

The Presidential Institution of the United States in Historical Context

By

David L. Wilson

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Numero Uno has long been a fascinating discussion topic for U.S. citizens'. The biggest super power, the number one recording artist, the best selling novelist, the highest grossing movie, the best dressed, the worst dressed, the number one football, soccer, or basketball team, the fastest human, the "World" Series, the Super Bowl--all vie for national attention. Modern survey research methods as demonstrated through numerous political and marketing polls testify to this American obsession today. Indeed, with the United States in the middle of a presidential campaign, not a day goes by without the results of various local, state, and national polls being widely discussed in the press and over coffee tables across the country. Contemporary journalists and political pundits, in fact, seem mesmerized by these polls almost to the exclusion of all else.

Historians and social scientists have not escaped this fascination with who is best, and by implication, worst. In 1948, historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. polled "55 experts" and published his presidential rankings in Life magazine,¹ using five categories, "Great," "Near Great," "Average," "Below Average," and "Failure." Presidents Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson ranked one through three and Presidents Ulysses S. Grant and Warren G. Harding ranked as the only failures. Schlesinger Sr. repeated his poll in 1962² with identical results at the top and bottom, adding Presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower to the list.

Sociologist Gary M. Maranell joined the ratings game in 1970,³ using "a standard social-psychological scaling procedure to secure scores for the Presidents" on seven different dimensions, including "General Prestige," "Strength of Action," "Presidential Activeness," "Presidents on Idealism or Practicality," "Flexibility," "Accomplishments of Their Administrations," and "Respondents' Amount of Information." Maranell sent his questionnaire to 1,065 historians, the group "most interested in American history," and received nearly 600 responses. The top and bottom Presidents in "General Prestige" mirrored Schlesinger's two polls.

Journalist Steve Neal, in essence, repeated the Schlesinger polls for the Chicago Tribune in 1982, asking "49 leading historians and political scholars" to rank order their ten best and ten worst presidents.⁴ The leading three Presidents were again identical. President Richard Nixon,

¹ Arthur Schlesinger Sr., "Historians Rate the Presidents," Life, 25 (November 1, 1948), p. 65-66, 68, 73-74.

² New York Times, July 29, 1962.

³ Gary M. Maranell, "The Evaluation of Presidents: An Extension of the Schlesinger Polls," Journal of American History, 57, No. 1 (June 1970), pp. 104-13.

⁴ Steve Neal, "Our Best and Worst Presidents," Chicago Tribune Magazine, Jan. 10, 1982, pp. 8-13, 15, 18.

however, replaced Grant as number two on the list of the worst U.S. Presidents, followed by Harding as the absolute worst. The following year, historians Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing published the results of an extensive survey of American historians, again with similar results.⁵ And the ratings game continues to this day.

Psychologists Steven J. Rubenzer, Thomas R. Faschinger, and Deniz S. Ones have recently completed an intriguing project, “The Personality and the Presidency,” in which they attempt to understand the role personality plays in presidential success and failure.⁶ They asked various experts to complete a 592-item questionnaire that extensively evaluated personality characteristics. They suggest that virtually all the 41 Presidents fit into one or more of eight categories: The Dominators, The Introverts, The Good Guys, The Innocents, The Actors, The Maintainers, The Philosophes, and The Extroverts. Harding and Grant are among the “Innocents,” while a few others fit into more than one category, Harding also being an “Actor,” for example.

In a presidential election year, it should be no surprise that scholars and other “experts” will again take the measure of our past national leaders. Next week, a conference entitled “The Leadership Difference: Rating the Presidents” will take place at Hofstra University in Hemstead, New York. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., one of the creators of the concept of the “imperial presidency,” is among the participants. Also next week, Steve Neal and others have organized a “Symposium on the Modern Presidency” to be held at the University of Illinois at Chicago. At the end of the conference, Neal, now with the Chicago Sun-Times, will release a new presidential survey to be published by his newspaper.

So, why am I here with you today and why all of this discussion about Presidential beauty polls? In the 1970s, I co-authored The Presidency of Warren G. Harding, and from 1974-1991 worked as an editor on The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant as well as editing Ulysses S. Grant: Essays and Documents in 1981. Spending so much of my professional life working on the careers of arguably our two worst Presidents makes me unique. There is no question that Warren G. Harding who died in office in his first term was an absolute failure as President for reasons too lengthy to go into here. Grant, on the other hand, who served two full terms probably deserves to be ranked higher than the absolute bottom, especially considering his first term. In fact, had Grant retired after one term, he would most likely be remembered as an average President. Sometimes we simply stay too long and Grant is a good example.

As a graduate student I had lengthy discussions with Gary Maranell about his poll, and as a professional historian actively participated in both of Neal’s polls as well as the Rubenzer study. One thing is clear: we have a fairly clear idea of who is best and why. The Presidency of the United States, the longest elective office that the world has known (excluding the Papacy), has evolved over time and reflects the growth and expansion of the country from the 18th-21st centuries.

⁵ Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing, “The Presidential Performance Study: A Progress Report,” Journal of American History, 70, No. 4 (1983), pp. 535-55.

⁶ Steven J. Rubenzer, Thomas R. Faschingbauer, and Deniz S. Ones, “Assessing the U.S. Presidents Using the Revised NEO Personality Inventory,” (Unpublished paper). The authors have completed a book-length manuscript with extensive analysis.

For the remainder of my time, I will briefly examine several different Presidents to demonstrate how the executive branch in the United States evolved over time, thus placing the institution in a historical context. Historian Michael P. Riccards argues that most of our presidents fit into six models, Federalist, Jeffersonian, Jacksonian, Whig, Lincoln, and Rooseveltian.⁷ His typology is useful in organizing how the executive office changed as the nation changed.

In the beginning there was Washington. After leading American colonial military forces to victory, General George Washington was certainly the best-known man of his day. Rather than exploit his fame and military power, he retired to his plantation near the Potomac River in Virginia and only reluctantly returned to public life in 1789. Their experience under British rule made the newly freed colonists suspicious of central authority and distrustful of things military. The early national government under the Articles of Confederation with most power vested in the individual states appeared unworkable by the late 1780s and a powerful movement developed to reform and ultimately to create an entirely different governmental form.

The framers of the new Constitution deliberately divided power among the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government at the national level, and still left substantial governing authority vested in each state. This new Federal system made eminent sense based on hard won lessons during the 18th century. George Washington on assuming the Presidency in 1789 perceived that anything he did would establish precedents for his successors. The new President understood power and realized that the U.S. was a weak nation in a predatory world. Washington believed in strong executive authority and was dismayed by political partisanship. He made clear that civilians controlled the military and exerted his authority in foreign affairs while following conservative economic policies domestically. At the same time, he deferred to congressional authority in many matters. Washington deserves his ranking at or near the top of U.S. Presidents not because he came first, but because he carefully and thoughtfully established the template underlying the broad outlines of the office.

The growth of political parties, the Federalists and Jeffersonian Democrats, shocked Washington almost as much as the French Revolution. He tried to ignore parties but circumstances did not allow him this luxury. More than one party meant the possibility of national turmoil if one party forced another out of office. We need to keep in mind that the first six American presidents represented a highly educated, land owning, wealthy elite. Thomas Jefferson had a different view of national affairs than Washington or President John Adams, Washington's successor, but they all came essentially from the same societal group and clearly understood one another. In my mind, this link made the Federalists transfer of power to Jefferson's party in 1801 relatively easy under the circumstances. President Jefferson oversaw a dramatic territorial expansion of the new nation with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Indeed, this land purchase forced Jefferson who believed in limited executive authority to expand the powers of the presidency. Nowhere in the Constitution does it say that the President can buy land in the nation's name; Jefferson made the purchase anyway.

⁷ Michael P. Riccards, The Ferocious Engine of Democracy: A History of the American Presidency (Lanham, Maryland: Madison Books, 1994), 2 Vols. See vol. 1, pp. xvii-xxi.

The nation grew and prospered through the 1820s to be confronted by a challenge to the older, established elite. Andrew Jackson did not come from the landed gentry and was poorly educated. He clawed his way up the ladder and achieved national fame through his considerable prowess as a military leader, killing Indians and British soldiers with equal abandon. Jackson represented the raw, uncultured side of democracy, the one most feared by the old Federalists. The Jeffersonians had become too comfortable in power and corruption abounded in the 1820s. Jackson and his supporters deeply resented this state of affairs and his Democratic party had quite a different view of public life and a broader definition of citizenship. Jackson expanded the powers of the President in 1829, believing in a strong executive. At the same time, he removed the Jeffersonians from their federal sinecures and filled national appointive offices with his supporters based on the idea of "To the victor belong the spoils," fundamentally altering national politics for years to come.

The idea that any citizen can carry out the duties of any public office became imbedded in the American mind. U.S. diplomats in the late 18th century and early 19th century proved to be able representatives and in effect formed the equivalent of a professional diplomatic corps. Constitutionally, U.S. diplomats and consuls are appointed by the President and must be confirmed by the Senate. Men like Jefferson, James Madison, John Adams, and John Quincy Adams were highly educated, skilled diplomats and often were fluent in several languages. The U.S. in reality did not develop a professional Foreign Service until faced by the demands of the 20th century. This lack of trained diplomats created real problems for the new nation at times, but one little noticed in the 19th century because most Americans (with the exception of traders with international commercial interests) looked inward and westward rather than outward and abroad.

President Abraham Lincoln faced a challenge unlike any of his predecessors in office (or successors for that matter). The attempt by slave-holding Southern states to dissolve the Union in April 1861 produced terrible consequences. Lincoln at first sought only to preserve the Union as it existed before hostilities commenced; ultimately circumstances forced him to turn the American Civil War into a war against slavery in late 1862. Lincoln involved himself deeply in domestic affairs while at the same time carrying out his duties as commander-in-chief of the North's military forces and thus maintained civilian control of the military during an extraordinarily dangerous time for the nation. "The Lincoln Presidency clearly operated at times outside of law and outside of normal constitutional practice," Riccards writes, "a model justified by expediency and grave emergency, and divorced at least in the beginning of the war and in the early stages of Reconstruction from the approval of the legislative branch."⁸ Lincoln's expansion of the executive war powers became extremely important for 20th century Presidents.

Lincoln himself had never been in combat and had served only briefly in the Illinois militia in 1832. He learned by experience and developed into an extraordinary war leader. Lincoln was willing to do what he believed to be right and used the powers of the executive office in unique ways. He did not have opinion polls to guide his every movement or decision. Indeed, had modern opinion surveys existed in the early 1860s, the war most likely would have had quite a different outcome. In April 1865, the United State possessed a one-million-man army and the largest and most modern navy in the world, all under the control of a civilian

⁸ Riccards, vol. 1, p. xx.

government. The war demonstrated the enormous potential of the United States if the nation ever decided to become involved in affairs outside of the Western Hemisphere.

The Presidents for the remainder of the 19th century rarely exerted executive authority in the manner of a Lincoln or even a Jackson. They did seek to protect their authority in foreign relations and for making appointments to federal office. These Presidents almost never made appeals directly to the people in the manner of a Jackson or Lincoln. They perceived themselves as executors of the policies and laws passed by Congress.

The modern U.S. presidency really began to emerge when Theodore Roosevelt became President in 1901. Roosevelt, a young and vigorous man, redefined national leadership. He saw himself as the leader of the nation, the leader of his party, and having a leading role in formulating and pushing legislation through Congress. Roosevelt pursued aggressive domestic and foreign policies, using his office as a “bully pulpit” to preach to the nation to bring popular pressure to bear on Congress to get what he wanted. His actions in Panama exemplify his willingness to exert executive authority to further the national interest as he defined it. Roosevelt left office in 1909, and remarked in a 1911 speech: “I took the canal zone and let Congress debate, and while the debate goes on the canal does also.” The Panama Canal opened in August 1914 just as the Great War broke out in Europe.

The Panama Canal complicated U.S. relations with Latin American. U.S. Presidents through much of the 20th century perceived the canal as vital to American interests and acted accordingly. They used their power as commander and chief on multiple occasions to send U.S. military forces into action throughout Central American and the Caribbean, including Mexico for a second time during the presidency of Woodrow Wilson.

The modern U.S. presidency came into full focus during Franklin D. Roosevelt’s thirteen years in office and we can see the emergence of the “imperial presidency” with all its trappings. The powers of the executive branch expanded enormously under FDR for two reasons: a terrible domestic crisis brought on by the Great Depression followed by World War II in which national human and material resources were mobilized in unprecedented ways. State governments in effect collapsed during the early years of the Depression, and the only recourse available was a vast expansion of federal powers. During FDR’s years, power shifted from the state control to national control in most domestic matters, and from Congress to the Executive Branch within the national government. These shifts in power appeared to some to upset the balance within the government intended by the framers of the Constitution. The federal government in the New Deal era in the 1930s took on added responsibilities such as Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, Tennessee Valley Authority, banking and securities regulation, provided work to millions of citizens through various efforts, and took on numerous other functions. The country witnessed a dramatic expansion of both the scope and size of the national bureaucracy directed by the President.

During World War II, the government, largely through the executive branch, expanded even further, controlling all aspects of the economy. The country supported a huge military, drafting millions of men into national service, and sent soldiers to all corners of the earth. At war’s end, American economic production equaled the total combined production of the next

twenty-five industrial nations. In FDR's reign, the U.S. evolved from a nation with a wrecked economy and small, unprepared military, to become the strongest economic and military power in the world with sole possession of the atomic bomb.

FDR did not live to see the end of the war, but the powerful institution he created endured. The Cold War that emerged so quickly after World War II extended presidential power even further. Between 1947 and 1950, with a country fearful of communism, President Harry S. Truman with the approval of Congress moved to create "the National Security State." The executive branch was reorganized to fight a long-term conflict with the Soviet Union and a host of new federal agencies appeared, including the Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Advisor with a large staff, and the National Security Agency which all vied for national resources. These agencies are still in place, though the Cold War that they were created to fight ended ten years ago.

President Richard Nixon's abuses of executive power in the early 1970s coupled with general discontent brought on by the Vietnam conflict resulted in congressional attempts to reign in the executive. The War Powers Act is one example. I would argue, however, that congressional attempts to reign in the executive have in large measure been ineffective. The failed attempt to impeach President William Jefferson Clinton has resulted in some additional limitations on executive authority on account of several Supreme Court decisions, though again, I suspect that the limitations will have little impact on presidential powers.

George Washington would be astonished to see what the office he created has become over time. He would wonder about the daily polls and the modern media. When he left office, he drove himself home in his carriage. When Bill Clinton leaves office he will be flown home, where ever home is for the Clintons, in Air Force One for one last time. When Air Force One is airborne, the plane has priority over all other aircraft in the country. No one takes off, flies near, or lands before the President of the United States.