

Introduction

Their Place in History

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The Rating Game

It is not surprising that presidential rankings and ratings generate enormous interest and debate. The president of the United States is, after all, the most visible leader in the world, with countless media outlets and online sources covering his (and one day *her*) every move. So too is there a natural inclination to rate and rank all things, especially in America. The American public enthusiastically consumes the weekly polls of college football's "top 25" and the annual *US News and World Report* college rankings, lists of corporations in the Fortune 500 and the year's top-grossing movies, and all sorts of other ranking lists. Scholars have also been ranking and rating the presidents. Indeed, everyone with an opinion seems to get in on the action—whether it is a public opinion approval poll, a panel of commentators on a television talk show, co-workers huddled around the office water cooler, or even a group of professors working on a book. It is inevitable that we should ask, "How is the president doing?" (Pederson & McLaurin, 1987).

Americans have asked this question since the beginning. Indeed, the "cult" of the presidency was born shortly after George Washington's death in December 1799 when Parson Weems's imaginative book *The Life of Washington* lionized the Founder and created numerous legends about the first president. Perhaps the first effort to rate the chief executives

occurred nearly a century later in 1888 when the Irish-born diplomat and writer James Bryce published *The American Commonwealth*. In his ambitious account of the United States, Bryce placed the presidents into categories based on their achievements. His groupings included those whose deeds will be remembered in “the history of the world” such as Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Grant, while dismissing those presidents serving after Andrew Jackson and before Lincoln as “mere politicians.” In this latter respect, his assessment generally reflects the consensus of modern scholars (Brinkley, 2019).

Perhaps the first systematic and scholarly effort to assess the presidents occurred in 1948 when the noted Harvard professor Arthur M. Schlesinger surveyed a group of fifty-five of the nation’s leading historians. In his poll, Schlesinger asked the participants to rate the presidents by placing them into categories such as “great,” “near great,” and so on, all the way to “failure.” The results of this groundbreaking poll were published in *Life* magazine to much fanfare; and so the enterprise of ranking presidents was born (Schlesinger, 1948).

Interest in such ratings and polls has only increased over the years. Accordingly, several major presidential ranking polls have been commissioned and released since the 1948 study. New polls have been done every few years to update assessments and include recent presidents. Likewise, as more archival documents are released and new biographies written, further information becomes available to scholars, all of which creates more accurate assessments.

The passing of time also allows history to see the wisdom or error of presidential decisions, not only with enhanced accuracy, but in a more dispassionate and objective manner. What may once have seemed foolhardy and unpopular, for instance, may have ended up helping the nation and the world. Take Harry Truman’s role in the Marshall Plan, Berlin Airlift, desegregating the armed forces, and planning for the establishment of NATO, all of which once faced political opposition but now seem to be nothing less than visionary and bold.

There is clearly the need for early and continued assessment of the presidents. And so it was when Schlesinger conducted a second poll in 1962. This time, he surveyed seventy-five leading historians and published the results in the *New York Times Magazine*. The popularity of the rankings were given an added boost when it was learned that President John F. Kennedy, who was in office at the time of the poll, expressed interest in the new poll (and, it should be noted, also took

satisfaction in the fact that his predecessor, Dwight Eisenhower, was not rated very highly). Over the ensuing years, the rating polls grew to be something of a “cottage industry” which continues to the present time (Schlesinger, 1962; Schlesinger Jr., 2003).

As is evident in Table I.1 on page 4, polls have been conducted every few years and several scholars and organizations have participated in the rankings, including C-SPAN, the Siena Research Institute, the American Political Science Association, both Schlesinger and his son Arthur Jr., and others. The results generate an ever-increasing interest from scholars and the public (and likely the presidents themselves). The more recent polls also continue the practice of surveying professional historians and political scientists with expertise on the American presidency. However, the recent polls have added two twists—they sometimes employ larger numbers of respondents and often rate the presidents on specific aspects of the roles and responsibilities of the president. This latter point includes such factors as the quality of appointments, state of the economy, handling of foreign policy, ethical leadership, public speaking, crisis leadership, moral authority, relations with Congress, and so on (C-SPAN, 2000; Murray & Blessing, 1994; Schlesinger Jr., 1996; SRI, 2010).

The popularity of these presidential rankings has even translated to polls on the first ladies and presidential cabinets. Like the presidential rating polls, these rankings also survey leading scholars of the presidency and first ladyship, and typically ask respondents to either rank their subjects from best to worst or place them into categories similar to those used by Schlesinger and other pollsters (Watson, 2003; Watson, 2000; Watson, 1999).

Obviously, the task of ranking or rating presidents is both important and an ongoing endeavor. The same is true for assessing individual presidents such as Barack Obama, although it is an undertaking marked by challenges and controversy.

Methodology

The noted Lincoln scholar David Herbert Donald used to tell the story of visiting with President John. F. Kennedy in 1962. During their conversation, the president expressed his concern about the methodology behind the rankings, maintaining, “No one has a right to grade a president—not

Table I.1. Leading Presidential Ranking Polls

PRESIDENT	1948	1962	1982	1996	1996	2000	2010	2017	2018
Washington	02	02	03	02	03	03	04	02	02
J. Adams	09	10	09	11	14	16	17	19	14
Jefferson	05	05	04	04	04	07	05	07	05
Madison	14	12	14	17	10	18	06	17	12
Monroe	12	18	15	15	13	14	07	13	18
J. Q. Adams	11	13	16	18	18	19	19	21	23
Jackson	06	06	07	05	08	13	14	18	15
Van Buren	15	17	20	21	21	30	23	34	27
W. Harrison	X	X	X	X	35	37	35	38	42
Tyler	22	25	28	32	34	36	37	39	37
Polk	10	08	12	09	11	12	12	14	20
Taylor	25	24	27	29	29	28	33	31	35
Fillmore	24	26	29	31	36	35	38	37	38
Pierce	27	28	31	33	37	39	40	41	41
Buchanan	26	29	33	38	40	41	42	43	43
Lincoln	01	01	01	01	01	01	03	01	01
A. Johnson	19	23	32	37	39	40	43	42	40
Grant	28	30	35	33	38	33	26	22	21
Hayes	13	14	22	23	25	26	31	32	29
Garfield	X	X	X	X	30	29	27	29	34
Arthur	17	21	23	26	28	32	25	35	31
Cleveland	08	11	17	13	16	17	20	23	24
B. Harrison	21	20	26	19	31	31	34	30	32
McKinley	18	15	18	16	17	15	21	16	19
T. Roosevelt	07	07	05	06	05	04	02	04	04
Taft	16	16	19	22	20	20	24	24	22
Wilson	04	04	06	07	06	06	08	11	11
Harding	29	31	36	39	41	38	40	40	39
Coolidge	23	27	30	30	33	27	29	27	28
Hoover	20	19	21	33	24	34	36	36	36
F. Roosevelt	03	03	02	02	02	02	01	03	03
Truman	–	08	08	08	07	05	09	06	06
Eisenhower	–	21	11	10	09	09	10	05	07
Kennedy	–	–	13	12	15	08	11	08	15
L. Johnson	–	–	10	14	12	10	16	10	10
Nixon	–	–	34	36	32	25	30	28	33
Ford	–	–	24	28	27	23	28	25	25
Carter	–	–	25	27	19	22	32	26	26
Reagan	–	–	–	25	26	11	18	09	09
G. H. Bush	–	–	–	24	22	20	22	20	17
Clinton	–	–	–	20	23	21	13	15	13

PRESIDENT	1948	1962	1982	1996	1996	2000	2010	2017	2018
G. W. Bush	-	-	-	-	-	-	39	33	30
Obama	-	-	-	-	-	-	15	12	08
Trump	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	44
Total N	29	31	36	39	41	41	43	43	44

Key: The president was not ranked (x)
The president did not yet serve his full term (-)
There are also a few ties in the polls

Polls: 1948 Arthur M. Schlesinger Poll
1962 Arthur M. Schlesinger Poll
1982 Robert K. Murray & Tim H. Blessing Poll
1996 Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. Poll
1996 William J. Ridings Jr. & Stuart McIver Poll
2000 C-SPAN Poll
2010 Siena Research Institute Poll
2017 C-SPAN Poll
2018 American Political Science Association Poll

Table I.2. Leading First Lady Ranking Polls

FIRST LADIES	1982	1993	1999	2003	2003	2008	2014	2018
Washington	9	12	4	13	5	9	9	10
A. Adams	2	3	2	2	4	2	2	6
Jefferson	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Madison	4	4	3	3	2	6	4	4
Monroe	23	23	24	31	31	29	30	31
L. Adams	14	16	22	12	26	21	18	23
Jackson	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Van Buren	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
A. Harrison	22	X	39	X	X	X	X	40
L. Tyler	31	30	30	34	35	35	37	36
J. Tyler	24	27	28	26	28	28	27	32
Polk	21	20	6	10	11	26	23	19
Taylor	29	33	31	35	36	34	35	37
Fillmore	25	31	15	29	25	32	32	33
Pierce	33	34	37	38	37	38	39	41
Lane	X	X	7	X	X	X	X	X
Lincoln	37	37	38	36	33	36	31	30
E. Johnson	20	24	16	22	32	33	38	39

continued on next page

Table I.2. Continued.

FIRST LADIES	1982	1993	1999	2003	2003	2008	2014	2018
Grant	19	26	7	18	18	24	22	24
Hayes	12	15	21	14	12	18	20	26
Garfield	27	28	14	30	X	27	28	34
Arthur	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Cleveland	13	22	9	23	15	20	26	25
C. Harrison	30	29	25	25	16	30	29	28
McKinley	35	32	32	32	34	31	34	35
Ed. Roosevelt	10	14	12	9	10	11	13	16
Taft	18	25	35	21	22	22	25	22
El. Wilson	16	21	10	19	19	13	19	17
Ed. Wilson	7	10	28	11	13	10	14	14
Harding	36	35	36	37	29	37	36	29
Coolidge	17	19	26	17	23	17	21	20
Hoover	11	13	27	16	14	14	17	13
El. Roosevelt	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Truman	15	11	18	20	27	16	16	27
Eisenhower	28	17	33	27	30	19	24	21
Kennedy	8	7	11	4	8	3	3	7
C. Johnson	3	6	17	7	3	5	7	5
Nixon	32	18	23	33	24	25	33	18
Ford	6	9	4	8	9	7	8	8
Carter	5	5	20	6	7	8	10	9
Reagan	34	36	34	28	21	15	15	15
B. Bush	–	8	19	15	17	12	11	12
Clinton	–	2	13	5	6	4	6	3
L. Bush	–	–	–	24	20	23	12	11
Obama	–	–	–	–	–	–	5	2
Trump	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	38
Total N	37	37	39	38	37	38	39	41

Key: The first lady was not ranked or was deceased (x)
 The first lady did not yet serve in office (–)
 There are also a few ties in the polls
 James Buchanan never married; his niece Harriet Lane served as his hostess

Polls: 1982 Siena Research Institute Poll
 1993 Siena Research Institute Poll
 1999 Watson Poll
 2003 Siena Research Institute Poll
 2003 Watson Poll
 2008 Siena Research Institute Poll
 2014 Siena Research Institute Poll
 2018 Watson Poll

even poor James Buchanan—who has not sat in his chair, examined the mail and information that came across his desk, and learned why he made his decisions” (Donald, 1995). On the other hand, President Theodore Roosevelt viewed the matter simply. In the opinion of the “Bull Moose,” presidents could be placed into one of two broad categories—they were either the “Lincoln type” or the “Buchanan type.” Of course, Roosevelt dominated his contemporary political stage as a Lincoln-esque leader (Smith, 2019). Yet, the rankings are rarely so obvious.

Methodologically, one of the inherent problems in assessing presidents is the small “N” (limited number of presidents). As of this writing, only forty-four men have served in forty-five presidencies (Grover Cleveland was both the twenty-second and twenty-fourth president). The problem of the sample size is simply one of the limitations facing any effort to rank or rate the presidents, but a shortcoming that does not hinder an assessment of a single president such as Barack Obama. It is also exceedingly difficult to compare presidents across time, as the nature of the office and events facing the country when John Adams governed were quite different than those that marked Obama’s presidency. Moreover, there is much variation among the presidents. Each has had his own style and challenges, as well as his successes and failures. Therefore, it is exceedingly difficult to even compare presidents.

Not all the presidents are ranked in all the polls. For instance, some scholars omit William Henry Harrison, who served just one month in office before his untimely death, and James Garfield, who was assassinated during his inaugural year in the presidency. Because both men died early in their presidential terms it is next to impossible to rank them in the same polls with presidents who served the full four or eight years. The same might even be said for Zachary Taylor, who passed away halfway into his second year in office, making it difficult to judge his performance. As a result, few scholars have attempted to offer detailed assessments of these three presidents (Pious, 2003).

The ranking polls do not include the pre- or postpresidential years. While some presidents have continued their public service after leaving the White House, such as John Quincy Adams and Andrew Johnson, who were elected to the U.S. House and U.S. Senate, respectively, and William Howard Taft, who served on the U.S. Supreme Court, this service is not factored in to the assessments. Relatedly, some former presidents have distinguished themselves in other ways after leaving office that ended up improving their public image. This includes Richard Nixon, who wrote a number of successful books after his presidency, Jimmy Carter, who was

tireless in his work with Habitat for Humanity and efforts to monitor elections around the world, and Bill Clinton, whose presidential center has run a number of global initiatives (Skidmore, 2004).

However, even if such service helps to offset the impact of Nixon's Watergate scandal, Carter's 444-day Iranian hostage crisis, or Clinton's affair with an intern, the postpresidential years are not factored into the ratings. Only presidential performance while in office is considered. On the other hand, much like biographies, assessments of individual presidents do concern themselves with the president's early years, entire career, and postpresidencies. That is the case with the present book.

It is not just *whom* to assess, but the matter of *when* to rate them that proves problematic. For instance, there are convenient milestones in a presidency—the end of the “first hundred days” and the midterm election, for instance—which naturally lend themselves to examining a president's progress in office. But, such assessments are only initial assessments, as it often takes years to get a full appreciation for a presidential legacy. Consider the cases of Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower, both of whom were seen in modest terms during the initial years after their presidencies. The standing of both presidents, however, has risen dramatically with the passing of time. Therein is the challenge of assessing not only presidents who are still in office, but also those who only recently completely their presidencies, as is the case for Obama.

To be sure, there has always been movement in the rankings and no presidential reputation has suffered more in recent years than that of Andrew Jackson. While Old Hickory used to enjoy a spot just outside the “great” tier and was heralded as being the first “populist” president and a champion for the common folk, recent scholarship has focused on his role as an “Indian killer,” brutal slave owner, and something of a contrary, knee-jerk reactionary. The Seventh President's standing continues to fall, while his future on the twenty dollar bill seems doomed. So too is his protégé's standing undergoing reassessment. James K. Polk is no longer seen simply as the leader behind the Mexican-American War of 1846–1858. Rather, Young Hickory's legacy now includes his unfettered pursuit of war in the name of Manifest Destiny and continental imperialism. This movement in the rankings also includes those at the bottom. A new appreciation for Ulysses Grant's role in promoting rights for all and his principled decision making has elevated the former Civil War general out of the “failure” category. Yet, hapless Warren Harding and James Buchanan seem destined to remain as cellar dwellers in the rankings (Smith, 2019).

Indeed, a president's standing is not fixed; rather, it varies as new information comes to light, new biographies are written, additional archival documents are available to scholars, and as we look back at history from the vantage point of hindsight. The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) releases presidential papers through the presidential libraries it administers, but it often takes ten or more years before all the documents are available. Therefore, it can take years before a firm rendering of a legacy can be offered. We will likely not have the full picture of the Obama presidency for some years, even if a compelling argument can be made to begin the enterprise now. Either way, it will certainly be a contentious and ongoing affair (Pederson & McLaurin, 1987).

As is the case after one hundred days or at the midterm, there are other occasions when scholars come together to reassess certain presidents. One example was in 1999, when Washington scholars took advantage of the bicentennial of the great general's passing to reassess his standing. The "Father of His Country" had, during the 1990s and 2000s, slipped a position or two from his lofty ratings in some of the polls, which compelled historians to reexamine Washington. Traveling museum exhibits, academic conferences, and numerous publications during the bicentennial celebration restated the case for Washington and led to a flurry of new scholarship. Likewise, the year 2009 marked the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth, and Lincoln scholars celebrated with a variety of bicentennial programs and festivities and numerous publications seized the opportunity to reexamine the Great Emancipator's legacy (Watson, Pederson, & Williams, 2010).

As such, there is the need not only for an initial assessment soon after the conclusion of a president's time in office, but for frequent reevaluations in the years to come. This may be especially true for Obama, a president who evoked strong and mixed feelings from Democrats and Republicans. Paradoxically, he was, after all, a president who was celebrated as one of the better presidents, yet decried as being one of the worst. It is certainly hard to think of another president before him who received media coverage running the full gambit from great to failure, depending on the particular news outlet and the day of the week. Obama was the subject of relentless social media movements designed to discredit his every policy, question his patriotism, assert that he was not even an American citizen, and allege ties to and support for terror organizations. It remains unclear how these occurrences will ultimately factor into an assessment of his legacy.

There are also considerations as to who should be charged with assessing the presidents. Countless opinion polls conducted by an array of polling organizations, universities, and major media outlets routinely examine the president's approval and disapproval numbers. Even though these polls offer a helpful snapshot of public opinion, they are limited in what they offer history in terms of a president's legacy and rating. They are also too narrow in their scope and far too temporary in their resonance to be of much use to scholars trying to weigh a president's legacy (Pious, 2003).

For instance, C-SPAN, Gallup, and other organizations have polled the American public and asked them to evaluate the presidents, indicate their favorite presidents, or list the greatest and worst presidents. The results tend to reflect popular and contemporaneous political preferences and are appallingly ahistorical. For example, such polls have listed John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan ahead of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, results no serious scholar of the American presidency would support. One recent poll revealed that 13 percent of the public listed Bill Clinton as the top president, while 20 percent of the respondents felt Clinton was the worst president. It is, of course, interesting that any president could be considered as both the best *and* worst president concurrently. But such results merely reflect the public's focus on the most recent presidents and lack of knowledge about earlier commanders in chief (C-SPAN, 2011).

Therefore, only professional historians and political scientists with expertise in the presidency are asked to participate in the ranking polls or books such as this one. As to the number of scholars polled, the range varies from the thirties to the seventies, however, one of the Siena Research Institute polls had 238 participants and the Murray-Blessing poll employed a whopping seventeen-page instrument and polled 953 scholars (Murray & Blessing, 1982; SRI, 2010).

One other valuable resource for assessing presidents is the president's own writings. Fortunately, all presidents serving from Herbert Hoover onward have presidential libraries. Administered by NARA, these libraries house the president's papers. These papers are made available to scholars and the public a few years after the president leaves office, in compliance with the 1978 Presidential Records Act. There are also numerous edited and published collections of presidential papers and many excellent biographies for most of the presidents.

So too did several presidents pen memoirs. Scholars are in general agreement that among the most insightful are those by Ulysses Grant

and Harry Truman. Sadly, some of the great presidents such as Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt did not survive their terms in office and history has been denied their memoirs. Other presidents chose not to pen accounts of their time in office, while still others wrestled with imperfect and selective memories in producing accounts of their presidencies. All presidents have worried about or at least been conscious of their standing in history. Several, most notably Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, Richard Nixon, and Bill Clinton, have been quite aware of how their legacies might be understood and shaped over time, while Ronald Reagan's supporters continue to actively promote his legacy. James Buchanan, who wrote his memoir shortly after the Civil War said of his failed term in office that he hoped history would not be too harsh in its judgment. It was.

Going forward, a number of methodological challenges surrounding the polls will remain. Likewise, the increasingly divided and partisan nature of the times in which Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump served will pose additional problems (Pious, 2003; Watson, Covarrubias, Lansford, & Brattebo, 2012). What is clear is that there are inherent limitations in attempting to assess—and especially in attempting to rank—presidents. Such is the case for Obama who, as of this writing, has only been out of office a few years and was a president who was seen in radically different ways by the American public. It is also inescapable that, as the first African American and bicultural president ever to serve, race will factor in to future assessments of his presidency.

Controversies

Even when leading scholars have been employed in the effort to rank the presidents, methodological criticisms exist. For instance, some pundits have suggested a “Harvard yard bias.” These critics maintain that the professors who rate presidents are liberals with a natural preference for activist presidents and an inability to approach the task professionally or objectively (Bailey, 1967; Felzenberg, 1997; Felzenberg, 2003). They point to the fact that several Republican presidents in the twentieth century fared poorly in the polls while, conversely, several Democrats were rated highly. To counter this alleged bias, some conservative organizations began polling groups of conservatives. An Intercollegiate Studies Institute ranking, for instance, polled thirty-eight scholars with a conservative bent and, not surprisingly, found that Democratic presidents fared far

worse than in other polls, with Clinton and Lyndon B. Johnson even listed as “failures” and Reagan as one of the nation’s greatest presidents (Pierson, 1997). Of course, such results are nonsense and it does not help the enterprise by stacking a poll or study one way or the other.

Tim Blessing, who has both rated presidents and written about the polls, argues that bias is not an issue in most scholarly polls (Blessing, 2003). He points to the poor presidencies of such Republicans as Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover, who served consecutive terms in the 1920s, and the scandalous presidencies of other Republicans including Ulysses Grant and Richard Nixon as accounting for the reason why a cumulative average ranking of Republicans tends to be somewhat lower than the Democratic average. Of course, Democratic averages have benefited by such impressive presidents as Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson, who served from 1933 to 1969 with the exception of Eisenhower’s two terms in the middle of that streak. It should also be noted that the scholarly ranking polls have placed early Democratic presidents—James Buchanan, John Tyler, and Franklin Pierce—toward the bottom of the polls, while such Republicans as Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln are nearly always in the top five spots.

It is difficult to use present-day party labels for early presidents, as the parties of the nineteenth century had nearly polar opposite platforms of those in the subsequent century and today. Yet, at the same time, recent presidents of both parties such as Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter have been ranked as average in the polls, and there is wide agreement by nearly all of the scholars as to this placement and those discussed in the aforementioned paragraphs (these results are supported by the editors of this book).

Criticisms of the ratings have also centered on concerns of “maleness.” The celebrated scholar James MacGregor Burns noted that presidents were assessed by males, from male perspectives, and according to male traits. Matters such as war, law and order, and other “force” issues have been prioritized in some of the polls and ratings. Fortunately, recent polls have included several female participants and women are comprising an ever-increasing presence among the ranks of presidential scholars (Burns, 1984; Burns, 1973).

Another issue pertains to the age-old question of whether the “times makes the man” (or, it might be said, whether the president makes the times). Did Washington, Lincoln, and FDR, for example, have

the opportunity to achieve greatness because of the momentous events thrust upon them? Teddy Roosevelt, for instance, even worried whether his presidency would be seen in positive terms because he believed he did not have the requisite war or crisis to allow him to achieve a lofty status. However, TR ended up commanding his times and transforming the office and nation. On the other side of history was James Buchanan who had a looming war and national crisis but severely mishandled both.

Perhaps the main challenge to assessing presidential performance is the vagueness of the roles and responsibilities outlined in Article II of the Constitution. As a result, the approach to the office has varied over time as much as have the presidents themselves. Perhaps the late, great scholar Clinton Rossiter summed it up best, when he quipped, "The president is not a Gulliver immobilized by ten thousand tiny cords, nor even a Prometheus chained to a rock of frustration. He is, rather, a kind of magnificent lion who can roam widely and do great deeds so long as he does not try to break loose from his broad reservation" (Kutler, 1990, p. 607).

Accordingly, some of the same behaviors that earn a president praise can also undermine his administration. How is John Adams to be assessed? He implemented the Alien and Sedition Acts, which chiseled away basic freedoms, yet he also acted boldly to prevent an expanded war with France, even though going to war was popular and his hesitancy ended up devastating his Federalist Party. Or, take the case of Lyndon Johnson who advocated for the 1964 Civil Rights Act and followed it up by signing Medicare into law the following year. It is difficult to balance these efforts with his penchant for bullying behavior and his expansion of the Vietnam War. How are such presidents as Adams and Johnson to be ranked?

Not surprisingly, there are many disagreements among scholars about how to attempt to rank presidents. While Schlesinger and his son favored asking scholars to place the presidents into categories such as "great," "near great," and so on, other polls have used a "holistic" approach by asking respondents to simply list the presidents chronologically from best to worst. Others have used a "mechanistic" approach by rating the president according to several categories that pertain to the major roles and responsibilities of the office. As to which categories should be used, it will likely not surprise the reader to learn that different scholars use different criteria. There are, however, some similarities across the students. Barbara A. Perry, Director of Presidential Studies and Co-Chair of the Presidential

Oral History Program at the University of Virginia's Miller Center, notes that historians consider roughly ten key "characteristics" in assessing a president's legacy. These include winning election/re-election, legislative record, management of the economy, handling of crises, Supreme Court appointments, international leadership, communication skills, scandals, approval ratings, and political legacy (Rothman, 2017).

Stephen J. Wayne, a leading voice in presidency studies, suggests several frameworks for assessing a president, including constitutional, legislative-based, quantitative, and public opinion (Wayne, 2003). Other leading scholars have also weighed in with their own approaches to the task. This includes Richard Neustadt who advocated a power-based approach (Neustadt, 1991; Neustadt, 1980), James MacGregor Burns and Fred Greenstein who used a president's leadership style and the notion of democratic leadership (Burns, 1984; Burns, 1973; Greenstein, 2000; Greenstein, 1988), and Sydney Milkis and Michael Nelson, who recommended focusing on political leadership (Milkis & Nelson, 2007). Other, more recent and creative approaches have been recommended such as examining how well presidents overcame the paradoxes inherent within the challenging office (Cronin & Genovese, 2009), considering the historic and cyclical periods in which presidents have served (Skowronek, 2011), and the rhetorical style used by presidents to motivate people (Kernel, 2006).

Table I.3. Major Approaches to Assessing Presidents

Political (Wayne)	Historical (Rothman)	Rankings (SRI)
Use of Power	Winning Election/Reelection	Party Leadership
Leadership Style	Legislative Record	Communication
Democratic Leadership	Management of Economy	Relations with Congress
Political Leadership	Handling of Crises	Court Appointments
Overcoming Paradoxes	Supreme Court Appointments	Handling of Economy
Historical Cycles	International Leadership	Ability to Compromise
Rhetorical Style	Communication Skills	Executive Appointments
	Scandals	Risk Taking
	Approval Ratings	Imagination
	Durability of Policies	Foreign Policy
		Domestic Policy
		Executive Ability
		Intelligence
		Avoiding Crucial Mistakes

It is often said that, in the presidency, character is king (Shogun, 1999). And so, one of the more popular approaches in assessing presidents is character, whereby both a president's leadership qualities and personality traits are examined. Character transcends personality insofar as presidents such as Kennedy and Reagan benefited from their charm and likeability. But it is an altogether more challenging task to try and define character and examine its impact in the White House. Character includes judgment, disposition, worldview, and personal style; but it is much more. The noted presidency scholar James David Barber proposed using political psychology to determine a president's fitness for office, predict behavior, and, ultimately, assess performance. While Barber's methods received mixed reviews from scholars, his basic premise remains useful (Barber, 1992; Renshon, 1975).

In terms of character, would the fact that George H. W. Bush violated his main campaign pledge—"Read my lips, no new taxes"—be a betrayal and personality flaw? Or would it be better understood as being flexible in the face of the realities of the situation? In the latter scenario, adaptability is a positive personality and leadership trait. Nor is character simply a matter of being ethical. Jimmy Carter and Calvin Coolidge were ethical individuals but neither one is rated highly by scholars or has been said to have been made of the "right stuff" for presidential greatness.

Indeed, character transcends a lack of scandal or a penchant for honesty. Yet, many presidents, such as Nixon, have been ruined by scandal. Others such as Clinton and Reagan had their legacies blemished by scandal, but remained rather popular, and scholars are still debating how to assess Clinton's affair involving an intern and Reagan's Iran-Contra scandal. For instance, how should the admittedly impressive budget surpluses and economic growth of the Clinton years be considered against the lies surrounding his affair with a young intern? Marital infidelity did not ruin the ratings for other presidents such as FDR or Eisenhower, just as the horrific practice of owning slaves has not denied Washington and Jefferson their lofty rankings. How should Reagan's considerable popularity be judged relative to the fact that he violated international norms and laws against trading weapons to an enemy such as Iran and subverted governments in Central America, all the while lying and trying to cover up the scandals? The answers to all these questions remain elusive.

Indeed, questions of character and scandal are complicated. FDR could be both coldly calculating and disingenuous but also compassionate

and charismatic, revealing a vastly complex character. He is rated as one of the nation's greatest presidents and is sometimes held up as the standard by which all presidents in modern times are judged.

To be sure, not all scandals are created equal; a case in point is the nature of the differences between the scandals associated with President Nixon—which were crimes of *commission*—and the scandals of President Grant—which were crimes of *omission*. A case can be made that Nixon's scandals were not only worse but more indicative of a lapse of character. Not all mistakes are created equal; it is hard to imagine the elder Bush's verbal miscues being equivalent to his son's mismanagement of two long wars or Clinton's marital peccadilloes rising to the level of Reagan's complicity in attempting to trade armaments to rogue regimes in the Middle East.

There is no clear answer to how best to approach the task of assessing a president. Accordingly, this book adopts an array of frameworks to assess Obama's presidency including all the aforementioned approaches—holistic, categories based on the major roles and responsibilities of the president, and the frameworks used in some of the leading books on presidential performance and leadership and ranking polls.

Assessing Obama

As of this writing, Obama's presidential library has not yet opened and the collection of Obama papers and documents is still being organized. However, some of the Obama papers are beginning to be made available to scholars and the former president has written books including autobiographies. At the same time, numerous historians are also now working on books about the forty-fourth president. All of these resources will play a role in shaping both the initial assessment of his presidency and his ultimate legacy. Of course, at the same time, television pundits and both the blogosphere and social media are ripe with all sorts of colorful perspectives on Obama.

The Obama presidency is noteworthy for many reasons; most obviously, he was the first African American president and he was reelected to a second term. However, another prominent aspect of his legacy was the devastating defeats his party endured in the midterm elections of 2010 and 2014. While it is the historical case that the president's party has generally fared poorly in midterms over the past century, the

Democratic Party lost a whopping sixty-three seats in the House and six in the Senate in 2010. In the next midterm they lost thirteen seats in the House and nine in the Senate. For context, it is worth noting that the average size of the midterm losses for the party in power since 1862 has been two seats in the Senate and thirty-two seats in the House of Representatives.

The Obama years were also noteworthy for what did not happen. President Obama managed to avoid a serious scandal and the closet full of ethical brouhahas that were a part of some recent White Houses. With respect to the role that scandal plays in shaping a presidential legacy, as listed in Table 1.3, Obama's presidency was, in the words of Professor Perry, "remarkably free" from scandal. He also avoided major political and policy mistakes and crises.

On the policy front, Obama passed landmark measures on health-care and climate change, is generally given high marks for his court appointments, was able to pass an economic recovery package and preside over a remarkable resurgence of an economy in recession, and remained rather popular after leaving office, all of which will likely boost his legacy. However, in terms of some of the other criteria used by historians, Obama's relations with Congress were, at best, strained, irrespective of whether the fault rests with him or not, and he suffered some foreign policy missteps. He was unable to muster support for a comprehensive gun control bill and some of his treaties and appointments stalled in a hostile Congress. It also remains to be seen whether his policies will survive the aggressive dismantling during the initial years of the Trump administration.

Another aspect of Obama's legacy will likely be that the size, scope, and roles of the federal government grew under his presidency, largely in response to the extraordinary array of domestic, fiscal, and international challenges he faced upon assuming the office, and in part due to his personal philosophical and ideological views on governance. This growth must be understood from the standpoint of one of Obama's main accomplishments. When he was sworn in as president, the nation was in the grips of the Great Recession, the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. The stock market had dropped precipitously, unemployment numbers were growing, reaching 10 percent in October of his first year in office, and the annual budget deficit had skyrocketed to 1.6 trillion dollars. However, by the end of the Obama years, the stock market and economy had enjoyed seven consecutive years of expansion,

unemployment had fallen to 4 percent, and the budget deficit had been reduced by two-thirds according to nonpartisan government reports by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and Office of Management and Budget (BLS; OMB, 2018). Still, debate raged over the president's decision to bail out the failing U.S. auto manufacturers, promote an economic stimulus package, and his Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP). Although all three efforts appear, by any objective measure, to have succeeded, they required an aggressive role for the federal government, which was controversial.

Yet, long before Obama was inaugurated, the office had grown to the point where it scarcely resembled the office held by Washington, Lincoln, or most of the presidents for that matter. In spite of the limitations imposed on the presidency by the cautious Framers, the office has grown to become the most dominant force in the American political system. The evolution of the presidency has been in response to crises and changes in society, as well as presidential character and viewpoints. The growth under Obama was no exception to this history.

Three other factors make it even more challenging to make sense of the Obama years. First, Obama's presidency occurred during the explosion of new social media and communications technologies, from Facebook and Twitter to iPhones and tablets, all of which impacted the nature of politics in far-reaching ways, both good and bad. Second, one of the dilemmas in assessing Obama is the current political climate, spawned in part by these very advances in telecommunications. With the nation in the throes of hyperpartisanship, incivility, and what might politely be deemed political dysfunction, the assessment of any president has become increasingly problematic and contentious in recent years. Many readers would probably admit that having an honest and objective discussion with office mates or even family members about Presidents Obama and Trump has been, at best, elusive and, at worst, a shouting match. Sadly, both the truth and civil discourse are threatened by the current climate of division, anger, and fact-optional politics.

Take, for example, Obama's policies to expand health care coverage, regulate assault weapons, and defer action on immigrants brought to the country as children, or his efforts to forge international alliances to deal with Iran's nuclear ambitions, expand trade in the Pacific, and address global climate change. All of these policies have been both enthusiastically celebrated and anxiously condemned, depending on

whether one is a Democrat or Republican. Subsequently, the same was true when Trump did the opposite of his predecessor—limit funding for “ObamaCare,” oppose gun regulations, and promote the deportation of illegal children. So too were his efforts to withdraw from treaties and agreements on Iran’s nuclear ambitions, trade in the Pacific, and global climate change met with both applause and gasps. Of course, differing political perspectives have always produced debate and varying levels of support or opposition to policies and presidents.

Third, so too has Obama faced unrealistic expectations from the public and the legacy of the “imperial presidency” described by Schlesinger, whereby the sheer array of interest groups, rising expectations, and the complexity of challenges pose nearly insurmountable obstacles for the president (Schlesinger Jr., 2004). As President Carter once admitted, “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” (Hodgson, 1980, p. 25). As professors Cronin and Genovese noted, the public has impossible expectations, wanting the president to address every problem while distrusting the centralized power necessary for him to do so (Cronin & Genovese, 2009, 1998). The inherent paradoxes of the presidency seem to be more challenging than ever.

Ironically, the clamor for nonpartisan and bipartisan approaches is more prevalent than ever while society struggles with the most bitter partisanship and venomous political tone in decades; and the “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” aspect of the Oval Office is more pronounced than ever. The editors and contributors fully expect that this book will arouse debate, which is a good thing. Every effort was made to mitigate such pitfalls by having multiple editors and contributors, all with diverse academic backgrounds, and by employing an array of theoretical frameworks and approaches to assess Obama.

It is difficult to evaluate a president who only recently left office. Accordingly, this evaluation does not pretend to be the definitive word. Far from it, as years will pass before a conclusive account can be forwarded. However, it is time for the assessment to begin and this book provides a relatively comprehensive account of numerous significant policy issues faced by Obama, a dispassionate historical examination of the events surrounding the Obama presidency, and a preliminary assessment of the major facets of his presidency, character, and administration. Neither Obama nor this book will have the final word on his legacy.

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