

What makes a Good President?

Presidential historian Robert Dallek maintains there are five categories by which to measure an effective president. While noting that these categories "are not intended to be the last ... word on how to succeed in the White House," Dallek nevertheless points out that it is striking how each of these elements "has been present and absent in the leadership of the most and least effective chiefs."

First, every successful president has had vision, insight, or understanding: a clear idea of where he wished to lead the nation in its quest for a better future. However illusory some of these dreams have been, whether for a harmonious nation or for America's Manifest Destiny to expand across the continent and out into the Caribbean and the Pacific, a clear and comprehensible grand design has been central to every significant presidential advance. Second, the most successful of our chiefs have also been great realists or pragmatists -- politicians who understood that politics was the art of the possible or that the road to proficient leadership was through a sensible opportunism or flexible response to changing conditions at home and abroad.

Third, presidential gains have depended on the consent of the governed: presidents without a national consensus for major policies touching people's everyday lives are politicians courting defeat. Fourth, the best of our presidents have always recognized that leadership required a personal connection between the president and the people, or that the power of the Oval Office rests to a great degree on the affection of the country for its chief. From Washington to Lincoln to the two Roosevelts and, most recently, Reagan, the force of presidential personality has been a major factor in determining a president's fate. And fifth, a corollary to conditions three and four, presidents need credibility -- presidents who are unable to earn the trust of their countrymen are governors who cannot govern and lead.

I. Ranking the Presidents

Rating presidents is an odd practice. No one can be an expert on all periods. Many presidents (e.g., Ulysses Grant, Calvin Coolidge, and Warren Harding) are probably rated more on received wisdom than on assessments of their records. The historian Robert Ferrell argues that, once one goes beyond one's narrow area of expertise, there is "a rapid diminution of real authoritative judgment." Even someone who has written more than a dozen books on the presidency, Ferrell asserts, would "almost have to guess" for some of the presidents.

Some respondents reflected this cautiousness. Historian Mark Leff argues, "Global measures can be an empty exercise." Political scientist Karen Hult notes that rankings of U.S. presidents are problematic: "First, as summaries, they by necessity mask what may be important differences within administrations." Some presidents may be better at some tasks than others or better at different times within their administrations. "Second," she argues, "rankings of presidents appear to me to reinforce the too-frequent tendency in the United States to attribute more power to the individuals who occupy the Oval Office than they typically have (or had)."

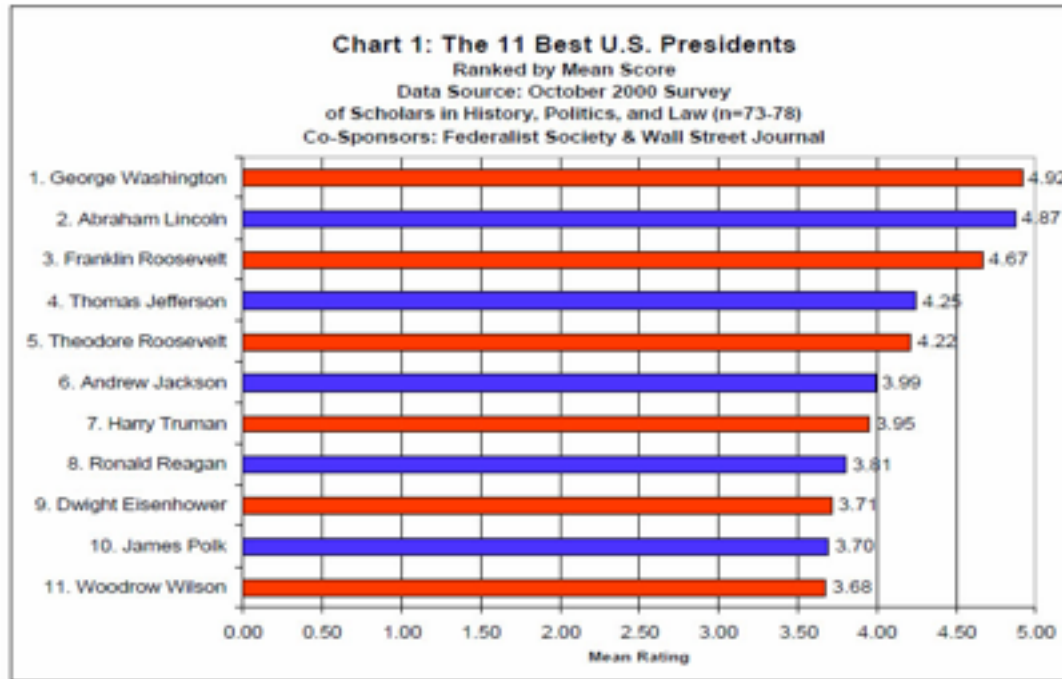
Respondents used different criteria in ranking presidents. Many favored their own evaluations of the presidents' goals and accomplishments. Others, such as legal scholar Annette Gordon-Reed, emphasized the presidents' own goals: "I tried to make decisions based upon the extent to which each man was able to accomplish what he set out to do rather than relying only on my opinion of the worth of their efforts."

A. The Best Presidents

According to the historian Robert Rutland, "The plain fact is that over half of our presidents have been mediocrities." Political scientist Thomas Cronin was more sanguine, "[A]t least two dozen

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individuals have served with distinction; only a few have been grossly inadequate.” Some presidents were ranked highly by almost everyone in our study.



The eleven presidents ranked highest in this survey are presented in Chart 1. As in many previous rankings (including Schlesinger’s), George Washington (ranked 1st), Abraham Lincoln (2nd), and Franklin Roosevelt (3rd) lead the pack. As historian Steven Gillon remarks simply in his comments on the survey, “Washington, Lincoln, and FDR remain—and should remain—in a class by themselves.”

Just a step below are Thomas Jefferson (4th) and Theodore Roosevelt (5th). All five of these presidents averaged well above 4.0 on a 5 point scale. In the next group are Andrew Jackson (6th) and Harry Truman (7th). Rounding out the top eleven are Ronald Reagan (8th), Dwight Eisenhower (9th), James Polk (10th), and Woodrow Wilson (11th).

Some scholars may have thought that Jefferson’s reputation was slipping, partly because of an increase in discussions of his slaveholding in general and his probable fathering of children with Sally Hemings. Political scientist David Mayhew’s comment expressed this concern, “Jefferson is getting downgraded these days, but after reading Henry Adams’ volumes recently, I see him as first-rate.”

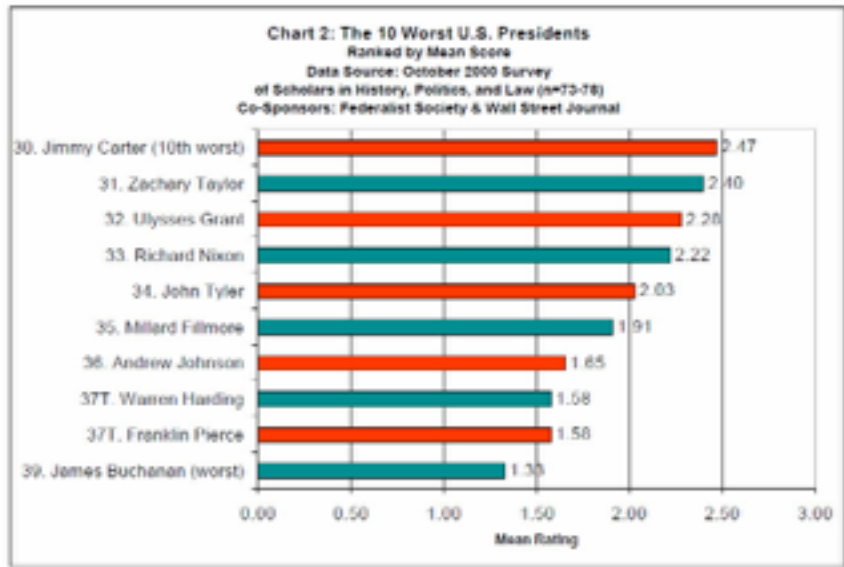
The presidents in our group of the 11 best corresponds exactly to the top 10 presidents in the 1996 Schlesinger study, with the addition of Ronald Reagan, who moved up from 25th in the Schlesinger study to 8th in our study.

B. The Worst Presidents

According to the 78 experts on our panel, the worst president was James Buchanan (ranked 39th), followed by Warren Harding (tied for 37th) and Franklin Pierce (tied for 37th). Buchanan and Pierce are usually blamed for doing little to head off the impending Civil War.

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Of those presidents in the bottom ten, five did not serve even one full term: Harding (37th), Andrew Johnson (36th), Millard Fillmore (35th), John Tyler (34th), and Zachary Taylor (31st). In addition, Richard Nixon (33rd) was forced from office and Andrew Johnson was impeached by the Republicans. The administration of Ulysses Grant (32nd) is remembered today a bit unfairly mostly for scandal. Although Jimmy Carter is usually praised for the Middle East Peace Agreement and blamed for his handling of Iran, he gets little credit for his deregulation of the trucking and airlines industries.



C. Grouping the Presidents

It has been traditional to group the presidents as “Great,” “Near Great,” and so on. While any such classifications are arbitrary, we can group using our scores in something like these traditional categories. Remember, however, that our respondents did not use these particular characterizations; these are applied after the fact to group the results.

There may be some surprises here. As time has passed since the Kennedy administration, the rankings of his presidency have slipped. In this study Kennedy (18th) appeared at the bottom of the “Above Average” group, somewhat below his ranking in the last Schlesinger survey (12th). Kennedy still leads all presidents who served less than one term and all but two presidents who served only one full term (James Polk and John Adams).

Ronald Reagan (8th) and Dwight Eisenhower (9th) moved into the “Near Great” group. Both had, not only high mean scores, but a high median of 4. Reagan’s ratings were highly variable; Eisenhower’s were not. Eisenhower had been at the top of Schlesinger’s “High Average” group; by moving up just one place in our study, he moved into the “Near Great” category.

Table 1
Ranking of Presidents by Mean Score

Data Source: October 2000 Survey of Scholars in History, Politics, and Law (n=73-78)
Co-Sponsors: Federalist Society & Wall Street Journal

		Mean	Median	Std. Dev.
Great				
1	George Washington	4.92	5	0.27
2	Abraham Lincoln	4.87	5	0.60
3	Franklin Roosevelt	4.67	5	0.75
Near Great				
4	Thomas Jefferson	4.25	4	0.71
5	Theodore Roosevelt	4.22	4	0.71
6	Andrew Jackson	3.99	4	0.79
7	Harry Truman	3.95	4	0.75
8	Ronald Reagan	3.81	4	1.08
9	Dwight Eisenhower	3.71	4	0.60
10	James Polk	3.70	4	0.80
11	Woodrow Wilson	3.68	4	1.09
Above Average				
12	Grover Cleveland	3.36	3	0.63
13	John Adams	3.36	3	0.80
14	William McKinley	3.33	3	0.62
15	James Madison	3.29	3	0.71
16	James Monroe	3.27	3	0.60
17	Lyndon Johnson	3.21	3.5	1.04
18	John Kennedy	3.17	3	0.73
Average				
19	William Taft	3.00	3	0.66
20	John Quincy Adams	2.93	3	0.76
21	George Bush	2.92	3	0.68
22	Rutherford Hayes	2.79	3	0.55
23	Martin Van Buren	2.77	3	0.61
24	William Clinton	2.77	3	1.11
25	Calvin Coolidge	2.71	3	0.97
26	Chester Arthur	2.71	3	0.56
Below Average				
27	Benjamin Harrison	2.62	3	0.54
28	Gerald Ford	2.59	3	0.61
29	Herbert Hoover	2.53	3	0.87
30	Jimmy Carter	2.47	2	0.75
31	Zachary Taylor	2.40	2	0.68
32	Ulysses Grant	2.28	2	0.89
33	Richard Nixon	2.22	2	1.07
34	John Tyler	2.03	2	0.72
35	Millard Fillmore	1.91	2	0.74
Failure				
36	Andrew Johnson	1.65	1	0.81
37T	Franklin Pierce	1.58	1	0.68
37T	Warren Harding	1.58	1	0.77
39	James Buchanan	1.33	1	0.62

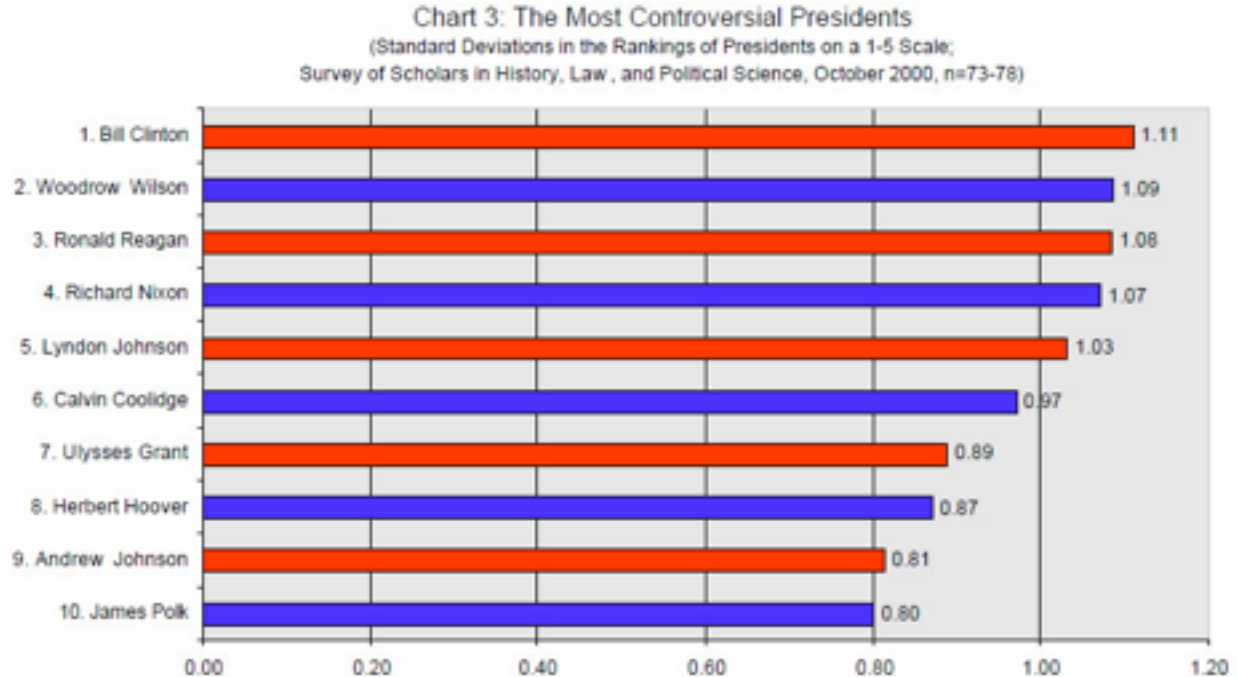
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Reagan had been in Schlesinger's "Average" category. In our study, he moves into the group of "Near Great" presidents. William Clinton (24th), although below both the mean and the median for all 39 presidents, still inhabits our "Average" category, a few slots below George H.W. Bush (21st). In our study, Clinton slips four places from the 1996 Schlesinger survey. Among presidents serving two full terms, only Grant ranks lower than Clinton.

Carter and Nixon both had low median ratings of 2.0. In Nixon's case, this low rating reflects what many believe to be his mostly disastrous domestic, international, and economic policies, not to mention the corruption of his administration.

D. The Most Controversial Presidents

Several presidents had highly variable ratings. As one historian responding to our survey points out, "It's hard to make judgments about recent presidents . . ." Perhaps not surprisingly, Bill Clinton had the highest variation in our ratings. Not only has there not been time to assess his presidency with dispassion, but also many of the respondents were among the distinguished



academics who signed public letters either opposing or supporting Clinton's impeachment.

Clinton has his strong supporters. One prominent law professor is very positive: "Clinton has been a great President even with the impeachment." Historian Steven Gillon remarks, "[D]espite the disgrace of impeachment, he helped develop a new modest liberalism that was appropriate for the times." Political science scholar Bruce Miroff also makes the positive case for Clinton: "Bill Clinton's opportunistic centrism and postmodern style of performance are already having a profound effect on both parties' presidential candidates."

Another scholar takes the opposite position on Clinton's style: "The symbolic aspects of the presidency are well under-rated. . . . This is one reason Reagan should be ranked higher than

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he generally is and why Bill Clinton must be seen to be a disaster for the office. From talking about his underwear on t.v., to his ‘short shorts’ he wore jogging around Washington, to the Lewinsky affair, he has done much to damage the symbolic import of the office.”

In a similar vein, political scientist Andrew Busch asserts, “It is too early to say for sure about Clinton, but his contempt for the law, the way he increased public cynicism, and his failure to achieve most of his highly touted programs—from health reform to campaign finance reform to the tobacco tax to Medicare expansion—combine to leave him toward the bottom. When impeachment is thrown in, along with the devastating effect his presidency had on lower levels of his own party, he sinks even further.”

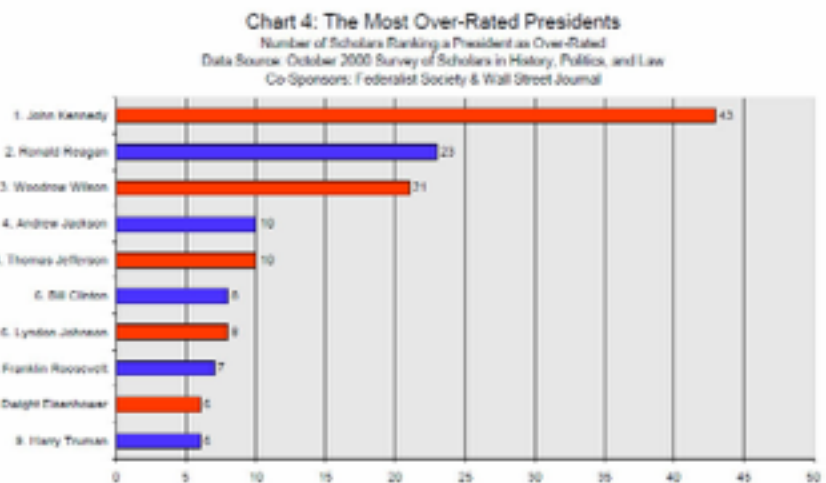
Also making part of the negative case for Clinton, law professor Michael Stokes Paulsen argues, “Presidents who created their own crises, or mismanaged war, or acted weakly, dishonorably, or corruptly (Buchanan, both Johnsons, Nixon, Fillmore, Pierce, and Clinton) must rank low, especially so if they lack notable, permanent accomplishments of a positive nature. We may be too close to events to realize it—and too many have voted for him to be willing to acknowledge it—but Bill Clinton may well be recorded in history as among the very worst of all American presidents.”

Other presidents with high variability in their ratings include Reagan, Wilson, Nixon, and Lyndon Johnson. Wilson (ranked 11th) has been undergoing a critical reappraisal recently, as his creation of federal agencies is more controversial than it once was and his handling of World War I and its aftermath is not judged as positively as it once was. Reagan has made a quick move to the “Near Great” group, a move fueled in this study in part from surprisingly high ratings from many academics thought to lean to the left.

Lyndon Johnson remains a controversial figure because he passed the most aggressive domestic legislative agenda of the post-World War II era. Some of that legislation (e.g., the 1964 Civil Rights Act) is viewed almost universally as positive; other parts of that agenda generally have widely varying support among academics. As law professor John McGinnis argues about Lyndon Johnson, “Often rated above average, he should be rated well below average. He fought two wars (in Vietnam and against poverty) and lost both of them. The consequences of these policies still harm our polity almost forty years later.”⁸

E. The Most Over-Rated Presidents

We asked the scholars surveyed to list the most over-rated and under-rated presidents. Because this question refers to an unstated baseline reputation, the results are not terribly meaningful. Moreover, one professor listed Richard Nixon as both over-rated and under-rated and another listed Reagan the same—a result that is not necessarily incoherent because they might well be over-rated by one group of scholars and under-rated by another (or over-rated for some attributes and under-rated for others). Enough of our respondents (16) cited Ronald



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Reagan as under-rated that he leads that list, while even more respondents (23) listed him as over-rated.

One law professor explained why he listed Reagan as over-rated, “[D]espite Reagan’s successes vis a vis the Soviet Union, other aspects of his foreign policy were disasters (e.g., Iran-Contra, Lebanon) and his economic policies produced recession and huge deficits.” One historian argued, “Reagan’s champions have been too quick to credit him with ending the cold war, and have brushed past a range of failures from civil rights to the environment to Iran-Contra.”

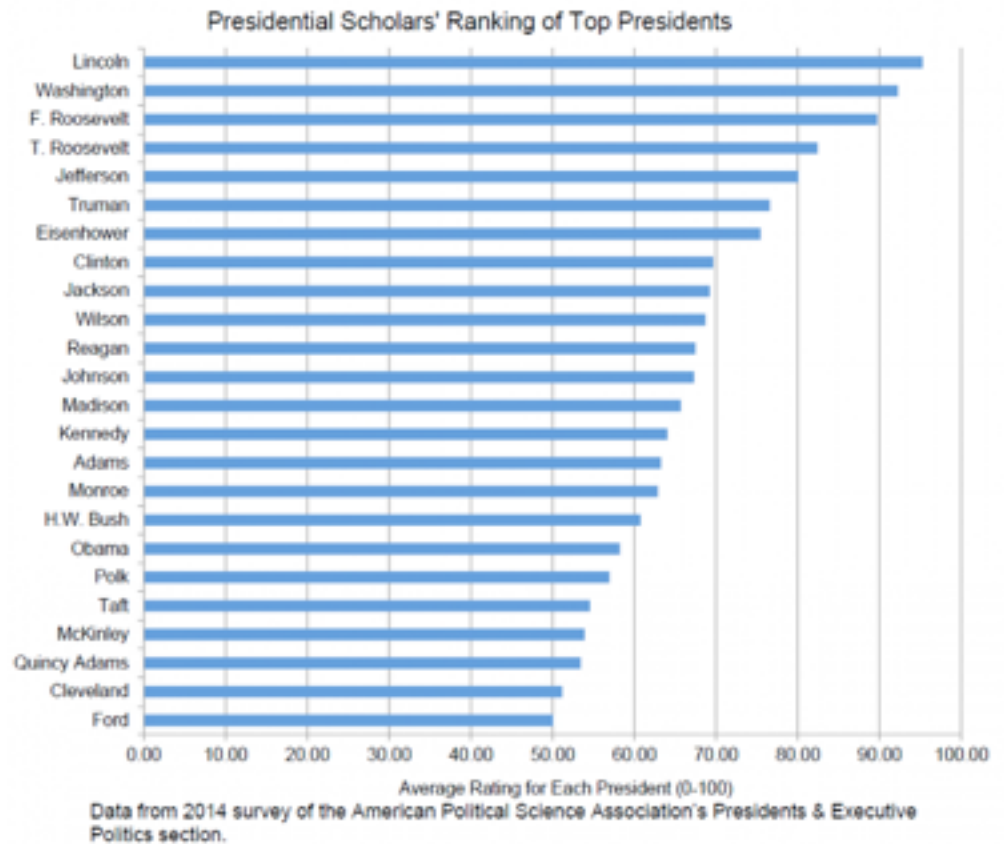
Nonetheless, there was a shocking consensus on the most overrated president—John Kennedy. When the opportunity to name the most over-rated presidents arose, fully 43 of the 78 scholars named John Kennedy. That a solid majority would volunteer his name suggests that his reputation is falling. Indeed, sometimes viewed in the category of the “Near Great,” Kennedy has now dropped into the bottom of the “Above Average” group. Indeed, he ranks one slot below Lyndon Johnson,⁹ who left office in disgrace. Political scientist Bruce Miroff argues: “Kennedy brought the Cold war to dangerous heights.”

Nonetheless, Kennedy has his defenders. One law professor argues that Kennedy was under-rated, “Kennedy transformed American politics; bringing to it a sense of personal style and the conviction that politics could be both idealistic and pragmatic.” Like Ronald Reagan and John Kennedy, Woodrow Wilson also have very substantial numbers of respondents who consider him over-rated.¹⁰

New ranking of U.S. presidents puts Lincoln at No. 1, Obama at 18;

The most highly ranked presidents contained many of the usual suspects. Abraham Lincoln was rated the greatest president, with an average score of 95 out of 100, followed by George Washington and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The rest in the top 10 were Teddy Roosevelt, Thomas Jefferson, Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Bill Clinton, Andrew Jackson and Woodrow Wilson. Those presidents with a score of more than 50 are graphed here.



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Below is the ranking of 42 chief executives averaged between the most eminent historians, Mr. Abe & Mr. Davey 

- 1.) Abraham Lincoln
- 2.) Franklin Roosevelt
- 3.) George Washington
- 4.) Theodore Roosevelt
- 5.) Thomas Jefferson
- 6.) Harry Truman
- 7.) James Madison
- 8.) Woodrow Wilson
- 9.) Dwight Eisenhower
- 10) Andrew Jackson
- 11) John Kennedy
- 12) Lyndon Johnson
- 13) James Polk
- 14) John Adams
- 15) Grover Cleveland
- 16) James Monroe
- 17) William McKinley
- 18) John Quincy Adams
- 19) George H.W. Bush
- 20) William Taft
- 21) Bill Clinton
- 22) Richard Nixon
- 23) Ronald Reagan
- 24) Martin Van Buren
- 25) Gerald Ford
- 26) Rutherford B. Hayes
- 27) Jimmy Carter
- 28) Chester Arthur
- 29) James Garfield
- 30) William H. Harrison
- 31) George W. Bush
- 32) Benjamin Harrison
- 33) Zachary Taylor
- 34) John Tyler
- 35) Herbert Hoover
- 36) Millard Fillmore
- 37) Franklin Pierce
- 38) Calvin Coolidge
- 39) Andrew Johnson
- 40) Ulysses S. Grant
- 41) James Buchanan
- 42.)Warren G. Harding

After studying US history and reading the attached article which presidents do you believe were the greatest in our history?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

How do you justify your placings?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

Who are the worst 2 in your mind and why?: