

Introduction

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Why evaluate the president? It is an endeavor performed at some level and to some degree by countless Americans and individuals around the world. The nightly newscasts, editorial pages, and talk radio shows certainly engage in their share of analysis, coinciding in the modern era with the emergence of the president as the focal point of the American political system and symbol of the nation. As the presidency is the country's most visible office, Americans generally know a great deal about the office and the person occupying it. The country (and a good part of the world) watches presidential inaugurations, follows the annual State of the Union address, and understands the roles presidents play in state affairs, ceremonial events, and times of crisis. From the armchair pundits who assess their president on a regular basis to those of us who perform our civic duty every four years at the polls, the president is routinely evaluated.

With the public, the press, and presidential scholars alike focusing on presidential performance, something of a cottage industry of presidential ratings has emerged. It all began in 1948, when the results of a poll were published in *Life* magazine.¹ The noted historian Arthur Schlesinger surveyed fifty-five historians, asking them to rate the presidents in categories of "great," "near great," "average," "below average," and "failure." Schlesinger was asked to produce another ranking, and he obliged in 1962 by publishing the results of a survey of seventy-five historians in the *New York Times Magazine*.²

Since the two Schlesinger polls, several scholars have offered rankings and ratings of the presidents,³ public approval polls have become a daily feature of presidential politics,⁴ a scholarly field of presidential character study has emerged,⁵ and the media is vigilant in its watch for even the slightest hint of a presidential stumble or political miscue. Indeed, presidents are the focus of the proverbial poking and prodding of scholars and biographers, and they continue to be long after they leave office. In recent years, scholars have even begun evaluating and ranking the performance of first ladies.⁶

Presidential performance has been assessed in many different ways. Public opinion ratings have been employed, along with numerical rankings beginning with number "1," "best" and "worst" labels, Likert scales, Schlesinger-inspired categories such as "great," "average," and "failure," and even dozens of scientifically weighted criteria such as the number of vetoes sustained and treaties ratified. Presidential scholar Stephen J. Wayne identifies several perspectives used in assessing presidents: use of power (Neustadt); character-based leadership qualities

(Barber, Renshon); leadership style (Burns, Greenstein); democratic leadership (Burns); political leadership (Davis, Milkis); effectiveness in modeling contemporary beliefs about leadership (Burns, Edwards and Wayne, Genovese); how well they overcome the paradoxes that frame the office (Cronin and Genovese); the historic/cyclical periods in which they serve (Skowronek); and the use of rhetoric and ability to motivate the public (Kernell).⁷ What remains clear is that both considerable debate on and interest in evaluating the presidents exist.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE PRESIDENCY, AND THE CHALLENGE OF ASSESSING THE PRESIDENT: A COMPLEX, EVOLVING OFFICE

The presidency is the center of American government. In spite of institutionalized checks and balances, the presidency has evolved well beyond the constitutionally weak office envisioned by the framers to become the most dominant institution in government. While still an office shaped by its history and constitutional limitations, it bears little resemblance to the one George Washington forged over 200 years ago. The office has evolved over time in response to crisis, the expanding role of government domestically and of the United States in world affairs, and through the sheer will of its occupants and their expansive view of Article II of the U.S. Constitution. Not surprisingly, questions have been raised both historically and today about how to view or study the presidency. Dating to the nation's founding, Hamilton and others maintained that the presidency was a vital and necessary part of the political system, while others saw it as a potentially dangerous office. So too is the presidency fairly unique as a national office among the nations of the world.

As such, studying the presidents and presidency is a complicated and problematic undertaking, with disagreement on how to assess presidents. For instance, presidential scholars are frustrated by the state of scholarship in the discipline.⁸ In general, research on the presidency suffers from a lack of theory building and models by which to test these theories, as well as a lack of systematic approaches to the study of the subject. There is no agreement about a unifying theory in the field by which to view the office, and no one best approach is suitable for all research questions.

Some of the sources available to presidential scholars—and how to use those sources—also present potential problems. While there are some excellent and informative presidential memoirs and biographies of presidents, scholars must be mindful that what the president or a former aide says about the president might be what they want the public to hear about the president. Vested political interests influence the way the story of history is told. Presidents and their former aides have imperfect (and selective) memories in reporting details of their

administration, and other biographers and scholars might lack the ideological distance from the subject necessary to offer an objective, neutral, and probing assessment.

A number of other likely and unlikely forces must be considered—or ignored—when assessing presidents. From Thomas Jefferson to Theodore Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan, the presidents and the president's friends pay attention to their standing among historians. Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton in particular were quite concerned with their eventual ranking and courted scholarly goodwill in their post-White House careers. While still in office, Clinton started meeting with scholars to discuss his legacy. In recent years, concerned Washington scholars, in an effort to repair their subject's standing, convened conferences and produced new scholarship after the "Father of His Country" slipped from two to three and then to four in some of the rankings. Suggesting that pollsters have a liberal bias, Ronald Reagan supporters commissioned a presidential ranking poll of "friendly" conservatives. The poll lifted the "Gipper" from twenty-fifth place and the company of Chester A. Arthur to "near-great" status. Whether or not the many books the "statesman" Richard Nixon wrote after leaving office will overcome the Watergate scandal and his resignation, or whether the Nobel Prize-winning work of humanitarian Jimmy Carter will erase the memories of stagflation and the 444 days of the Iranian hostage crisis remains to be seen. When assessing the president's *presidency*, they should not. It is against these challenges and others that we endeavor to assess George W. Bush's performance.

HOW TO EVALUATE PRESIDENTS?

One of the challenges of evaluating presidents is conflicting public expectation about the office. The American public has for some time had overly high expectations of their presidents, and these expectations are rising.⁹ For instance, the expectations people have are not only unrealistic but they eclipse the formal powers of the office needed to meet those expectations. These rising expectations followed the expanding activism of government throughout the twentieth century by liberals and progressives, whereby a role for the White House and national government developed in improving the quality of people's lives and addressing economic and national security crises. This was especially the case during Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency, when the role, scope, and size of government were greatly expanded. Likewise, national security concerns such as World War II, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the nuclear threat of the Cold War, as well as the contemporary attacks by terrorists, resulted in a further enlargement of the presidency.

Presidents have contributed to this expansion through the ambitious and exhaustive array of promises they make on the campaign stump, which also

generally exceed the limited constitutional powers of the office and generally outdistance presidential actions once in office.¹⁰ In a sense, the level of importance afforded and the centrality in the U.S. political system of presidents are beyond the real power held by presidents. The public routinely believes presidents are responsible—both good and bad—for occurrences and items they may have little power to effect. In the words of President Jimmy Carter: “When things go bad you get entirely too much blame. And I have to admit that when things go good, you get entirely too much credit.”¹¹

Yet it must be noted that the president does more than promote and implement public policy. The president assumes the symbolic role of leader of the nation, worldwide champion of democracy, and leader of his or her party. To be sure, generations of children are imbued with patriotic stories of presidents. As such, scholars must take into account this symbolic role when assessing presidents and somehow incorporate it into the more “substantive” and direct means of evaluation.

Most recent presidents have been seen by the public, press, and presidential scholars alike as rather mediocre. The question is often asked: where have all the great presidents gone? The answer might be in part due to inherent difficulties and “ungovernability” of the contemporary office, as eluded to at the outset of the Introduction. For instance, leading presidential scholars Thomas Cronin and Michael Genovese have noted several troubling paradoxes of the office.¹² The paradoxes of the American presidency are such that Americans want conflicting and possibly improbable or unrealistic things from their presidents: the public wants presidents to be bold leaders yet sensitive to public opinion; they want their leaders to solve an array of challenges yet do not want or trust the centralized power often necessary to address these same challenges; there is a general preference for bipartisan or nonpartisan presidents, yet supporters of each party want presidents to forward their preferences and agenda. To Cronin and Genovese, these paradoxes produce inconsistent demands that lead to a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” scenario for the occupant of the Oval Office.¹³

Another issue that arises is whether it is the person or the policy that is evaluated. It is generally agreed that the public considers the personality of presidents in their approval or disapproval of performance.¹⁴ Approval is somewhat of a popularity contest where personal characteristics such as warmth, strength, and charisma translate well at the polls. The public has little interest in the details of public policy, but the public certainly knew that Dwight Eisenhower was a war hero. Indeed, the media also focuses more on the personality of presidents than on the specifics of policy. John F. Kennedy benefited from his good looks, just as Ronald Reagan’s charm propped up his approval rating. Richard Nixon’s scandalous behavior continues to receive more ink than his legislative record. Personality is far easier to understand than, say, the intricacies of atomic energy regulation or anti-inflation policy, and it sells more newspapers. This leads

to the challenge of how to determine or measure personality or character.¹⁵ The public has varying views on what they want or admire in a president, and it is difficult for scholars neither trained in psychoanalysis nor possessing intimate and sustained access to their subjects to attempt to measure personality. What one might deem to be strong leadership might be seen by another as being autocratic. Standing firmly by one's convictions might just as well be a case of stubbornness. Prudence is both a virtue and a vice in the presidency.

On the other hand, a case can be made that personality *is* substance, character *is* king, and the personalized nature of the office is such that the presidency is first and foremost about moral character,¹⁶ so it must be incorporated into our analysis of presidents. At the same time, personality certainly does not solely determine presidential standing or approval. There are, after all, great and frequent shifts in presidential standing, while the person in office remains the same. Evaluations must consider both the person and the policies of that person.

Scandal also appears to factor into assessments of a president. Such presidents as Richard Nixon and Warren Harding, both mired in scandal, are routinely ranked poorly compared to their peers. Events such as Watergate, Teapot Dome, and an array of unethical behaviors by the president or his aides negatively impact presidential standing. However, should one blemish—even a large one—as the saying goes, be the tail that wags the whole dog? To what extent is Lyndon B. Johnson's impressive legislative record diminished by Vietnam? Should Ronald Reagan's productive first term be overshadowed by the Iran-Contra scandal and the inactivity of his second term? How does the negative impact of Bill Clinton's improper relationship with an intern compare to the record economic prosperity the country enjoyed during his administration? Similarly, a question exists as to whether one major success should outweigh an otherwise unremarkable presidential record.

Not all scandals are equal, and scholars need to do a better job of thoroughly considering the impact of the scandal—economically, politically, on the standing of the office, and over the long term—when evaluating or ranking presidents. It is difficult to determine the impact on the office and on national policy of scandals, but such a determination needs to be attempted. It would certainly appear that the consequences to U.S. foreign policy were far graver and harmful from Reagan's Iran-Contra scandal than, say, from Clinton's sexual affair with an intern. Yet the Monica Lewinsky ordeal led to impeachment proceedings, contributed to gridlock on Capitol Hill, and resulted in an inability by the president, Congress, the press, and the nation to focus on much else, including pressing policy concerns. By the same account, marital infidelity by other presidents (e.g., Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy) certainly did not diminish their standing, nor did such universally and timelessly inhumane acts as owning slaves keep George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson out of a top-10 ranking. Indeed, it might be argued that such blemishes on a president's character are far worse than, say, Clinton's deceit about his affair,

which is widely seen as a revealing glimpse into a larger character problem. By that same criterion, would not George Bush's "deceit" regarding his "no new taxes" pledge be equally problematic or indicative of a character blemish? Or, given the massive budget deficits Bush faced, perhaps his broken pledge might be better viewed as a pragmatic decision than a lie. Judged from the safe distance of history, it might have been both bolder and wiser to break the pledge than honor it.

A number of inappropriate activities were associated with the Grant and Nixon administrations, and both former presidents continue to suffer in the rankings and scholarly evaluations because of them. Yet Grant's mistake was one of *omission*, unlike Nixon's mistake, which was one of *commission*. Grant had the poor judgment to appoint and then fail to supervise a number of unethical individuals. The former Civil War hero would, nonetheless, leave the presidency a popular man and leave the office in better health than when he entered it. It is conceivable that he would have won a third term had he pursued it in 1876. Richard Nixon, on the other hand, was the source of much of the unethical conduct in his administration, and he was forced to resign from an office that he dramatically weakened. Had he not resigned, he most likely would have been removed by Congress. Nixon will most assuredly always be remembered for resigning and for the Watergate scandal. Both events had a significant and negative impact on the office, whereas the same cannot be said for Grant's scandals. But Nixon should also be remembered for his historic China policies. The impeachments of Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton are also likely to tarnish their legacies well into the future, as well they should. This has certainly been the case for the 135 years or so since Johnson's presidency. Both events had an impact on the office. Yet it appears that the negative impact on the office itself was not lasting and that the impeachment charges were not justified, which might necessitate a reconsideration of the events and standing of the two presidents adversely affected.

Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton—all presidents involved in the most spectacular scandals of the modern era—enjoyed decisive reelection victories, which might be seen as public confirmations of their presidencies and leadership. However, all three went on to become embroiled in scandal during their second term. There must certainly be a role in presidential ratings for public approval, reelection, and scandal, but it is easier said than determined. In hindsight, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter appear to have been remarkably ethical, but both were defeated at the polls and left behind marginal presidential records. So one is left to ponder how these events should factor into presidential ratings.

The standing of presidents varies over the course of the term or terms in office. This phenomenon often occurs after the president has left office. After leaving the White House, Eisenhower, for instance, was rated slightly below average in the 1962 Schlesinger poll. The formal general was seen as inactive and too disengaged from his own presidency. However, as new information and

documents have become available to scholars, and with the (nearly) “20-20” vantage point of history, Eisenhower’s reputation has gradually rebounded to a respectable “near great” in some recent polls. Harry Truman was not popular among the majority of the American public or members of Congress during his presidency. Truman’s contemporaries joked that “to err is Truman,” and the Speaker of the House of Representatives deemed Truman “the worst president in history.”¹⁷ Truman’s approval plummeted from almost 90 percent after World War II to 23 percent in late 1951, which remains the all-time lowest rating with the exception of that for Richard Nixon before his resignation in 1974. Despite this, Truman is now widely considered a “near-great” president and is consistently ranked in the top 10 of all presidents. Moreover, Truman has been mentioned as a role model by nearly every presidential candidate of both parties in recent years. The improvement of Truman’s reputation took many years, and his impressive achievements and handling of monumental events—the ending of World War II, the Marshall Plan, the establishment of the United Nations (UN) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), desegregation of the military, having the courage and wisdom to fire Gen. Douglas MacArthur, and so on—took many years to be fully understood and appreciated.

Herein lies a cautionary lesson to would-be evaluators of presidents, and one understood by the authors of this book engaged in an early assessment. This assessment of President George W. Bush is not meant to be the final word on his performance. It is still too early to tell how George W. Bush and recent presidents will be rated by historians, and too early to determine the long-term impact of their policies and actions in office. Recent rating polls have reflected some upward movement of Ronald Reagan, as enough years have passed since his presidency to begin to assess his legacy. Apparently, his peace-through-strength military buildup has been given credit by scholars for contributing to the collapse of the Soviet Union, while the large budget deficits, a shrinking industrial base, and the reduction of environmental programs that occurred under his watch have not proven as troubling as had previously been thought. The same might be said of Reagan’s lax management style. However, unlike many other presidents, there is considerably less consensus on his standing. Reagan ranks anywhere from “near great” to “below average” in recent polls, although some consensus should soon form with the further passage of time.

It is even more challenging to evaluate Reagan’s successors, George Bush and Bill Clinton, because their presidencies are even more recent. Both seem to be especially difficult to assess. Scholars remain divided over whether or not Bush deserves credit for leading an international coalition of nations in the Persian Gulf War or whether, in light of subsequent events, he erred in not removing Saddam Hussein from power when he had the chance. While the war accomplished its objectives in impressive fashion, the oil-based energy policies promoted by President Bush and U.S. support for Iraq in the Iran-Iraq conflict of the 1980s contributed to Hussein’s power in the first place. The

same sticky questions fog Bush's leadership, as it remains to be seen whether he deserves credit for presiding over the end of the Cold War or whether he squandered the opportunity to act more boldly to shape the post-Cold War order in its aftermath. The president enjoyed a high approval rating, near 90 percent, after the Persian Gulf War, but he saw his popularity erode to roughly 30 percent by mid 1992.

In the initial years after leaving the White House, Bill Clinton's legacy has been tarnished by the scandal involving his intern, Monica Lewinsky. Whether this will change and he will be remembered for eliminating long-running budget deficits and presiding over a period of general peace and unprecedented economic prosperity cannot be determined at this time. Clinton's legislative accomplishments are seen by some as little more than incremental co-optation of Republican plans, while others feel he deserves credit for protecting Medicare, environmental programs, and education from "right-wing extremism." About the only certainties at this point in time are that Bush's military victory will work for him, and his single term in office will work against him, and that Clinton's reelection will work for him, and his impeachment will work against him. Both presidents are likely to remain ranked as "average."

Today, John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan remain quite popular among the public and seem likely to remain popular with the passage of time. Yet neither is considered one of the "great" presidents. This example points to the quandary of whether scholars should consider public opinion in rating presidents, a question hotly contested by those that rank presidents. Indeed, there are conceptually two different ways of looking at the issue of presidential standing. One considers popularity or approval ratings as gauged by the American public in the increasingly regular opinion polling industry. These are influenced by public opinion, subject to great and frequent changes, and are determined primarily by average citizens. The other conceptual approach is to consider historical reputation and ranking. This is also subject to changes, although with far less regularity and extent, and is determined largely by experts on the presidency. In the debate between whether to employ popular or scholarly based ratings, one cannot ignore a president's popularity with or approval by the public. Yet the reliability of such measures as anything other than immediate gauges of approval is questionable. Public opinion polls do not permit the respondent time for reflection or comparison, and one cannot assume that respondents have intimate familiarity with, say, Millard Fillmore or Franklin Pierce.

Gallup commissioned presidential ranking polls by the public. The results, even though they are interesting, further point to the unsuitability of opinion polls as the means by which comprehensive presidential assessments are done. For instance, Clinton was rated as the top president by 13 percent and the worst president by 20 percent polled. It is doubtful that a president could be both best *and* worst. Kennedy received more votes for greatness than did Lincoln and Washington, and the first president was rated far below what any

serious scholar would consider. Such polls of the public place Kennedy and Reagan at the top of the list, well above where the scholarly polls rate them. Yet one would be hard pressed to find a scholar who would, unlike the general public, rank either president above George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Woodrow Wilson, or Harry Truman.¹⁸

ASSESSING PRESIDENTIAL PERFORMANCE

The previous discussion points out the challenge of *how* to rate the presidents and what to consider while doing so, but it also raises the question of *when* to evaluate. The Eisenhower and Truman examples also present a challenge to an early assessment such as is found in this book, yet it also invites early, frequent, and continuous assessments, along with the need for new approaches to evaluating presidents. Indeed, shifts in the standing of presidents both during and after their presidencies are not unusual, and scholars remain divided about how best to assess presidents.¹⁹

It is beneficial to contemplate the advice of leading presidential scholar James MacGregor Burns, who points out four additional anomalies of attempted ratings of presidents. According to Burns, there is a maleness to the rating game, in that presidents are assessed by male traits and qualities and from the perspective of males; the president is evaluated as part of and within the institution of the presidency, yet there is much disagreement about how to view or assess the institution; presidents are evaluated comparatively, but we disagree on what we want in a president and what qualities to use to assess them; and the interaction of situation and agency cannot be ignored, as specific situational opportunities might help or harm a presidency, and, given the nature of the office, some question whether a president (other than the case of Theodore Roosevelt) can achieve greatness without a war or crisis.²⁰

RANKING PRESIDENTS

George Washington and Abraham Lincoln loom large as heroic figures, more myth than men. All presidents have benefited from the prestige that these men brought to the office, while simultaneously struggling under their aura. In the modern era, the looming legacy of Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) has set the bar quite high, and he both set the standard for contemporary presidents and is credited for establishing the “modern presidency.” Perhaps not surprisingly, all those serving subsequent to him have generally had difficulty governing in his shadow. For instance, FDR presided over one of the most critical times in the nation’s history—the Great Depression and World War II. He demonstrated

bold, visionary leadership and challenged the very way of thinking about the role of government and “approach to governing,” charting a new course for governance, taking on powerful business and economic interests, leading his countrymen out of economic crisis, and winning the greatest war. Even Ronald

TABLE 1
Early Rankings of the Presidents

<i>1948 Schlesinger Poll</i>	<i>1962 Schlesinger Poll</i>
GREAT	GREAT
1. Lincoln	1. Lincoln
2. Washington	2. Washington
3. F. Roosevelt	3. F. Roosevelt
4. Wilson	4. Wilson
5. Jefferson	5. Jefferson
6. Jackson	
NEAR GREAT	NEAR GREAT
7. T. Roosevelt	6. Jackson
8. Cleveland	7. T. Roosevelt
9. J. Adams	8. Polk
10. Polk	9. Truman
	10. J. Adams
	11. Cleveland
AVERAGE	AVERAGE
11. J. Q. Adams	12. Madison
12. Monroe	13. J. Q. Adams
13. Hayes	14. Hayes
14. Madison	15. McKinley
15. Van Buren	16. Taft
16. Taft	17. Van Buren
17. Arthur	18. Monroe
18. McKinley	19. Hoover
19. A. Johnson	20. B. Harrison
20. Hoover	21. Arthur
21. B. Harrison	22. Eisenhower
BELOW AVERAGE	23. A. Johnson
22. Tyler	
23. Coolidge	BELOW AVERAGE
24. Fillmore	24. Taylor
25. Taylor	25. Tyler
26. Buchanan	26. Fillmore
27. Pierce	27. Coolidge
FAILURE	28. Pierce
28. Grant	29. Buchanan
29. Harding	FAILURE
	30. Grant
	31. Harding

Reagan, the president in the modern era whose ideology was most diametrically opposed to FDR's, admired FDR and occasionally cited his words and memory while governing.

As this example demonstrates, the first and most obvious characteristic of presidential ratings is that they are comparative. Presidents are measured against one another, as opposed to being evaluated independent of one another, according to the U.S. Constitution, or against world leaders. Most employ categories such as "great," "near great," and so on—or some derivative of this—in rating presidents, although some assessments simply rank the presidents chronologically from first to last, or best to worst. Most ratings, including the first ratings and the most popular ones, do not use specific criteria in evaluating the presidents. Rather, in the words of Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., whose father invented the rating game and whose 1996 ranking of presidents is one of the most cited, ratings attempt to evaluate the president from a "holistic" not "mechanistic" approach.²¹ Presidents are considered for their overall record. Other, more "mechanistic" efforts have developed a series of criteria—constitutional, quantitative, legislative-based, public opinion-based, and so on—to use in rating presidents.

Most ratings are based on polls of scholars, typically historians, who are asked to evaluate the presidents and place them into the aforementioned categories and best-worst listings. These polls generally survey thirty to seventy scholars, although there are some notable exceptions. While Arthur Schlesinger polled fifty-five and seventy-five historians in 1948 and 1962, respectively, and his son, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., surveyed thirty-two scholars in 1996, Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing used a seventeen-page instrument to poll 953 historians in 1982.²² William Henry Harrison and James A. Garfield are usually omitted from the ratings because of their abbreviated tenures in office,²³ however, a few efforts included these two presidents.²⁴

Table 1 lists the first two ranking polls, conducted by Arthur Schlesinger. Table 2 gives examples of recent, well-known ratings.

CRITICISMS OF THE RANKINGS

It is a challenge to evaluate presidents, much less group leaders into categories. Not surprisingly, the endeavor has been criticized. First and foremost, as methodologists would point out, there is a small "N"—only forty-two individuals have served as president, with George W. Bush serving as the country's forty-third president (Grover Cleveland served two nonconsecutive terms)—and considerable variation in approach and style among them. There also exists the problem of how to evaluate such a multifaceted office (the U.S. Constitution is vague, the office is always evolving, and each president approaches it in a unique, highly personalized way), which criteria to use (a "holistic" versus a "mechanistic"

TABLE 2
Examples of More Recent, Well-Known Polls

<i>1982 Murray-Blessing Poll</i>	<i>1996 Schlesinger Jr. Poll</i>	<i>2000 C-SPAN Historian Poll</i>
GREAT	GREAT	1. Lincoln
1. Lincoln	1. Lincoln	2. F. Roosevelt
2. F. Roosevelt	2. Washington	3. Washington
3. Washington	3. F. Roosevelt	4. T. Roosevelt
4. Jefferson		5. Truman
	NEAR GREAT	6. Wilson
NEAR GREAT	4. Jefferson	7. Jefferson
5. T. Roosevelt	5. Jackson	8. Kennedy
6. Wilson	6. T. Roosevelt	9. Eisenhower
7. Jackson	7. Wilson	10. L. Johnson
8. Truman	8. Truman	11. Reagan
	9. Polk	12. Polk
ABOVE AVERAGE		13. Jackson
9. J. Adams	HIGH AVERAGE	14. Monroe
10. L. Johnson	10. Eisenhower	15. McKinley
11. Eisenhower	11. J. Adams	16. J. Adams
12. Polk	12. Kennedy	17. Cleveland
13. Kennedy	13. Cleveland	18. Madison
14. Madison	14. L. Johnson	19. J. Q. Adams
15. Monroe	15. Monroe	20. Bush
16. J. Q. Adams	16. McKinley	21. Clinton
17. Cleveland		22. Carter
	LOW AVERAGE	23. Ford
AVERAGE	17. Madison	24. Taft
18. McKinley	18. J. Q. Adams	25. Nixon
19. Taft	19. B. Harrison	26. Hayes
20. Van Buren	20. Clinton	27. Coolidge
21. Hoover	21. Van Buren	28. Taylor
22. Hayes	22. Taft	29. Garfield
23. Arthur	23. Hayes	30. Van Buren
24. Ford	24. Bush	31. B. Harrison
25. Carter	25. Reagan	32. Arthur
26. B. Harrison	26. Arthur	33. Grant
	27. Carter	34. Hoover
BELOW AVERAGE	28. Ford	35. Fillmore
27. Taylor		36. Tyler
28. Tyler	BELOW AVERAGE	37. W. Harrison
29. Fillmore	29. Taylor	38. Harding
30. Coolidge	30. Coolidge	39. Pierce
31. Pierce	31. Fillmore	40. A. Johnson
	32. Tyler	41. Buchanan
FAILURE		
32. A. Johnson	FAILURE	
33. Buchanan	33. Pierce	
34. Nixon	34. Grant	
35. Grant	35. Hoover	
36. Harding	36. Nixon	
	37. A. Johnson	
	38. Buchanan	
	39. Harding	

debate), and how to account for the time in which the president served (times of war might “make the man;” comparing someone who served in 1800 with someone who served in 2000).

The criticism that has generated the most debate has been that of the bias of the ratings because of the partisanship and ideology of those performing the assessment. In what is sometimes deemed the “Harvard yard bias,” critics have alleged that most scholars who rate presidents are liberals who are registered Democrats and teach at elite institutions of higher learning. This produces, they allege, a predisposed bias for liberal Democrats, presidents with an active record of government intervention, and a tendency to compare all presidents to FDR.²⁵ In response to this concern, conservative organizations, such as the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, and conservative scholars have pursued their own ratings.²⁶ Such ratings have produced some noticeable differences: Woodrow Wilson often drops from “near great” to “below average”; Ronald Reagan, who is usually judged “average,” moves to “near great”; Bill Clinton and Lyndon B. Johnson drop from “average” and “high average” to “failure”; and average presidents Jimmy Carter and Dwight Eisenhower become a “failure” and “near great, respectively.” However, Richard Pious, a leading presidential scholar, has suggested that if a liberal bias were at work in the polls, then Lyndon Johnson and John Kennedy would be rated higher, while Eisenhower would not be rising in polls.²⁷ Likewise, perennial bottom dwellers Grant and Nixon are also showing some upward movement in recent polls, and a few conservatives do rate fairly highly. Pious further notes that Democrats might have had the good fortune of serving in more interesting times (World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the start and peak of the Cold War, etc.), which might explain the generally higher ranking of Democrats. At the same time, some Republicans have suffered “spectacular failures” (Grant, Harding, and Nixon).

Republicans are not the only presidents rated poorly. Joining Harding, Nixon, Grant, Coolidge, and Hoover at or near the bottom, for instance, are Democrats Buchanan, Pierce, Andrew Johnson, and Tyler. Republican Abraham Lincoln tops the ranking, and Republican Theodore Roosevelt is a regular in the top 10. After an exhaustive study of presidential rankings, Tim Blessing concludes that partisanship of the raters is not a major issue in determining presidential standing,²⁸ and a conference of distinguished presidential scholars on the issue of presidential ratings held at Hofstra University in October 2000 concluded that the effect of rater bias or partisanship was “minimal at best.”²⁹ The rating game has endured. Indeed, it flourishes.

CONCLUSION

Assessing the presidents is a challenging endeavor, especially when done while the president is still in office. The benefits of assessing a president at midpoint are

many: it begins the analysis that will continue for years to come; the first two years (some even argue that the first 100 days) are widely considered the most crucial period of the presidency;³⁰ it generally marks the period of greatest nominating, appointing, and legislative activity; the period typically ends with the party's losses in the midterm elections and a new strategy for the second half of the term; insights about priorities and the president's leadership approach can be gained from assessing the important transition and learning periods of the presidency; and it produces an early picture of the high and low points of the particular president.

This assessment is certainly not a definitive evaluation of George W. Bush. To be sure, as has been discussed in this introductory chapter, a president's standing is subject to the changing whims of public opinion during his term and often changes over time after he leaves office. As more information becomes available when presidential papers are organized and presidential libraries opened, and as events unfold as a result of presidential actions and inactions, scholars are able to reassess their subjects and place them in a new or larger context, as will be the case for George W. Bush. The task before us, then, has been to avoid looking at contemporary political events from the perspective of the headlines but rather with a dispassionate eye to history.

NOTES

1. Arthur M. Schlesinger, "Historians Rate U.S. Presidents," *Life*, November 1, 1948, 65–66, 68, 73–74.

2. Arthur M. Schlesinger, "Our Presidents: A Rating by 75 Historians," *New York Times Magazine*, July 29, 1962, 12–13, 40–41, 43.

3. Some of the more popular polls of presidents include the Schlesinger 1996 poll: see Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "The Ultimate Approval Rating," *New York Times Magazine*, December 15, 1996, 46–47; the Murray and Blessing poll, Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing, *Greatness in the White House: Rating the Presidents*, 2nd ed. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); C-SPAN's "Survey of Presidential Leadership: How Did the Presidents Rate?" February 21, 2000, www.americanpresidents.org/survey/. See also William Pederson and Ann McLaurin, *The Rating Game in American Politics* (New York: Irvington, 1987).

4. A number of organizations such as Gallup take regular polls on presidential approval. See, for instance, www.gallup.com.

5. Among the leading studies of presidential personality and character are James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1992); Fred I. Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Clinton* (New York: Free Press, 2000); Fred I. Greenstein, *Leadership in the Modern Presidency* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

6. Ranking polls on the first ladies have been done by the Siena Research Institute at Siena College in New York and Robert P. Watson; see Robert P. Watson, *The Presidents' Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000), 171–98; Robert P. Watson, “Ranking the Presidential Spouses,” *The Social Science Journal* 36, no.1 (1999): 117–36.

7. Stephen J. Wayne, “Evaluating the President: The Public’s Perspective through the Prism of Pollsters,” *White House Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003): 35–40.

8. For a discussion of the approaches to and challenges of studying the presidency, see George C. Edwards III and Stephen J. Wayne, *Presidential Leadership: Politics and Policy Making*, 5th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 503–13; George C. Edwards III and Stephen J. Wayne, *Studying the Presidency* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 17–49.

9. James P. Pfiffner, *The Modern Presidency*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 2000).

10. Ibid.

11. Godfrey Hodgson, *All Things to All Men: The False Promise of the Modern American Presidency* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), 25.

12. Thomas E. Cronin and Michael A. Genovese, *The Paradoxes of the Modern Presidency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

13. Ibid.

14. See Cronin and Genovese, *The Paradoxes of the Modern Presidency*, Wayne, “Evaluating the President,” 35–40.

15. Attempting to assess presidential character is a difficult endeavor. Studies such as those by James David Barber, *The Presidential Character*, have come under severe criticism. For a comprehensive discussion of the criticisms of studying presidential personality see Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*.

16. See Robert Shogun, *The Double-Edged Sword: How Character Makes and Ruins Presidents, From Washington to Clinton* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).

17. Alan Brinkley, “Work Hard, Trust in God, Have No Fear,” *New York Times Book Review*, June 21, 1992, 1.

18. The C-SPAN viewer poll of the public places both John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan at the top and well above such presidents as Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and George Washington. See www.americanpresidents.org.

19. Among the challenges of ranking the presidents are shifts that occur as new information comes to light. See, for instance, D. A. Lonnstrom and T. O. Kelly, “Rating the Presidents: A Tracking Study,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 591; Arthur B. Murray, “Evaluating the Presidents of the United States,” in *The American Presidency*, ed. David C. Kozak and Kenneth N. Ciboski (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1985), 437–48.

20. James MacGregor Burns, *The Power to Lead: The Crisis of the American Presidency* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984); James MacGregor Burns, *Presidential Government: The Crucible of Leadership*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

21. See Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "Commentary," *White House Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003): 75–77.

22. See Murray and Blessing, *Greatness in the white House*; Schlesinger, "Commentary." The Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) polled thirty-eight scholars, C-SPAN's survey of presidential historians polled fifty-eight, Porter polled forty-one, and the *Chicago Tribune* polled forty-nine.

23. William Henry Harrison served as president for only one month, dying from complications contracted during his long inaugural address that was delivered in foul weather. James A. Garfield died at the hands of an assassin only months into his term. For a discussion for not including these presidents in rating polls, see Max J. Skidmore, "Presidents after the White House: A Preliminary Study," *White House Studies* 2, no. 3 (2002): 237–50.

24. See C-SPAN, "Survey of Presidential Leadership."

25. Thomas Bailey, *Presidential Greatness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), chap. 4.

26. One of the most comprehensive attempts to rank the presidents from George Washington through Ronald Reagan was done by Murray and Blessing, *Greatness in the White House*. The ISI commissioned its own poll with thirty-eight conservative scholars. See James Pierson, "Historians and the Reagan Legacy," *The Weekly Standard* September 29, 1997, 22–24.

27. Felzenberg suggests that presidential raters favor liberal, activist presidents using the standard of FDR. See, for instance, Alvin S. Felzenberg, "Partisan Biases in Presidential Ratings: Ulysses, Woodrow, and Calvin, 'We Hardly Knew Ye,'" *White House Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003); Alvin S. Felzenberg, "There You Go Again: Liberal Historians and the *New York Times* Deny Ronald Reagan His Due," *Policy Review* (March–April 1997). Richard M. Pious, "Reflections of a Presidency Rater," *White House Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003).

28. See Tim H. Blessing, "Presidents and Significance: Partisanship As a Source of Perceived Greatness," *White House Studies* 3, no.1 (2003); Murray and Blessing, *Greatness in the White House*.

29. Meena Bose, "The Leadership Difference: Rating the Presidents," *White House Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003): 3–20.

30. See Schlesinger Jr., "The Ultimate Approval Rating," 46. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "Rating the Presidents: Washington to Clinton," *Political Science Quarterly* 112, no. 2 (1997): 179–90.