crisis in 1956. Eisenhower became bound by the fervor of the Cold War. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization became his administration’s response to Communism in that region and also tied them to the cause of South Vietnam.

Following the turbulent years of the Great Depression, World War II, Roosevelt’s extensive legislative changes, and the worrisome years of Truman, the American people were ready to settle down and enjoy the peace and prosperity the war had regained for them. Eisenhower was the perfect image of the confident, quiet, and all-knowing grandfather who had what it took to dutifully lead the nation down the right path. Like Washington, Eisenhower was a leader, not a politician, which was perhaps his greatest political asset.

10) James Madison 1809-1817 (Democratic-Republican)

James Madison was another one of the founding fathers that inherited the presidency almost by default. Being the Father of the Constitution, he was an obvious choice for the chief executive. His constitutional ideology guided him through his presidency; he had complete devotion to maintaining the balance of power. His first administration was dominated by the diplomatic collapse with Great Britain and then the subsequent War of 1812, making him the first wartime president. He did not put any restriction on wartime civil rights, believing it to be
unconstitutional. This action provided for the swift healing of partisan and regional wounds that had erupted before and during the war.

The War of 1812 was the first major test of the young American government, and its president had had no real military experience. He was also unwilling to grant himself excess powers that might have enabled him to better fight the war. Andrew Jackson's technically postwar victory at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815 was the only thing that saved public opinion of an otherwise disastrous war.

James Madison was one of the most intelligent, and predictable, presidents to ever serve. Yet it was these qualities, and his dedication to the Constitution, that held the country together during its first major war. And despite the war's unpleasant outcome, his confidence in his political policies allowed the nation to easily recover.

11) Woodrow Wilson 1913-1921 (Democrat)

Woodrow Wilson entered the presidency with the hopes of instituting a policy of liberal democracy and progressivism, a directive he called the New Freedom. The Underwood-Simmons Tariff lowered rates and included the first graduated income tax. He further regulated business with the creation of the Federal Trade Commission and the Clayton Anti-Trust Act. The Federal Reserve Act reformed the banking system to be able to better monitor the country's money supply. Wilson kept out of the Great War in Europe for as long as possible. He was publicly propelled, however, with the threatened safety of American ships in the Atlantic and the conveniently threatening Zimmerman note supposedly sent to Mexico from Germany. Wilson turned American involvement in the war into a fight for democracy and the spread of American values. His personal quest became his Fourteen Points policy that he believed would ensure the protection of democracy, collective security, and free trade.

In order to maintain political support, Wilson allowed a system of patronage that filled appointments with southern Democrats. Due to their influence, Wilson sanctioned affronts to racial equality. At the treaty of Versailles, Wilson was forced to compromise on many issues regarding postwar policy, including war reparations against Germany. This affected hi to such an extent that he was unwilling to compromise with Congress upon his return, leading to the defeat of his Fourteen Points and U.S. entry into the League of Nations. Having worn himself
out campaigning for his policy, he suffered a massive stroke in September 1919 and was basically incapacitated for the rest of his term.

Woodrow Wilson is a divisive figure. He sought genuine improvements both in domestic policy and abroad. In regards to his Fourteen Points, his initiatives were almost too idealistic for the times and the American people were not willing to commit themselves to extensive foreign involvements. Yet his ideas would stand the test of time and would be remembered when world war came around again.

12) John Adams 1797-1801 (Federalist)

John Adams, though one of the most qualified men ever to serve as president, was not very capable at playing the political game. His opinionated, vain, and stubborn personality did not help him either. He hated being criticized but was also critical of himself. He went along with many of initiatives of the Federalist-controlled Congress. Relations were tense with both England and France, but an undeclared naval war ensued against France following the XYZ Affair. The most controversial event in Adam’s presidency was the passing of the Alien and Sedition Acts, which gave the president special powers to deport dangerous foreigners and suppress critical speech. Though they were meant to ensure security during the quasi-war with France, the acts were immensely unpopular.

Adams faced the near impossible task of succeeding the extremely popular George Washington. He was also forced to face the turbulent political parties that Washington had managed to avoid. At this time, the parties did not have a long history of an enduring union with limited, but accepted, political opposition to fall back on. Therefore, each party expected the worst of each other and magnified every sign of opposition as perilous to the nation’s survival. Adams, however, was not as staunchly tied to his Federalist party and was willing to go against other Federalists on issues of policy. This drastically diminished his political power. But by going against his party he was able to work out a treaty with France. Though it came too late to reelect him, it did ensure peace for Thomas Jefferson’s first term.

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13) George H. Bush 1989-1993 (Republican)

George Bush inherited the presidency from the popular Ronald Reagan with the now infamous campaign line, "Read my lips: No new taxes!" Unlike his predecessor, he was more of a centrist and involved with his administration. He was also a supporter of patient diplomacy. When the Soviet Union collapsed he did not flaunt the triumph of American democracy over Communism, but instead calmly furthered diplomatic relations that promoted good feelings between the two countries. When Saddam Hussein of Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1991, Bush supported the formation of an international coalition to fight against him, rather than an American-led retaliation. Also significant was his decision to leave Hussein in charge following his defeat. Bush felt that the aims of the Gulf War had been met and invading Iraq would not be supported by the coalition. Bush was a keen internationalist who believed in maintaining stability and incrementally improving foreign relationships. At home, Bush supported the Americans with Disabilities Act and legislation promoting clean air and civil rights.

Bush face numerous difficulties regarding domestic issues. His more centrist views disappointed the Republican right that wanted for idealism. His forty-four vetoes lost him support with Democrats. Bush was also left with dealing with the $2.7 trillion deficit left by Reagan’s administration, forcing him to go back on his promise not to raise taxes. Following the end of the Cold War, social issues that had previously been ignored or pushed aside came into the forefront. Bush’s moderate and inconsistent views regarding social issues hurt him. In 1991, he signed a civil rights bill that was almost identical to the one he vetoed in 1990. Also inconsistent was his record on abortion. He had previously supported abortion, but then started condemning it once joining Reagan’s ticket in 1980. He was also unable to shake his image as an elitist who did not understand the plight of average Americans.

George H. Bush was not Ronald Reagan. To many this was his ultimate shortcoming, while to others this was a beacon of hope. Regardless, he seemed to have disappointed both sides. Yet the achievements he did make are significant. He believed in consensus governing that ensured that all voices were heard. He handled the collapse of the U.S.S.R. with aplomb that ensured diplomatic stability. With regards to the Gulf War he chose not to exceed the war aims laid out by the international coalition. Though this continued Saddam Hussein’s destructive reign for another decade, he kept the country from continuing war in the Middle East. His
ultimate political downfall, going back on his promise to raise taxes, was made in order to protect the country from the fiscal decisions made during the Reagan years.

14) **William Clinton 1993-2001 (Democrat)**

Bill Clinton's young, refreshing image appealed to Americans in the early 1990's. He was the ultimate example of a "rock star" president. He had amazing political savvy and was personable enough to win over many critics. Economic prosperity ensued during his first years. During a governmental shutdown in November 1995, Clinton was able to convince the public that the Republicans were heartless and inept. He also refused to compromise with Republicans on a health care initiative, a risk that luckily paid off. He was involved in Northern Ireland and in bringing peace between Israel and Palestine. He also became a spokesman for the global economy and the new Age of Information.

Clinton’s management style was chaotic, and two years into his term the Republicans won control of Congress. The ultimate tragedy of Clinton’s presidency was that it was blemished by scandal with the discovery of his White House affair with Monica Lewinsky and then his subsequent impeachment. Because of this he lost almost all political standing during the last years of his term. Yet he had worked to enhance the prosperity of the 1990’s and refused to back down to critics. He was an ultimate politician, which both hurt and helped his public image.

15) **John F. Kennedy 1961-1963 (Democrat)**

John Kennedy’s presidency represented the ascent of a new generation and a new set of ideals. With increasing tensions over the Cold War, his campaign promoted hop and optimism. He epitomized this with his challenge for Americans to reach the moon by the end of the decade. Like many Americans, he was shocked by the violent images of attacks on civil rights protestors being displayed on televisions across the United States. He transformed civil rights from a sectional to a national issue. The true test of his presidency came with the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, when it seemed that the Cold War would actually erupt into violence. He refused the advice of his advisors to launch an air strike on Cuba, thereby averting what could have become nuclear war.
Though he was an immensely popular president, Kennedy had more than his fair share of faults. The Bay of Pigs invasion turned into a public relations disaster that he managed to survive only by confessing the whole truth to a forgiving public. He is often given a pass for Vietnam, with more ire directed at his successor, Lyndon Johnson. Yet it was Kennedy who approved the assassination of the South Vietnamese president, thereby making Vietnam America’s issue. Had he lied into another term, he most likely would have gone on to escalate the war as Johnson was forced to do. Kennedy was able to compartmentalize his life to such an extent that the public was unaware of his less than pure private life, which included mafia ties and extensive womanizing. The press’s code of silence and his untimely assassination preserved Kennedy’s wholesome image.

John Kennedy’s narrow win over his conservative presidential rival Richard Nixon can be interpreted as an ideological shift. Following the grandfatherly presidency of Dwight Eisenhower, the American people seemed ready for a change that embraced the upcoming younger generation. Kennedy provided an example of hope for a country enjoying its prosperity and beginning to undergo significant social change. Yet he was also a spoiled politician who enjoyed his power and the luxuries it afforded him. His death cemented his pure image in the hearts of the American people despite his considerable imperfections.


In the election of 1976, Americans chose Jimmy Carter to restore dignity and honesty to the office of the presidency. Following the scandals of Nixon and the worries of Ford, the people wanted a change. One of Carter’s successes was adding cabinet posts for energy and education. In foreign policy, he pushed through a treaty returning the Panama Canal to Panama, normalized relations with China, and, most famously, presided over the Camp David Accords. His promotion of human rights led to his unpopular actions against the U.S.S.R. and his allowance of the sick, exiled Iranian Shah into the country. This latter act of kindness was the cause of the Iranian Hostage Crisis.

Carter was a Washington outsider before and during his presidency. His welfare and tax reforms went nowhere because he ignored Democratic congressional leaders. His efforts to stop inflation and stagnant growth had no effect, though this was not his fault. In 1973 OPEC imposed a ban on oil exports to countries that supported Israel, the U.S. being chief among them.
Inflation became a worldwide issue. The resulting energy crisis in the U.S. was blamed on Carter. He did not help his position when he gave his “malaise speech” in which he justifiably scolded Americans for their lack of confidence in U.S. domestic and foreign policies. His foreign policies were certainly not always well accepted. In response to the invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S.S.R. he set up a grain embargo, and boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics. The ultimate downfall of his presidency was the Hostage Crisis in Iran, which, after months of negotiations and a botched rescue attempt, was never resolved until the day of Ronald Reagan’s inaugural.

The very fact that he goes by “Jimmy” and not “James” says a lot about President Carter. The first president born in the Deep South, he was a true political dark horse who emphasized his simple roots. His status as a political outsider may have won him the presidency, but it hampered his ability to govern. Yet considering the sad state of American politics at the time, even critics of Carter have admitted that any one else is his position would also have had little political capital to work. It is also difficult to effectively judge his term due to his extraordinary diplomatic and humanitarian achievements he has made since leaving office. Yet what is undeniable is Carter’s honesty and integrity. His presidency was plagued with crises that were out of his control, and even his unpopular decisions were made based on his moral values. Jimmy Carter was simply above playing the political game that was necessary for him to be a success in the Oval Office.

17) William McKinley 1897-1901 (Republican)

Though William McKinley does not have a lasting popular legacy, he played a vital role in overseeing the United States as it transitioned from the nineteenth century to the twentieth. He fulfilled his expected duties of passing a protective tariff and moving towards gold-back currency. One new tactic started by McKinley was a modern-style management of the then sensationalistic press. McKinley’s private secretary became the first unofficial press secretary, and for the first time the White House was considered a primary source of news. With the Spanish-American war, the size of the White House staff increased dramatically. McKinley adjusted his earlier protectionist policy to adapt to the growing importance of foreign markets.

One downside to McKinley’s term was that it was caught up in the imperial enthusiasm of the late nineteenth century. The explosion of the battleship Maine forced his hand into
backing Cuban independence and declaring war on Spain, an action supported by his vice president Theodore Roosevelt. McKinley took a missionary standpoint in defending the war as a battle to better “lesser breeds.” Following the struggle, the United States took possession of Cuba, Guam, and the Philippines.

McKinley can be called the first modern president. The United States was adapting to its growing industrialization and was also gradually becoming a global power with the acquisition of its first colonies. Thought he morals of colonialism and its policies are debatable, it did enhance the international influence of the country as it transitioned into the new century.

18) Zachary Taylor 1849-1850 (Whig)

Zachary Taylor was elected to the presidency as, basically, a celebrity candidate. His war hero reputation appealed to Northerners and his slave-owner status appealed to Southerners. He was hardly expected to make any significant contributions of his own. He had pledged not to veto any Congressional legislation concerning slavery in federal territories. Yet the country’s sectional crisis intensified when gold was discovered in California. The issue of slavery hindered efforts to ass California, and its gold, into the union. Taylor, increasingly disturbed by the attitudes of Southern secessionists, shocked many when he endorsed the admission of California as a free state. He opposed the Compromise of 1850 because he felt it marred the integrity of the nation with the threats of secession.

After eating his infamous bowl of cherries with a pitcher of milk following a sweltering day of Independence Day festivities, Taylor died of what was most likely cholera in 1850. This ended any chance of his administration creating any substantial negatives. So his shortened presidency can only be judged in regard to his impact on the growing sectional problems of his time. He ended up not being the pushover people assumed they had elected. He instead evolved his political ideals to sit what he thought best for the country and did not let threats of secession intimidate him.

19) Andrew Jackson 1829-1837 (Democrat)

After forty years of president coming from elite and educated backgrounds, General Andrew Jackson was elected as a “man of the people.” Previous presidents had supported the more republican form of government ruled by an educated upper class. Jackson’s dedication was
to democracy and the rule of the common man. “Jacksonian Democracy” would later be coined to describe the new American political philosophy. He was also the first to experience the tangible danger in the growing sectional divide during the Nullification Crisis of 1832, with South Carolina claiming the right of the states to secede from the union. Jackson adamantly rejected this claim and avowed the supremacy of the Union.

Andrew Jackson’s popular reputation was based on his record as a war hero and as the last actively influential president until Abraham Lincoln. However, when it came to his political appointees, he used his power to institute the spoils system. These same appointees would often be fired at will if they disagreed with his policies. Jackson’s extensive use of his veto power boosted his influence in the legislative process. Bills that did not meet his approval before passage were vetoed. When he lost his battle with the renewal of the charter for the Bank of the United States, he withdrew all federal accounts causing the bank to fail anyway. However, he did not set up a replacement for the bank leading to dire economic problems for his successor, Martin Van Buren. The most controversial of Jackson’s actions was the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Though the Supreme Court repealed the act, Jackson refused to adhere to the ruling. Some level of defense can be awarded to Jackson due to the fact that, at the time, many white Americans supported the removal of Native Americans from land that they themselves wanted. However, Jackson also seemed to harbor personal prejudices against Native Americans and this action is remembered in history was one of the most shameful in American history.

“If General Jackson wants to go to Heaven, who’s going to stop him?” This comment, made following Jackson’s death, accurately sums up the enormous influence Jackson developed in his political career. Widely popular, he was seen as a crusader for the rights of the common man against the corrupt elitist politicians. Yet he took his politics very personally, and saw any political opposition as a personal attack. It was impossible to intimidate Jackson, but it was also impossible for him to be convinced to hear out opposing viewpoints. His volatile and impulsive nature added to his popularity and prestige, but was also a hindrance to his political actions.

20) James Monroe 1817-1825 (Democratic-Republican)

James Monroe is often credited as the leader of the “Era of Good Feelings.” Yet this time was also one of significant change. The torch was passing from the Revolutionary generation, of which Monroe was the last to occupy the presidency, to a new generation. His rhetoric was
nonpartisan as he sought to overcome party differences. The country was also benefiting from agricultural prosperity and the success of Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans, making it easy to forget the unpleasantness of the war with England. Monroe was also dedicated to staying a “private citizen,” paying for his government travels in 1817 with his own money. His political policy was to pursue measures agreeable to the greatest number of people. He allowed the proponent of national interests to be delegated to others, such as Secretary of State John Quincy Adams.

The negatives of Monroe’s presidency are mainly due to a lack of political opposition and the changing nature of the country itself. He followed the ideology of his mentor, Thomas Jefferson, by requiring a constitutional amendment to make internal improvements to the nation. By setting a hard-line precedent for legislative change, the later appropriations of Adams and Jackson were hindered. Also at this time, the growth of commercial institutions was outpacing the political as the government remained small under the Jeffersonian view of limited government. The most controversial position Monroe had was in his belief that Congress could not infringe on the rights of states to have slavery. His signing of the Missouri Compromise in 1820 was merely the first attempt to fix a growing sectional problem that would plague the country for the next forty years.

The “Era of Good Feelings” masked he major changes occurring in American society. There was an increasingly uneasy balance between national and sectional interests that had not yet come to the forefront. Monroe’s historically positive legacy can mainly be attributed to good luck for the lack of political crises during his eight years in office. He maintained the Jeffersonian view of limited government and the ultimate power of the Constitution at a time when the country’s infrastructure was expanding the constitutionality of slavery was being questioned.

21) Rutherford B. Hayes 1877-1881 (Republican)

Following the scandals of the Grant administration, people looked to Rutherford Hayes as an “anti-Grant” that would save the Republican Party. He reformed civil service by prohibiting federal employees from taking part in political activity, upsetting members of his own party. He also defied Congress by replacing corrupt men working in the New York Custom House with

2 Brinkley, 60.
men of merit, though the Senate had already deferred to Senator Conkling’s patronage choices. This restored some of the independence of the executive branch lost in previous administrations. When the Democrats won control of the Senate in 1878, they passed a number of bills that included riders that either repealed or subverted election laws protecting the rights of black voters. Hayes vetoed all of them. His humanitarian beliefs set him apart from many presidents of his time. He vetoed a bill restricting Chinese immigration, supported better education for blacks, and advocated for the rights of Native Americans.

Though Hayes had idealistic goals, the realities of the presidency and contemporary politics limited his efforts. Because he barely won the election over Democrat Samuel Tilden, a deal was struck to keep the southern states from rebelling. Hayes was forcefully committed to ending the military occupation of the South and rebuilding the infrastructure of the southern economy. The withdrawal of federal troops was widely supported by those tired of dealing with the Reconstruction and the problems with the South. Yet once the federal troops were gone from southern statehouses the Democrats immediately regained control. Hayes felt betrayed when these new governments did not uphold black rights. The racial democratic control of southern state governments, and the north’s apathetic response, put off racial issues on a national level until the 1940’s.

Though his idealistic, and arguably naïve, agendas did not go through as he wanted, the fact that Rutherford Hayes promoted the rights of racial and ethnic minorities at all was significant in the time when they had no real influence in society. Hayes fought to keep the racist agendas of southern Democrats at bay, but his hands were tied by a national lack of interest in furthering Reconstruction. Yet he did manage to regain some presidential independence by defying Congress on notable issues. Honoring his campaign pledge not to run for a second term, he left the presidency having faced the challenges of the changing social landscape of the United States.

22) Herbert Hoover 1929-1933 (Republican)

Herbert Hoover had an impressive career prior to the presidency and was elemental in the success and prosperity of his predecessors Harding and Coolidge. His ascent to office seemed only natural. Yet the timing of it was pure bad luck. The collapse of the stock market in 1929 was due to a decade of unchecked and unsound business and economic practices. The economic
bubble of the 1920's spontaneously burst that October. Despite public perception, Hoover actually worked until the end of his term to resolve the economic crisis. He increased loans through Federal Reserve banks and tried to stimulate the economy through $19 million of government spending. These were bold steps compared to the laid back policies of the past decade. He also pushed through Congress the Reconstruction Finance Corporation in 1932 to infuse $2 billion into the economy.

The problem with Hoover's initiatives was that they simply were not enough. They also did not extend far beyond his political philosophy of hands-off government. He handicapped himself by not being able to break out of his belief in the cooperative state based on volunteerism. He simply believed that it was not the government's role to bail the public out in a crisis, but that they should rather rely on the private sector. Another debacle was his retaliation against the Bonus Army protestors into the capital. It was General MacArthur who exceeded his limits and used excessive force, but Hoover received the blame. His own demeanor and tendency towards melancholy did not inspire confidence among the American people, which was reflected in their complete lack of faith in the economy.

Herbert Hoover's administration is comparable to a Greek tragedy. In another time, he could have been an extremely effective president. However, he simply did not have the temperament to deal with the collapse of the economy and the prosperity of the previous decade that he had worked so hard to build. His uncharismatic and melancholy demeanor gave the public the impression that he neither understood nor cared about their plight, leading them to seek decisive leadership from another source: Franklin Roosevelt.

23) Calvin Coolidge 1923-1929 (Republican)

Calm and collected Calvin Coolidge inherited the presidency after the death of the popular and personable Warren Harding. His first order of business was to clean up Harding's posthumous scandals. Beginning with his humble swearing in at his father's Vermont farmhouse, Coolidge was the perfect portrayal of the serious, but honest, politician that was desperately needed to restore the image of the office. Though he regressed from the former, more active presidencies of Roosevelt and Wilson, this is exactly what the country wanted. He also lowered taxes twice, adding to the 20's boom. He signed two significant foreign policy initiatives. The Dawes Plan of 1924 reduced German war reparations payments and helped to
stabilize its economy. The Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 sought to declare war illegal as an instrument of national policy.

Coolidge firmly believed in the Republican view of limited government and was adamant in reducing government spending. Therefore bills that included raises for postal workers, support for farm prices to aid the ailing agricultural industry, and bonuses for veterans, which would alter haunt his successor Herbert Hoover. The rampant economic prosperity during his time in office was based on unsound business and stock market practices that went unchecked by any authority. Yet like Hoover after him, Coolidge believed that putting any sort of check on the economy would do more harm than good.

Despite the devastation that followed his presidency, Coolidge can hardly be held solely accountable. He simply went along with the policies the rest of the country promoted and wanted. No one imagined that the raging economic prosperity could end. He was probably the luckiest man in 1929 for having decided not to run for reelection, which he probably would have won. Though his record is not the most stunning, Coolidge provided the calm, cooling confidence that the American people wanted.

24) Grover Cleveland 1885-1889, 1893-1897 (Democrat)

Grover Cleveland’s political policy was to keep bad things from happening, rather than making beneficial things take place. He used his veto power to block bills that he thought would unnecessarily drain the treasury, such as pensions for soldiers who did not actually fight in the Civil War or deserted. He also terminated the Tenure of Office Act, which had harassed presidents since its passing.

Cleveland used his veto power 414 times. Many of these were to block legislation that gave trivial amounts away. He wanted to end this system of government paternalism, making him extremely unpopular among workers. Both of his terms saw serious discord among labor, with numerous strikes and riots. His second term was dominated by the economic Panic of 1893, for which he expressed little sympathy. He called in Congress to repeal the Sherman Silver Purchase Act in order to offset a run on the U.S. Treasury, but that did little other than furthering the debate between gold and silver supporters.

Though Grover Cleveland did not believe in proactive presidential initiatives, his negative leadership turned out to be the most influential of all the presidents of the latter half of
the nineteenth century. He believed that the people should support the government, not vice versa. However, this presented problems during his terms as the country was reacting to rapid industrialization and economic stability. The government at that time provided no social safety net, and many were beginning to believe that the government should be more protective of their rights.

25) William Howard Taft 1909-1913 (Republican)

Being the handpicked successor to the popular Theodore Roosevelt easily won amiable William Taft the election. One of his more successful arenas was foreign policy, where he promoted “Dollar Diplomacy,” the use of economic influence instead of military. In domestic affairs, he actually did more than his predecessor in regulating monopolies and busting trusts. He even filed an antitrust suit against U.S. Steel whose formation had been approved by Roosevelt.

The downfall of Taft’s term can be attributed mainly to the personality differences between he and Roosevelt. Roosevelt had been a more proactive leader, while Taft’s style was passive. His leadership capabilities turned out to be rather weak and he delegated much responsibility. He feared having too much power would lead to the emergence of an “imperial presidency.” Finally, Taft’s dream and ambition had been to become a Supreme Court justice, not president, and his political ideologies were aligned within that schema.

Despite shortcomings in his personality, Taft was a likable politician more akin to the passive leaders of the nineteenth century. Bridging the active presidencies of Roosevelt and Wilson, Taft’s political contributions are often unfairly cast aside in favor of amusing stories regarding his weight.

26) Ronald Reagan 1981-1989 (Republican)

After the tense years of Nixon, Ford, and Carter, Ronald Reagan gave the American people a renewed sense of calm and confidence. A former actor, he was a brilliant orator. Ironically, his most bizarre proposal probably led to his greatest moment. With his proposal of the ludicrous-sounding strategic Defense Initiative, nicknamed “Star Wars,” the Soviet Union was intimidated and reinforced its belief that it could no longer compete with the U.S., which led to the ultimate end of the Cold War. However, Reagan did not end the Cold War. He was
simply at the right place at the right time. The cold War’s end was due to a long succession of events that wore down the power of the Soviet Union.

Reagan’s policies were often contradictory. He lowered taxes to help the economy while simultaneously building up the military. During his time in office the national debt rose from $900 billion to $2.7 trillion. His policy of “Reaganomics” led to an economic boom during his two terms, but would create a deficit in the early nineties that would lead to the political downfall and his successor George H. Bush. He had a lax management style that deferred responsibilities to his subordinates. This led to controversy with the Iran-Contra Affair. He denied authorizing it but still took responsibility. His lax managing made it very plausible that he had no idea what was going on, though that possibility is unsettling in of itself.

Reagan was an ideologue whose abilities allowed him to inspire the confidence and hope of Americans after years of political gloom. He left office extremely popular, but time has worn away the façade of prosperity to see that much went neglected by Reagan during his presidency, notably his lack of sustainable economics and his inaction during the AIDS panic. Reagan’s ultimate legacy was that he inspired hop in Americans and restored confidence.

27) Gerald Ford 1974-1977 (Republican)

Gerald Ford’s brief term in office began with the resignation of Richard Nixon. After the long and bitter Watergate scandal, the American people welcomed the honest and amiable Ford who proclaimed the end of America’s “long national nightmare.” This honeymoon period ended when Ford pardoned Nixon on September 8th. Though the ethics of the decision are debatable, politically it was a smart move that effectively ended the discussion about Watergate and spared the country from a long and public trial. With the scandal behind him, Ford was better able to govern.

Ford inherited a poor economy with rampant inflation and unemployment, which he stumbled in his efforts to fix. First, he raised taxes and cut spending, but then he went along with Democrats to lower taxes. In March 1975, he made the mistake of going on vacation while the country was still suffering hard times and South Vietnam was collapsing. Ford later asked Congress for more aid to send to Vietnam, but was refused. Finally, on April 19, 1975 Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese, a humiliating end to an extremely unpopular war.
Gerald Ford served at an interesting time in United States history. The scandals of Richard Nixon and the bitter defeat of the Vietnam War left many wanting a change in politics. Within the Republican Party many were moving to the right and rallying behind more conservative figures like Ronald Reagan. This proved disastrous for Ford’s reelection hopes considering his more moderate views and the even more liberal beliefs of his wife, Betty. His reputation also suffered from being caught numerous times on camera tripping or falling down, giving off a klutzy image. Yet most of the events surrounding his presidency were out of Ford’s control. He inherited a bruised office and the leadership of a bitter and changing nation. Yet his honest appeal did help give some semblance of recovered decency to the presidency.

28) John Quincy Adams 1825-1829 (Democratic-Republican)

Like his presidential father, John Quincy Adams had the pedigree and experience to be a great president. He envisioned an unprecedented agenda for internal improvements to the country, such as building roads, canals, and universities. He believed an educated and enlightened America would solidify the success of its future. He sought to display his nonpartisanship by keeping President Monroe’s appointees rather than replacing them with his own. Adams’s major downfall was that he was the last of the scholarly, gentry-class politicians that had dominated the government since its establishment. Though many were alter undertaken, his ideas to improve the American infrastructure met with stiff resistance. The country was still under the Jeffersonian belief of limited government, and his administration constantly battled the nation’s indifference. Many believed that such changes should originate from the people. Adams’ devotion to maintaining nonpartisanship hurt his political standing when he failed to rally enough supporters around him. His term was also hurt by the controversy surrounding his election. Andrew Jackson berated Adams throughout his presidency over the supposed “corrupt bargain” made with fellow candidate Henry Clay. Jackson formed the Democratic Party as a vehicle to defeat Adams in the 1928 election.

John Quincy Adams was certainly deserving of the presidency, but unfortunately he was a man simultaneously stuck in the past and ahead of his time. He maintained the more elitist image of politicians past but envisioned the government making changes and improvements that seemed impolitic and unachievable to his contemporaries. Adams believed his idealistic integrity was enough to maintain political support, rather than catering to the masses. Yet
appealing to the population at large was exactly what would win his rival Andrew Jackson the 1828 election. His solitary term as president would prove to be the low point of Adams’ impressive career.

**29) Chester Arthur 1881-1885 (Republican)**

Chester Arthur succeeded the assassinated James Garfield. A product of the corrupt political machine run by Senator Conkling, Arthur made a surprising break with the spoils system and became a reformer. He signed the Pendleton Act of 1883, which curbed the spoils system and establishes a civil service system based on competitive exams. He also supported the modernization of the navy and foreign policy initiatives to expand American trade. He vetoed the Chinese Exclusion Act forced Congress to adjust its ban on Chinese immigration from twenty to ten years.

The only real negative that can be attributed to Arthur’s presidency was his background of political corruption and then the uninteresting normalcy of his term. He made no real political initiatives, but considering the weak position of the presidency at that time any initiatives probably would not have fared well anyway.

Arthur’s presidency was not overwhelmingly eventful. Yet, as the fourth vice president to succeed a president who died in office, he broke with tradition by serving a stable and progressive term that kept with the policies of his elected predecessor. The more subdued position of the presidency during the late nineteenth century suited Arthur, who saw the position as a profession, not a calling.


Richard Nixon’s name was dragged down by the Watergate Scandal of his second term, which unfortunately buried the more positive deeds of his first. The Family Assistance Plan was meant to replace welfare with a federally guaranteed minimum income, but the Democrat-controlled Congress rejected it. Nixon’s first term also saw the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, which he neither initiated nor opposed. He supported legislation authorizing the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, introduced regulations that created the first affirmative action programs, and supported a significant expansion of the food stamp program. The draft was replaced with the volunteer army. “Nixonomics” worked with companies to keep
prices down and employment up, and Nixon also took the country off the gold standard. In 1972, he made his famous trip to communist China.

Despite the more liberal actions of his presidency, Nixon was critical of Johnson’s War on Poverty and did away with the Office of Economic Opportunity that coordinated it. He imposed budget cuts that began the decline of the space program. “Nixonomics” did little to put off the 1973 economic recession, the most severe one since the Great Depression. War in Vietnam did not end immediately as he had promised. He instead escalated the war into Cambodia and Laos in order to cut off the supply lines of North Vietnam. Stalemate ensued until January 1973 when an agreement was reached with Hanoi. In the election of 1972, Nixon left the running of the campaign to his committee to Reelect the President, members of which broke into the offices of the DNC in the Watergate Building. Though its possible he had no knowledge of the actual break-in, he was caught on tape conspiring to cover it up. By resigning and avoiding impeachment, he was entitled to an annual $63,000 pension.

Many of Nixon’s faults can be attributed to quirks in his personality. He was extremely paranoid, making lists of his enemies and then using the presidency to get back at them and reward his friends. He was obsessed with power, with he and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger bypassing the Secretaries of State and Defense in dealing with foreign policy. His defensive nature perpetuated the Watergate Scandal; not only losing him the presidency, but also having his good works before and after eclipsed by disgrace.

31) John Tyler 1841-1845 (Whig)

The major significance of John Tyler’s presidency was that he was the first vice president to succeed a president who had died in office. Yet the Constitution was vague on whether he would take over the office completely or simply remain vice president. Tyler settled the issue with no hesitation by assuming all powers of the presidency. This prevented any crisis that may have come from the lack of a functioning executive and set the precedent for future succeeding vice presidents. He refused to answer to Harrison’s Cabinet. He held onto Daniel Webster long enough for the Webster-Ashburton Canadian Border Treaty, after which Webster resigned. Tyler, having freer reign in foreign policy, managed through legislative maneuvering to annex Texas.
Tyler had been added as William Henry Harrison’s running mate to appeal to southern Democrats, out of which the Whig party had emerged. The problem with the Whig party was that they were unified by what they were not, Jacksonians, and not by what they were, thereby encompassing a wide range of opinions within the party. So when Tyler defied the party by vetoing two of its laws, they disassociated themselves from him. Tyler defied calls for his resignation and adopted a new Democratic policy that resulted in stalemate between him and Congress. His annexation of Texas only furthered the debate over expanding slavery, showed his slaveholding sympathies, and led to war with Mexico.

John Tyler’s independent nature cannot be denied. He averted crisis and set the precedent for future succeeding vice presidents by quickly assuming all powers of the presidency. He did not allow himself to be intimidated by cabinet members or even his own party. Yet his defiance left him without political backing, which almost effectively ended his legislative initiatives. Even his major contribution, the annexation of Texas, would increase sectional divides and lead to war.

32) Ulysses S. Grant 1869-1877 (Republican)

When General Grant entered the presidency, Civil War issues seemed to be taken care of, with most of the southern states readmitted into the union with Republican state governments. His was the first presidential election in which southern blacks could vote. In 1871, Grant broke with the liberal-Republicans that supported more pro-southern policies and urged Congress to pass legislation combating the Ku Klux Klan. Financially, he backed the plan for slow reduction of paper currency and resisted pressure to increase the money supply in the depression of 1874. He also provided a sense of calm during the election of 1876 allowing for the peaceful transition to the administration of Rutherford B. Hayes.

Despite high hopes for him, Grant ultimately disappointed. Instead of filling appointments with competent experts, he appointed friends, relatives, and army peers. He also took no initiative to introduce policies of his own, allowing all legislative initiatives to come from Congress. His hands-off policy led to corruption among his subordinates and a lack of unity among the Republicans. Matters in the south deteriorated as ex-Confederates rebelled against their new Republican state governments.
As a general, Grant was applauded as an effective administrator who could depend on the integrity of his subordinates. This trait was all but lost during his presidency. His hands-off tactics regarding national policy allowed for growing tensions in the South and within the Republican Party to erupt.

33) Warren G. Harding 1921-1923 (Republican)

Warren Harding assumed the presidency following the wartime second term of Woodrow Wilson. Between the war and Wilson’s campaigning for the League of Nations, Harding promised Americans a return to the “normalcy” of more peaceful times. He was confident, personable, and attractive; basically everything Wilson was not at the time. His cabinet was filled with brilliant figures, such as Charles Evans Hughes and Herbert Hoover, who worked diligently to bring about the economic prosperity Americans would enjoy for the rest of the decade. He backed Hughes’ plan for international naval disarmament at the Washington Naval Conference of 1921-22. He reduced taxes and persuaded Congress to adopt unified federal budget making. He also pardoned socialist leader Eugene Debs who many believed was wrongly imprisoned under the 1917 Espionage Act.

Despite his immense popularity with the people, some perceived Harding as little more than a figure head and a tool for the Republican Party. Though this statement may not be completely accurate, he did fill government positions with friends and cronies. These appointments would lead to the posthumous derailing of his political reputation with the Teapot Dome scandal. His personal liaisons with his mistress also became known, leading to theories about his wife’s involvement with his untimely death in 1923.

Though Harding’s presidency was certainly not a failure, it seems that he was not intellectually up to the job of running postwar America. He instead left the bulk of this work to his subordinates, with mixed results. Though his personal record is not stunning, he did give the American people the sense that the country was returning back to normal and he restored the prestige of the presidency that was lost during Wilson’s final years.

34) Millard Fillmore 1850-1853 (Whig)

Millard Fillmore’s presidency was caught up in the sectional conflicts between the Northern and Southern states in the first half of the nineteenth century. The year 1850 was
particularly volatile and could have seen the beginning of the Civil War right then. Fillmore, however, did take some steps to prevent this. When Texas threatened to invade New Mexico over territorial conflict, Fillmore sent in federal troops. He also strengthened forts in North and South Carolina when he learned South Carolinians were planning to seize federal forts in Charleston. The main issue of his presidency was his signing of the Compromise of 1850 into law. He believed that this would generally please everyone and maintain a peaceful status quo.

Like his successors, Pierce and Buchanan, President Fillmore was trapped in the brooking sectional crisis that was spiraling out of control. Though he opposed it, he felt the Compromise of 1850 would help the situation it was panned from both sides of the conflict. Northerners in particular opposed the included Fugitive Slave Law.

Like many nineteenth century presidents, Millard Fillmore was more inactive and believed Congress should dictate policy while the President saw that the Constitution was upheld. His Constitutional loyalty was the main reason why he signed the Compromise of 1850 into law. Though the shortcomings of the Compromise are often stressed, there were gains made. California was admitted as a free state, Utah and New Mexico could decide on the issue themselves, and the slave trade was banned in the District of Columbia. Though he made no permanent advances to remedy the sectional crisis, Fillmore did do what was within his perceived power to keep the growing tensions at bay.

35) Martin Van Buren 1837-1841 (Democrat)

Martin Van Buren can be described at the first Herbert Hoover. His pre-presidency record was impressive, having served as secretary of state then vice president under Andrew Jackson. Yet his presidency was dominated by the Panics of 1837 and 1839, marking the first time any president had to deal with an economic crisis on that level.

With the increasing influence of the Whig party, Van Buren did not have the same influence over the legislative that Jackson enjoyed. To keep the Democrats together he adopted a pro-southern position on slavery, having never viewed it as a moral issue. He threatened to veto any legislation that threatened slavery where it already existed. He also continued Jackson’s hard-line policy towards Native Americans. The economic panics were mostly the result of the economic policies of Andrew Jackson. Yet like Hoover in the 1920’s, Van Buren limited his ability to deal with the crisis with his own political policies. His version of Hoover’s
Bonus Army fiasco was his decision to redecorate the White House, reflecting a cold image on the American people.

Though the economic crises of his presidency were not his fault, the times called for a leader stronger than Van Buren could be. He came into the presidency as Jackson’s handpicked successor and felt very much deserving of the office. Yet he had no political agenda of his own, and his term paled in comparison to the active years of Jackson.

36) Benjamin Harrison 1889-1893 (Republican)

Benjamin Harrison’s ascent to the office was largely due to his capabilities as a public speaker. Yet he possessed an indifferent demeanor and had no real political agenda, taking direction from others of his party. He signed into law the McKinley Tariff, which raised tariff prices to the highest ever. This drastically decreased foreign imports, though instead of boosting all American businesses it led to monopolies and increased prices. His support of the 1890 Sherman Silver Purchase Act required the government to buy nearly all the silver produced by U.S. mines, which would lead to the Panic of 1893 and the act’s repeal by President Cleveland.

Harrison’s only personal legislative initiative was to increase pensions for his fellow war veterans, though this also had an adverse effect when older veterans became targets for young female opportunists. The other major law he signed was the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890. Though Harrison’s Justice Department failed to enforce the act, it would be used later by Theodore Roosevelt as a trust busting tool. Benjamin Harrison’s pitiful legacy is almost equal to that of his grandfather, William Henry Harrison, who died in office only weeks after his inauguration. Basically a pawn of his party, he had no personal political ambitions and had a cold, stoic demeanor that his public image was never able to recover from.

37) Franklin Pierce 1853-1857 (Democrat)

Pierce’s presidency was caught up in a wave of enthusiasm for expansion. Though this resulted in the successful Gadsden Purchase, there was a public debacle over the Ostend Manifesto that threatened Spain if it refused to sell Cuba. The dominating factor of Pierce’s term was the “Kansas Question.” The passage of Stephen Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Act, for which Pierce was bullied by Douglas to support, reopened the issue of slavery in the two territories by leaving it up to local popular sovereignty. Violence broke out as settlers from both sides of the
issue poured into the territories to dishonestly sway the vote. Pierce refused to send federal aid as rival governments were set up in Kansas and violence continued.

Franklin Pierce was unfit and unprepared to deal with the increasingly hostile slavery debate. His temperament was to be accommodating to all, but this allowed him to be pushed around by more aggressive figures. His reluctance to act made “Bleeding Kansas” another major issue of resentment in the struggle over slavery.

38) Andrew Johnson 1865-1869 (Democrat-Union)

Andrew Johnson was arguably one of the least effective presidents. A Democrat from Tennessee, he was put on the Republican ticket to make Abraham Lincoln more appealing to Southerners. This created an obvious problem when he unexpectedly came into office, and it also seriously influenced his policy towards reconstruction of the South following the Civil War. He favored the quick acceptance of the Confederate states back into the Union. While doing so he let other concessions slide, such as institutionalized fair treatment of the newly freed slaves. He was a racist, believing that blacks had no part to play in the public sphere and thus did nothing to protect their interests in southern state governments. This would effect race relations in the United States for years to come.

Angered by Johnson’s actions, Congress set him up to have him impeached for violation of the Tenure of Office Act. The charges were flimsy and politically motivated, and Johnson was acquitted by a one-vote margin. Thus one positive development of Johnson’s presidency was that for the next 130 years no president was impeached merely on token grounds.

Andrew Johnson let his personal prejudice and beliefs influence southern reconstruction, a plan for which Lincoln never publicly offered. His racist views kept freed blacks from being fully integrated into southern society and set a precedent of civil rights infringement. He unraveled the executive leadership demonstrated by Lincoln and set a precedent for weaker executives and amore influential and powerful Congress.

39) James Buchanan 1857-1861 (Democrat)

Buchanan’s presidential legacy is plagued with the break-up of the Union. A self-defined moderate, he opposed the anti-slavery movement as extremism. He relied mainly on the advice of his southern friends and family, oblivious to the need for opposing views. He supported the
pro-slavery Kansas constitution and interfered in the 1857 Dred Scott case. He did nothing in reaction to the secession of South Carolina, or even in preventing it. Upon the election of his successor, Abraham Lincoln, Buchanan capitalized on his “lame duck” status and took no action against the secession of the rest of the South and the crumbling of the Union.

The only real positive result of Buchanan’s presidency was his animosity towards fellow Democrat Stephen Douglas, which basically split the party in two. When Buchanan was passed over for the nomination in the 1860 election, the party nominated two candidates. The split of the Democratic vote allowed for the election of Abraham Lincoln.
The War Heroes
George Washington William H. Harrison
Ulysses S. Grant Dwight D. Eisenhower

The Professional Politician
Martin Van Buren James Buchanan
Abraham Lincoln Franklin D. Roosevelt
Lyndon B. Johnson

Standing Alone
John Adams Zachary Taylor
Rutherford B. Hayes Jimmy Carter

Pushed into the Spotlight
John Tyler Millard Fillmore
Andrew Johnson Chester Arthur
Gerald Ford

The “American” Dream
Thomas Jefferson James Monroe
Calvin Coolidge Ronald Reagan

The World Stage
William McKinley Woodrow Wilson
Harry S. Truman George H.W. Bush

Hail to the Chief
Andrew Jackson Grover Cleveland
Theodore Roosevelt Richard Nixon

Keeping the Balance
James Madison James K. Polk
William Howard Taft

The Idealists
John Quincy Adams Herbert Hoover
John F. Kennedy Bill Clinton

The Unknown President
Franklin Pierce James Garfield
Benjamin Harrison Warren G. Harding
The War Heroes

Since the country's inception, military leaders have been looked upon as figures that represented the best of what America had to offer. Independent, brave, and disciplined, military war heroes were held up as the ideal leaders. In all, Americans have elected twelve generals to the presidency. More than one third of all presidents have been war heroes. Four of them in particular were elected specifically for their military valor and seeming ability to rise above the influence of politics.

The lasting legacy of war heroes in American politics began with the ascension of the United States' greatest war hero, General George Washington, into the presidency. The hero of the War for Independence, General Washington had a clear record of putting the needs of his army and the country above any personal gain. As the new Constitution was being drafted, the executive branch was designed with Washington in mind as its first head. He was the "model of restraint," a perfect candidate for a new democracy wary of giving any individual too much power.

Following Washington's two terms, party politics emerged with a vengeance. Military men became political commodities for the parties they chose to align with, and thus were major influences on public opinion. The election of General William Henry Harrison in 1841 was significant because he was a member of the Whigs, the political party formed solely to oppose the first general president elected after Washington, Andrew Jackson. Unlike Jackson, Harrison's image was deliberately molded to appeal to public opinion. His campaign emphasized both his military career, including his famous battle at Tippecanoe, and his life as a frontiersman. How this image would translate to the presidency will never be known, due to his death one month after his inauguration. His election, however, was part of a larger trend

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3 George Washington, Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, Zachary Taylor, Franklin Pierce, Andrew Johnson, Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James Garfield, Chester Arthur, Benjamin Harrison, and Dwight Eisenhower.
5 Kunhardt, 4.
electoral trend. Between 1824 and 1856, every presidential election but one had a military hero as a candidate. This is due mostly to the lack of political enemies among military men, their contrast to often-distrustful career politicians, and how they seemed to “belong to the entire country.”

The next war hero elected to the high office was Ulysses S. Grant. Aside from Lincoln, he was the great hero of the Civil War to Northerners. After a bungling succession of incompetent generals, Grant was the primary commander able to bring the war to a conclusion due to his aggressiveness and military foresight. He was drawn to the presidency following Andrew Johnson’s unsuccessful time in the office. However, Grant came to be known as the model of the military president whose talents on the field could not transfer to politics with any real success. Some credit this to his inexperience and lack of focus, a cause of the corruption among his appointees, while others could point to bad timing—the Panic of 1873. Despite Grant’s lack of success, Republican military men dominated the presidency for the rest of the century, with the exception of Democrat Grover Cleveland who never served.

The rise of a prominent general to the presidency occurred again in 1952 with the election of Dwight D. Eisenhower. He was the hero of World War II, commander of the Allied Forces. As noted by Kunhardt, of all the presidents with military backgrounds, Eisenhower was the most like George Washington. He was a centrist who appeared to be above politics. In fact, early on few knew whether or not he was a Democrat or a Republican. Also similar to Washington was Eisenhower’s ability to hold onto his popularity both during and after his presidency.

Though war heroes have had a prominent influence on American presidential politics, their measure of effectiveness as been somewhat mixed. Military valor often does not guarantee success in the Oval Office. There is also the unusual fact that in the three major military conflicts in American history, the Civil War and the two World Wars, Americans have elected men with little to no military experience. Yet military experience has been a major factor in past presidencies, and still plays a major role today. With the increase of American involvements overseas, the previous military and/or foreign experience of presidential candidates

7 Kunhardt, 4.
8 Kunhardt, 5.
takes on a whole new significance. For a country born out of revolution, war heroes will always hold a special place in American society and politics.

**The Professional Politician**

The initial holders of the presidency all belonged to the group of "Founding Fathers" that had emerged from civilian backgrounds to help to form the new American government. By definition, they all considered their political careers to be second to their original occupations. However, in the following generation, with the settled establishment of the American government, individuals were able to make politicians into a professional vocation.¹⁰

The first career politician to enter the presidency was Martin Van Buren, elected in 1836. Before then he had served an impressive career as a state senator, state attorney general, a U.S. senator, governor, secretary of state, and vice president.¹¹ He had been a major developer of the new Democratic Party that rallied behind Andrew Jackson. More than qualified for the position, Van Buren’s presidency faced two major setbacks. The first was that he had to succeed Andrew Jackson, one of the country’s most powerful and dominating personalities ever to hold the office. The most notable drawback to his presidency was bad timing. Due mostly to the economic antics of his predecessor, Van Buren had to face the country’s first major economic depression. On top of that, he supported the then popular philosophy that government had no place in influencing the economy. Political savvy was not enough to overcome the crisis that would forever mar his political and historical reputation.

The next prominent career politician elected to the presidency was James Buchanan in 1856. Like Van Buren, he also had an impressive political resumé as a Pennsylvania state representative, U.S. representative, U.S. senator, and secretary of state under James K. Polk. Also like Van Buren, Buchanan faced the unavoidability of horrible political timing. Buchanan’s years in office saw the *Dred Scott* case, the economic panic of 1857, and the formation of the Confederate States of America. His political will was not strong enough to face the challenge of secession.¹²

Following the disaster of Buchanan’s administration, Abraham Lincoln faced the near impossible challenge of Civil War. Though his political reputation was not as extravagant as

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¹⁰ Kunhardt, 88.
¹¹ Taranto, 48. Served as state senator et al. for New York and secretary of state and vice president under Andrew Jackson.
¹² Kunhardt, 88.
some of his predecessors, Lincoln was more effectively able to use his political savvy to the best possible use.\textsuperscript{13} He kept the running of the first months of the war under his control by not calling in a special session of Congress when he took office. He filled his cabinet with notable figures such as General Winfield Scott and William Seward. He was also the first president to personally contact members of Congress to try and persuade them to his views.\textsuperscript{14} He used the practice of patronage to secure his nomination for reelection. His overall lack of experience and political flexibility granted him the ability to oversee and win the ultimate national crisis.

Following Lincoln’s administration, career politicians seemed to take a dive in terms of political power and moral integrity. The trend began to break with the election of Theodore Roosevelt, and it officially ended with the election of his cousin Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Franklin followed his cousin’s political career up to his contraction of polio in 1920.\textsuperscript{15} However, he was able to use his political savvy to overcome the disease that should have been the end of his career. He used elaborate staging, maneuvering, and an amiable relationship with the press to hide the fact that he could not use his legs. Simultaneously, he expanded the size and influence of the federal government to not only deal with the devastation of the Great Depression, but also to take the opportunity to institute social reform. He was ever wary, however, of any political vulnerability. He formed policies based both on what he could get away with politically and publicly.

The other notable career politician elected to the presidency was Lyndon B. Johnson. Described as the “quintessential legislative insider,” he was effectively able to use his political experience and personal powers of persuasion to aid his initiatives.\textsuperscript{16} His presidency can be noted as the culmination of the professional politician in the office. Ever since his administration the growth of television’s influence has forced presidents to rely less on political negotiation and more on gaining public support for their initiatives.

Standing Alone

With the development of the American political party system, the office of the presidency was forced to turn away from the ideal nonpartisan executive that the framers had designed. However, there have been notable leaders who have defied expectations and political urgings,

\textsuperscript{13} Taranto, 80. Served as an Illinois state representative and U.S. representative.
\textsuperscript{14} Kunhardt, 88.
\textsuperscript{15} Taranto, 155. Served as New York state senator, governor, assistant secretary of the navy.
\textsuperscript{16} Kunhardt, 89.
often to mixed results. The first such president was John Adams, elected in 1796. As one of the “Founding Fathers,” Adams believed in the importance of maintaining a politically independent executive. Though he was nominally a member of the Federalist Party, he did not hesitate to break from the party line in order to do what was best for the country. By breaking with the Federalists and facing near mutiny from Democratic-Republicans in his own administration, Adams was left on his own. Though this meant an end to his presidential career, he was better able to put the needs of the country above the bickering and prejudices of the hostile political parties.

The next notable president who asserted his independence was Zachary Taylor. Elected as a war hero candidate, expectations for his individual abilities were low and it was assumed he would follow the party line of the Whigs. Though he had made a campaign promise not to veto the famed Wilmot Proviso if it passed, he did enact a plan to bring in California and New Mexico as free states before Congress could act. His plan did not work out, but he was able to maintain the political integrity of Southern Whigs for a while longer. His proactive efforts against slavery’s expansion were the last before the country’s sectional crisis consumed the office of the presidency.

A line of relatively weak presidents followed until the election of Abraham Lincoln, and the administration of his posthumous successor Andrew Johnson. Weaker presidents followed as Congress regained its political dominance against the notion of an independent executive. Independence was regained with the election of Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876. He pursued significant civil service reform and stood up to Congress on several issues including unpopular pardons and vetoing popular legislation that had racist legislative riders attached.

In the twentieth century, the executive office became more of an independent political entity as the size of the White House influence and bureaucracy grew. The role of the president was becoming increasingly separate from traditional political influence. This culminated with the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976. He was a true Washington outsider, having served as a

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17 Taranto, 65-66. The Wilmot Proviso proposed a slavery ban in any territory gained in the Mexican War. It became a political litmus test for politicians regarding their stance on slavery expansion.
18 Kunhardt, 130.
19 Taranto, 102-103.
20 Kunhardt, 131.
Georgia state senator and governor. Following the scandals of Nixon and the non-entity of Ford, Carter’s rhetoric of cleaning up politics appealed to voters. However, his outsider status came at a cost. He was unable to play the necessary political games to enact productive policies. He was also held back by economic downturn and a human rights policy ahead of its time. He was also unable to make full use of the media as a method to win over public support.

At its best, independence in a president brings significant accomplishments and nonpartisanship. At its worst, a president is left politically isolated and, therefore, ineffective. Americans want strong, self-thinking leaders, but not at the price of losing all political clout.

**Pushed into the Spotlight**

According to the notes of James Madison from the 1787 Constitutional Convention, upon the sudden death of a president there was no intention for the vice president to assume presidential powers in full.\(^{21}\) He was to serve as a temporary fill-in until a special election could be held to choose a successor. However, due to ambiguous language in the final draft of the Constitution, this intention was not made clear. Starting with John Tyler, nine vice presidents have succeeded to the high office due to death or resignation.\(^{22}\) The record of success in their impromptu administrations has been mixed, with five unable to win their own terms afterwards.

John Tyler is the most notable among the five because he was the first vice president ever to succeed a sitting president. Though the constitutionality of his new role was vague, he took it upon himself to assume full presidential powers. His actions set a precedent that has lasted to this day. However, his time in office was difficult. Like most vice presidents, he was put on the ticket for sectional balance. Therefore he found himself ideologically at odds with people within Harrison’s administration and the leaders of the Whig Party. Three other succeeding vice presidents faced the same problem. Millard Fillmore and Chester Arthur were put on their respective tickets because they represented Northern interests, while Andrew Johnson was paired with Abraham Lincoln because he was a Southern Democrat.\(^{23}\)

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\(^{21}\) Kunhardt, 207.

\(^{22}\) John Tyler—death of William Henry Harrison; Millard Fillmore—death of Zachary Taylor; Andrew Johnson—assassination of Abraham Lincoln; Chester Arthur—assassination of James Garfield; Theodore Roosevelt—assassination of William McKinley; Calvin Coolidge—death of Warren Harding; Harry Truman—death of Franklin Roosevelt; Lyndon Johnson—assassination of John Kennedy; Gerald Ford—resignation of Richard Nixon.

\(^{23}\) Kunhardt, 208.
However, when Theodore Roosevelt took over McKinley’s term, he was the start of a trend of stronger, more qualified vice presidents who were able to not only successfully finish out their terms, but would go on to win one of their own. The pattern ended with Gerald Ford. Ford, more than anything, was a victim of a bad political situation that would have hindered anyone in his place. He faced not only the aftermath of the Nixon Watergate scandal, but also the demoralizing ending to the Vietnam War and the worst economic downturn since the post-WWII period. Also, he had only replaced former vice president Spiro T. Agnew eight months before, making him the first president never to have been elected president or vice president. His lack of a political base in Washington plus the deteriorating political environment left Ford in a political quagmire that he was unable to overcome.

The “American” Dream

Ever since the country’s inception, American citizens have continually worked to define what is truly “American” and what is the proper path that the country should take. While a proper answer may never be found to that question, it has not stopped politicians and presidents from pursuing their own American vision.

The primary presidential former of the popular “American” vision was Thomas Jefferson. Since his drafting of the Declaration of Independence, he had been working to bring his vision of the ideal America to life. He criticized the Federalists who expanded executive power, kept a standing army, and incurred on civil liberties during times of crisis. His vision was based on a complete faith in “the people” and their ability to make their own destiny. His ideal was a rural America, where farmers were the ideal citizens and urbanites played only a minor role. He promoted enlightened individualism and self-government built around a population of small property owners, which was in sharp contrast to the monarchial states with hordes of homeless subjects. However, Jefferson’s vision was the penultimate eighteenth century ideal that would not last long after his generation was gone.

A follower of the Jeffersonian ideology was the fifth president, James Monroe. He had the supreme fortune of leading the country at a time when there was a lack of partisan strife, due mainly to the fact that there was no real opposition party, heralding the “Era of Good Feelings.”

24 Taranto, 183-184.
25 Kunhardt, 259.
26 Kunhardt, 260.
Yet this was also a time of transition. Monroe bridged the transition from Jeffersonian republicanism to the more Federalist stance later adopted by Jackson and Polk.\(^{27}\) He supported having a standing army and navy, but he also held to Jefferson’s strict interpretation of the Constitution. He therefore felt that the executive branch could have little interference in domestic affairs. This precedent made making internal improvements difficult for presidents down the line. Monroe’s presidency is also noted for the unofficial adoption of the Monroe Doctrine, giving the United States sole influence in the Western Hemisphere. This ideology became the basis for all of American foreign policy.

The Jeffersonian vision also lived on in the presidency of Calvin Coolidge. During the 1920’s, American politics adopted a more laissez-faire policy of limited government, epitomized by the Coolidge administration. Emphasis was given to the power of individuals and communities to shape and improve the country. Coolidge was able to bridge a divided Republican party by embracing traditional Republican values and adopting more progressive stances that drew back Republicans “of the Teddy Roosevelt variety.”\(^{28}\) The country experienced one of the greatest economic booms in its history, partly due to Coolidge’s leadership and vision of what constituted a true American society.

Another notable proponent of “American” values was Ronald Reagan. He romanticized the American past, specifically the visions of Jefferson and Coolidge.\(^{29}\) Yet he also went against some of their policies by building up the military, expanding the federal debt, and increasing foreign involvements. Reagan also promoted American optimism and belief in human nature. Following the sorrowful political confusion of the 1970’s, Reagan’s vision restored spirit to many.

**The World Stage**

As chief executive, the president is faced with both domestic and foreign duties. In this plurality, it is in the area of foreign policy that presidents have more freedom.\(^{30}\) However, for more than one hundred years, the United States had little involvement in foreign affairs. In 1885, although the United States had surpassed Great Britain in manufacturing, it was still not

\(^{27}\) Taranto, 35.  
\(^{28}\) Taranto, 147.  
\(^{29}\) Kunhardt, 261.  
\(^{30}\) Kunhardt, 303.
considered a major world power.\textsuperscript{31} Then in the late nineteenth century, America was caught up in the race for colonial expansion.

William McKinley focused on domestic affairs in his presidential campaign; however, the country's continued dispute with Spain over the independence of Cuba led to the Spanish-American War. With the United States' quick victory, he saw the opportunity to spread his vision of America as a force for good in the world.\textsuperscript{32} The U.S. gained control of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines with a $20 million payoff to Spain. Suddenly, the importance of the presidency was transformed as the authority of the office grew.

The next president to involve himself in foreign affairs on a major scale was Woodrow Wilson. As president during the First World War, Wilson took the opportunity to promote his idea of a new internationalism and a "new world order" headed by a League of Nations. His concepts, however, were ahead of his time and could not compete with the isolationist sentiment that settled over much of America following the end of the war. Many of his policies would be used later by Franklin Roosevelt in World War II, the conflict that once and for all secured the American president as a major world leader.

Roosevelt's successor, Harry Truman, continued the new role of the presidency in foreign affairs. It was left to him to officially end World War II, with the controversial decision of dropping the atomic bombs on Japan. In the ensuing years, the major foreign concern for Truman was the expansion of the Soviet Union and communism. He initiated the policy of "containment" that committed presidents to foreign involvements for years to come. The tensions of the Cold War put more prestige on the presidency because the commander in chief was the one who controlled the country's nuclear power. Other significant foreign policies initiated by Truman's administration were the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Point Four Program.\textsuperscript{33} Truman's presidency solidified the supremacy of the executive branch in foreign policy.

Following the Cold War era, the influence of the United Nations grew, and the presidency had to adapt. This was done under the administration of George H.W. Bush. Having served as the American ambassador to the U.N., he was able to take the relationship with the

\textsuperscript{31} Kunhardt, 304.
\textsuperscript{32} Taranto, 122.
\textsuperscript{33} Taranto, 161. The Point Four Program provided economic aid to underdeveloped countries.
organization seriously.\textsuperscript{34} He also worked to build numerous relations with foreign leaders, which permanently influenced presidential diplomacy. The country's involvement in the Gulf War was quick, clearly defined, and limited. His ever present pragmatism both aided foreign policy and kept in from going too far.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{Hail to the Chief}

From the nation's beginning, there has been wariness over the extent of presidential powers. There was an underlying fear of accidentally creating an American monarchy. However, a strong executive was needed, a lesson learned during the revolutionary war, which was run by a Congress suffering from a lack of central leadership.\textsuperscript{36} Beginning with John Adams, there has been a consistent power struggle between the executive and legislative branches.

The first president to drastically increase presidential power was Andrew Jackson. He fully believed that he had a mandate of the people to push his power to its potential limits. He used his forceful personality to get what he wanted from his subordinates and other governmental branches. He set the precedent of the spoils system in selecting political appointees. Most importantly, he instituted a vast new usage of his veto power, established the right of the president to interfere in the legislative process.\textsuperscript{37}

However, Jackson was followed by a succession of weak presidencies leading up to Abraham Lincoln, with the exception of James K. Polk. Following Lincoln's expansion of executive power, the dominance of Congress was once again reasserted. It was not until Grover Cleveland's two term that the presidency once again regained strength. Cleveland used his exemplary character and policy of hard work to address civil service reform.\textsuperscript{38} His scrupulousness allowed gave him to resolve to stand up to Congress against wasteful legislation.

Theodore Roosevelt was the president that reformed the presidency to fit the needs of the growing twentieth century nation. He regarded the office of the president to be in charge of national reform and addressing the true needs of the people. He expanded presidential parameters to fight corrupt businesses and trusts. He also continued the new foreign role of the

\textsuperscript{34} Kunhardt, 305.
\textsuperscript{35} Taranto, 201.
\textsuperscript{36} Kunhardt, 347.
\textsuperscript{37} Kunhardt, 348.
\textsuperscript{38} Taranto, 113.
presidency started by McKinley, notably with his mediation of the Russo-Japanese war. Roosevelt’s bold and aggressive personality, like Andrew Jackson, allowed him to push his limits. His main goal was to transform the allegiances of the people from local to national pride.

Following the presidential lull of the 1920’s, Franklin Roosevelt’s proactive presidency started a new trend of expanding executive power. World War II and the Cold War gave increasing power to the president in terms of national defense. It was during the Vietnam War where the power of the presidency would be pushed arguably too far. Lyndon Johnson started initiating secret policies regarding the conflict, and this was continued by his successor, Richard Nixon. In his efforts to shape a new world order, Nixon pushed his presidential control too far with his secret bombing of Cambodia and the attempted cover-up of the Watergate break in.

**Keeping the Balance**

The elaborate system of checks and balances was written into the Constitution out of fear of one governmental branch gaining too much power, particularly the presidency. Interestingly, the rise of party politics had a balance of its own. The promotion of partisanship created cooperation between the president and members of his party in Congress; conversely, the president’s main political base was separate from Congress, giving him more independence.

The president most willing to embrace the balance of powers was James Madison. This is primarily due to the fact he was the main writer of the Constitution, and thus designed the very system. His constitutional awareness kept him from being very forceful, examining his decisions from all possible angles and acting only when a clear consensus emerged. Such a policy could work in times of prosperity, but he was faced with the first major test of American stability, the War of 1812. His lack of military experience allowed War Hawks in Congress to overpower him, and the war became a disaster.

One president able to keep the balance between branches and his own party was James K. Polk, elected in 1844. Though he faced a divided Democratic Party, he addressed sectional concerns with “equal and exact justice.” He was able to bridge party gaps and pass through tariff reductions and the reestablishment of an independent Treasury. The main reason for his

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39 Kunhardt, 349.
40 Kunhardt, 348.
41 Taranto, 32.
42 Kunhardt, 398.
43 Taranto, 61.
successful one term was due in part to his ability to accomplish set goals and rise above the growing factionalism in the country. He was able to conduct the responsible duties of the presidency without succumbing to sectional prejudices.

The other major proponent of presidential balance was William Howard Taft. He came from a legal background and had hoped to be a Supreme Court justice. Therefore he had a significant commitment to legal and Constitutional limits. Though he was the hand-picked successor of Theodore Roosevelt, he personally felt that Roosevelt had taken his presidential liberties too far and that it was up to him to restore the balance. This conflicted not only with Roosevelt’s ideology, but also the progressive reform movement that prevailed at the time. The country was demanding change at a faster pace than Taft could handle, leading to his ultimate loss in the presidential election of 1912.

The process of checks and balances has kept presidential power relatively in line. Since 1968, for all but six years, the opposition party has held at least one house in Congress, offering protection from “governmental rashness.” Also helping to curb governmental power is the rising influence of the media, which has become an unofficial fourth branch of government. The constant surveillance on the government by the public through the media has primarily kept politicians in line.

The Idealists

There have been several presidents elected based on their idealism or the idealistic image they construct. The first among these was John Quincy Adams. Son of the second president, John Adams, he also had built up a remarkable political career and was equally deserving of the presidency. He was the last of the presidents to hold onto the high-minded nationalist vision of the George Washington generation. His plan for improving the American infrastructure was impressive, including building roads and canals, scientific expeditions, and a naval academy. However, his proposals were significantly ahead of his time. America was still the land of minimalist government. He also lost significant political backing due to the enemy he made in Andrew Jackson. Jackson’s accusations of Adams’ supposed “corrupt bargain” with Henry Clay kept Adams from achieving much of anything during his four years in office.

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44 He served as the Supreme Court chief justice from 1921-30.
45 Kunhardt, 399.
46 Taranto, 40.
47 Taranto, 42.
Another interesting idealistic president was Herbert Hoover. Hoover singularly represented the political policies of the 1920's. He served as Secretary of Commerce from 1921 to his election in 1928. He almost single handedly formed the hands-off policy of government in regards to business and the economy. He stressed the reliance on individuals and volunteerism to create reform and hold business accountable. And up until October of 1929, this policy seemed to be working. Yet volunteerism did not cover the economic malpractice going on behind the scenes that led to the inevitable burst of the prosperity bubble of the 1920’s. Hoover’s time in the White House marked the low point of his impressive career, as his political philosophies kept him from making the necessary changes to bring the country out of depression.

Another figure elected due to idealism was John F. Kennedy. Following the turmoil of World War II and the quiet prosperity of the 1950’s, Kennedy seemed to usher in the emergence of a new generation. His administration was labeled “Camelot” with him presiding as King Arthur. Kennedy was able to give off the feeling that America was moving in the right direction. The notable failures of his presidency, including the Bay of Pigs invasion and his philandering, were glossed over by his wholesome public image and by his untimely death in 1963.

Bill Clinton’s image was not the perfection of idealism. His appeal was that he was the first president elected after the official end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. His simple southern roots and youth detached him from that previous dark time in American politics, and the old men who had been at the helm. The economic boom of the 1990’s also boosted his administration’s image. Despite the flaws of his presidency, his undeniable personal appeal was able to restore his public image even in the face of political disaster at the end of his presidency.

The Unknown President

With the many men who have served in the nation’s highest office, it is inevitable that several of them will be lost on the public consciousness. Franklin Pierce was elected in 1852, amidst the country’s sectional crisis. The Democrats picked him because he was the only type who could win, a Northerner with Southern sympathies. Pierce’s term was riddled with bad luck, poor political timing, and numerous mistakes. Any small accomplishments made were lost

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48 Taranto, 73.
with his support of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and his enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, both of which aided the south.\textsuperscript{49}

Another presidential name lost to history is James Garfield. His anonymity can be mostly attributed to his early death months after taking office in 1881. The most notable thing about his presidency was that a remarkable eighty percent of the population voted in the election between him and Winfield Scott Hancock.\textsuperscript{50} There was also a vast display of public mourning over his death, seemingly more for what he was than what he accomplished.

Benjamin Harrison was the grandson of the war hero and president William Henry Harrison and served his term during the nation’s centennial in 1888. Yet his name is also often lost to history. This is mainly because of the notable achievements that occurred during his presidency, such as the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, he had little involvement with any.\textsuperscript{51} His also had a cold demeanor, which hindered his public image. More importantly, he was simply another in a long line of late nineteenth century presidents whose "gravely vacant and bewhiskered faces mixed, melted, swam together."\textsuperscript{52}

The other president lost to obscurity was Warren G. Harding. Harding assumed the office in 1921, the beginning of the period of post-war prosperity in the 1920’s. A notable feature of his presidency was his impressive cabinet, which included Charles Evan Hughes, Andrew Mellon, and future president Herbert Hoover. Other achievements of Harding’s laidback presidency are either obscured by the more interesting social culture of the 1920’s or the scandals that clouded his reputation following his death.

\textsuperscript{49} Taranto, 74. Coincidentally, Pierce’s best friend and secretary of war was Jefferson Davis.
\textsuperscript{50} Taranto, 105.
\textsuperscript{51} Taranto, 117.
\textsuperscript{52} Taranto, 105. Original quote came from novelist Thomas Wolfe.
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