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Rating the Presidents: Washington to Clinton

ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER, JR.

My father, the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, started it all nearly half a century ago. In 1948 he asked fifty-five leading historians how they rated the American presidents. The results, published in *Life* magazine just before Harry Truman confounded the prophets and won reelection, excited much interest and also much controversy. In 1962 the *New York Times Magazine* prevailed upon my father to repeat the poll. Again much interest and much controversy.

In 1996 the *New York Times Magazine* asked a less eminent historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., to replicate his father's poll. The results appeared in the issue of 15 December 1996 under the title "The Ultimate Approval Rating." Space limitations required the omission of much historical and methodological commentary. With the kind permission of the *New York Times Magazine*, here is the more complete report.

The Schlesinger polls asked historians to place each president (omitting William Henry Harrison and James A. Garfield because they died so soon after taking office) in one of five categories: Great, Near Great, Average, Below Average, and Failure.¹ The standard was not lifetime achievement but performance in the White House. As to how presidential performance was to be judged, the scholars were left to decide for themselves. It was assumed that historians would recognize greatness—or failure—when they saw it, as Justice Potter Stewart once proposed to recognize pornography.

Presidents might well have wondered (and some did): who are historians to arrogate to themselves the judging of presidential performance? Dwight D.

¹ Mrs. Leonard Lyons, after reading the *New York Times Magazine* article, wrote the author, not without justice: "Some categories other than yours come to mind: Dope, Lucky Stiff, Bumbler, etc.—which makes me realize how resilient Americans are if they can survive such as these."

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Eisenhower, who did badly in the Schlesinger 1962 poll, accused the scholars of equating “an individual’s strength of dedication with oratorical bombast; determination, with public repetition of a catchy phrase; achievement, with the exaggerated use of the vertical pronoun.”² “History will treat me fairly,” said Richard M. Nixon, drawing an odd distinction. “Historians probably won’t. They are mostly on the left.”³

Other presidents felt that people who had never been president could not possibly appreciate what presidents go through. “Trials and encouragement come to each president,” wrote Calvin Coolidge in an unwonted lyrical outburst. “It is impossible to explain them. Even after passing through the presidential office, it still remains a great mystery. . . . Like the glory of a morning sunrise, it can only be experienced—it cannot be told.”⁴

John F. Kennedy too came to doubt whether the quality of the presidential experience could be understood by those who had not shared it. My father sent his 1962 questionnaire to the historian who had written *Profiles in Courage* and *A Nation of Immigrants*. Kennedy started to fill it out; then changed his mind. “A year ago,” he wrote my father, “I would have responded with confidence . . . but now I am not so sure. After being in the office for a year, I feel that a good deal more study is required to make my judgment sufficiently informed. There is a tendency to mark the obvious names. I would like to subject those not so well known to a long scrutiny after I have left this office.”

He said to me later, “How the hell can you tell? Only the president himself can know what his real pressures and real alternatives are. If you don’t know that, how can you judge performance?” Some of his greatest predecessors, he went on, were given credit for doing things when they could have done nothing else; only detailed inquiry could disclose what difference a president made by his individual contribution. War, he observed, made it easier for a president to achieve greatness. But would Abraham Lincoln have been judged so great a president if he had had to face the almost insoluble problem of Reconstruction?

For all his skepticism, Kennedy read the results of my father’s 1962 poll with fascination. He was greatly pleased that Truman was voted a Near Great, nor was he displeased that Eisenhower came in twenty-second, near the bottom of the Averages. Later, jokingly or half-jokingly, he blamed Eisenhower’s vigorous entry into the 1962 congressional elections on the historians. “It’s all your father’s poll,” he said. “Eisenhower has been going along for years, basking in the glow of applause he has always had. Then he saw that poll and realized how he stood before the cold eye of history—way below Truman; even below Hoover. Now he’s mad to save his reputation.”⁵

² Dwight D. Eisenhower to James C. Hagerty, 18 October 1966 in R. Gordon Hoxie, *Command Decision and the Presidency* (New York: Reader’s Digest Press, 1977), 245.

³ Richard M. Nixon on *Meet the Press*, 10 April 1988 (responding to a question by John Chancellor).

⁴ Calvin Coolidge, *Autobiography* (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corp., 1929), 234, 194.

⁵ The Kennedy quotes are from Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 674–675.

Kennedy was surprised that the historians voted Woodrow Wilson a Great, placing him number four after Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, while ranking Andrew Jackson only number six and a Near Great. Though a fine speaker and writer, Wilson, in Kennedy's view, had failed in a number of cherished objectives. Why did professors admire him so much? (I suggested that he was, after all, the only professor to make the White House.)

Kennedy was surprised too by Theodore Roosevelt's ranking—number seven and a Near Great; TR had really got very little significant legislation through Congress. Why should Wilson and TR rate ahead of achievers like James K. Polk (number eight) or Truman (number nine)? For Kennedy, the measure of presidential success was evidently concrete accomplishment. Presidents who raised the consciousness of the nation without achieving their specific objectives ought, he seemed to think, to rate below those, like Polk and Truman, who achieved their objectives even if they did little to inspire or illuminate the nation. Ironically, historians feel that Kennedy himself comes off better when measured by the TR-Wilson rather than by the Polk-Truman standard.

There is force in the argument that only presidents can really understand the presidency. But by the Coolidge-Kennedy doctrine only presidents would have the qualifications to rate presidents. Alas, few presidents have claimed that right. Indeed, the only presidential list I know comes, not surprisingly, from that plain-speaking history buff Harry Truman. In 1953 he named his eight best Presidents—in chronological order, Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Polk, Lincoln, Grover Cleveland, Wilson, and FDR—and his eight worst—Zachary Taylor, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Ulysses S. Grant, Benjamin Harrison, Warren G. Harding, Coolidge, and Eisenhower.⁶

Meanwhile, scholars continued to play the rating game. Some felt that ratings on the Schlesinger basis were unduly impressionistic and subjective. Quantitative history was coming into vogue. Also political scientists, with their faith in typologies and models, were joining the fun. Would not the results be more "scientific" if presidents were given numerical scores against stated criteria? Then feed the figures into the computer.

So further polls were undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s with more pretentious methodologies. Some poll takers used only a few yardsticks: success in attaining objectives, for example; the relationship of objectives to the general welfare; the quality of political leadership; personal trustworthiness and integrity; impact on history. Others multiplied yardsticks. Thomas A. Bailey of Stanford, who regarded the Schlesinger polls as a Harvard-eastern elitist-Democratic plot, came up with no less than forty-three.

But the yardsticks were mostly too general to warrant mathematical precision or to escape subjective judgment. Their proliferation only produced lengthy and

⁶ Harry S. Truman, "The Eight Best Presidents, the Eight Worst Presidents and Why," *Parade*, 3 April 1988.

intimidating questionnaires. And, to judge by the results, the refinement of standards made little difference. However simple or complex the method, the final ratings turned out to be much the same. Even Bailey's own rankings were remarkably similar to the Schlesinger polls.

There have been nine Greats and Near Greats in nearly all the scholarly reckonings. Lincoln, Washington and F. D. Roosevelt are always at the top, followed always, though in varying order, by Jefferson, Jackson, Polk, Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson, and Truman. Occasionally John Adams, Cleveland, and Eisenhower join the top nine. The Failures have always been Grant and Harding, with Buchanan, Pierce, Fillmore, Taylor, and Coolidge always near the bottom.

The scholars' lists not seldom provoke popular as well as presidential indignation. For a long time FDR's top standing enraged many who had opposed his New Deal. "To rank him with Lincoln and Washington," the Detroit editor Malcolm Bingay wrote in 1948 about the first Schlesinger poll, "hits me as historical sacrilege."⁷ As late as 1982, Robert K. Murray of Penn State, a leading scholar of presidential ratings, polled 846 historians. When they placed Franklin Roosevelt slightly ahead of George Washington (though still behind Lincoln), Murray was deluged with angry letters, "many being from the fanatic right," he wrote me, "whose fulminations know no bounds."⁸ People today forget that Roosevelt was the most hated as well as the best loved president of the twentieth century. But now that even Newt Gingrich pronounces FDR the greatest president of the century, conservatives accept FDR at the top with stoic calm.

The choice of best and worst presidents has remained relatively stable through the years. There is much more fluctuation in between. Some presidents—particularly J. Q. Adams, Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, and Cleveland—have declined in the later polls, but the most striking change has been the steady rise of Eisenhower from twenty-second place in the Schlesinger 1962 poll to twelfth in David Porter's 1981 poll, to eleventh in the poll taken by Robert Murray and Tim Blessing in 1982, to ninth in Steve Neal's *Chicago Tribune* poll the same year and ninth again in Neal's *Chicago Sun-Times* poll in 1996. Had he lived long enough, Eisenhower might have raged less over the verdicts of scholars.

Several factors account for Eisenhower's ascent. The opening of his papers showed that the mask of genial affability Ike wore in the White House concealed an astute, crafty, confident, and purposeful leader. As Nixon typically put it, Eisenhower was "a far more complex and devious man than most people realized, and in the best sense of those words."⁹ Moreover, the FDR model and the yardsticks in earlier polls contained a bias in favor of an activist presidency. After Vietnam and Watergate showed that presidential activism could go too far, Eisenhower appeared in a better light. The peace and harmony sentimentally recollected

⁷ Malcolm Bingay, "Chides Historian for Hasty Appraisal of FDR As 'Great,'" *Akron Beacon-Journal*, 4 November 1948.

⁸ Robert K. Murray to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., 15 March 1983.

⁹ Richard M. Nixon, *Six Crises* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962; Warner paperback, 1979), 189.

from Ozzie-and-Harriet days shone well against the turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s. The more his successors got into trouble, the better Eisenhower looked. Presidents sometimes do more for the reputations of their predecessors than they do for their own.

Over the years it has been periodically suggested that I replicate my father's polls. But the difficulty of making overall judgments about some of the presidents since Eisenhower stumped me—in the cases of Kennedy and Gerald Ford, because of the brevity of their time in office; in the cases of Lyndon Johnson, Nixon, and George Bush, because their foreign and domestic records are so discordant. Scholars, for example, might be inclined to rate Johnson higher in domestic than in foreign affairs and do the reverse for Nixon and Bush. And the most recent presidents always seem more controversial and harder to classify. Still the passage of time permits appraisals to crystallize. So in 1996 the *New York Times Magazine* took a new poll.

The question of disjunction still nags. "I find three cases," Walter Dean Burnham said, "which one could describe as having dichotomous or schizoid profiles. On some very important dimensions, both Wilson and L. B. Johnson were outright failures in my view; while on others they rank very high indeed. Similarly with Nixon." Alan Brinkley said: "There are presidents who could be considered *both* failures *and* great or near great (for example, Wilson, Johnson, Nixon)." James MacGregor Burns observed of Nixon, "How can one evaluate such an idiosyncratic president, so brilliant and so morally lacking? . . . so I guess to average out he would be average."

Another source of confusion comes from the reluctance of some respondents to confine their judgments to White House performance. Several presidents—James Madison, J. Q. Adams, Grant, Herbert Hoover, Jimmy Carter—had pre- or post-presidential careers of more distinction than their presidencies; and this evidently affected some of the ratings.

Yet the 1996 poll still shows a high degree of continuing scholarly consensus. In nearly all the polls since 1948, the same nine men top the list. Lincoln, with a unanimous Great vote, comes in first in 1996. Washington and FDR, as usual, are next; each had one Near Great vote. The big three are followed, as usual, by the Near Greats—Jefferson, Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson, Truman, and Polk. Steve Neal's 1996 poll, with five yardsticks (political leadership, foreign policy, domestic policy, character, impact on history) and fifty-eight respondents, came up with the same nine men, plus Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan, who edged out Polk.

Polk's high ranking is always a puzzle for laymen. "Of all our array of presidents," James Thurber once imprudently wrote, "there was none less memorable than James K. Polk."¹⁰ But Polk at 49 was the youngest man up to that time, and the only Speaker of the House of Representatives ever, to make the White House. He specified his objectives early on—to reduce the tariff, establish

¹⁰ James Thurber, *Let Your Mind Alone!* (New York: Harper, 1937), 141.

the independent treasury system, settle the Oregon boundary question, and acquire California—and worked efficiently and relentlessly to achieve them. His objectives have been criticized but not his ability. Besides, he kept the most complete of presidential diaries, which endears him to scholars.

The next batch, the High Averages, are led in the 1996 Schlesinger poll by Eisenhower, whose one Great vote and ten Near Greats are outweighed by a host of Averages. The same fate befalls John Adams with ten Near Greats and Kennedy with nine. Lyndon Johnson receives fifteen Near Greats from scholars who seem to have forgotten about Vietnam, but low ratings and two Failures awarded by those who remember Vietnam bring his score down below Kennedy's. Monroe and McKinley complete the High Averages.

Most presidents fall into the Average class. Recent presidents, too close for historical perspective, are likely to rise or fall in polls to come. Carter has one Near Great and two Failures, with the rest of his votes in between. Some admire his accomplishment in putting human rights on the world's agenda; others deplore his political ineptitude and the absence of any clear direction in his handling of domestic affairs.

Reagan, on the other hand, has seven Near Great votes, including some from liberal scholars impressed by his success in restoring the prestige of the presidency, in negotiating the last phases of the cold war, and in imposing his priorities on the country. But he also receives nine Below Averages and four Failures from those who consider his priorities—his attack on government as the root of all evil and his tax reductions that increased disparities between rich and poor while tripling the national debt—a disaster for the republic.

His score averages out a shade below that of George Bush, who receives no Near Greats but more Averages than Reagan and only one Failure. Bush's skill in putting together the coalition that won the Gulf War outweighs for many his seeming lack of purpose in domestic policy. Some respondents thought it premature to judge Clinton, but two vote him Near Great and two more a Failure, and he ends up Average.

Some exception has been taken to Reagan's rating as number twenty-five, placing him between Bush and Arthur and below Clinton. According to the March-April 1997 *Policy Review*, this "low assessment" was "the most astonishing part of Schlesinger's poll." The Reagan rating, the magazine continued, "invites suspicion that participants were selected as much for the conclusions they were likely to reach as for their scholarly credentials."¹¹ *Policy Review* then picked its own panel, including William F. Buckley, Jr., Henry Kissinger, Jeane Kirkpatrick, George H. Nash, Joshua Muravchik, Michael Barone, and others—a group that invites the same suspicion roused in *Policy Review* by my panel—and they joined seven of my respondents in putting Reagan in the Near Great category. As for the suggestion of bias in the selection of my thirty-two, William J. Ridings,

¹¹ Alvin S. Felzenberg, "‘There You Go Again’: Liberal Historians and the *New York Times* Deny Ronald Reagan His Due," *Policy Review*, March-April 1997.

Jr., and Stuart B. McIver polled *seven hundred and nineteen* historians and political scientists for their 1997 book *Rating the Presidents*, published some months after the *New York Times Magazine* poll. The Ridings-McIver poll ranked Reagan even lower, number twenty-six, placing him between Hayes and Ford and below both Bush and Clinton.

The list of Failures shows a slight shift from past polls. Harding and Grant are, as usual, favorite Failures. Do they really deserve it? They are marked down because of the scandal and corruption that disgraced their administrations. But they were careless and negligent rather than villainous. Their sin was excessive loyalty to crooked friends. “Harding was not a bad man,” as Theodore Roosevelt’s daughter, Alice Roosevelt Longworth, put it. “He was just a slob.”¹³ The president who commuted the prison sentence of the Socialist leader Eugene V. Debs after Wilson refused to do so hardly merits the bottom slot as the worst of all presidents. Scandal and corruption are indefensible, but they may injure the general welfare less than misconceived policies.

In the new poll the ineffectual Franklin Pierce and the rigidly dogmatic Herbert Hoover tie with Grant as the best among the Failures. Next down the list comes Nixon. Most respondents, while recognizing Nixon’s intelligence and drive, resolve the “schizoid profile” by concluding that his impressive ability is negated by his rather more impressive offenses against the Constitution. It is perhaps hard to demonstrate that the only president forced to resign from the office was not a Failure.

The nation’s belated awakening to racial injustice explains why two presidents receive more Failure votes this time than in earlier polls: James Buchanan, whose irresolution encouraged the secession of the Confederate states; and Andrew Johnson, who, while a Unionist, was a stout believer in white supremacy. It seems reasonable to suggest that Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Hoover, and Nixon damaged the republic a good deal more than did the hapless Grant and the feckless Harding.

Nine men, we have seen, have led the list from the first Schlesinger poll of historians nearly half a century ago. What do Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Polk, Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Truman have in common? What do they, and Eisenhower too, who arrived too late for the 1948 poll, tell us about the qualities necessary for success in the White House?

Well, half were over six feet tall. The exceptions were Polk (5’ 8”), Theodore Roosevelt (5’ 10”), Wilson (5’ 11”), Truman (5’ 9”) and Eisenhower (5’ 10 1/2”). On the other hand, James Monroe, John Tyler, Buchanan, Chester A. Arthur, Taft, Harding, Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Gerald Ford, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton were also six feet or more; so height by itself is no guarantee of greatness in the White House. Nor is education. Nearly half the prize group—Washington, Jackson, Lincoln, and Truman—never attended college. As for age, the average

¹² William J. Ridings, Jr. and Stuart B. McIver, *Rating the Presidents: From the Great and Honorable to the Dishonest and Incompetent* (New York: Citadel Press, 1997).

¹³ Alice Roosevelt Longworth, *Crowded Hours* (New York: Scribner’s, 1933), 324–25.

age of the nine at inauguration or succession was 54 years; so youth is a comparative advantage.

Height and age are minor considerations. Intelligence helps, though Reagan—with his seven Near Greats—shows that an influential president need not have much. Maturity? The British ambassador called Theodore Roosevelt an arrested 11-year-old. Unflinching honesty? Deviousness is a presidential characteristic not confined to Eisenhower. Loyalty? This can be a presidential defect: remember Grant and Harding. Private virtues do not guarantee public effectiveness.

More to the point is the test proposed 125 years ago by our most brilliant historian, Henry Adams. The American president, he wrote, “resembles the commander of a ship at sea. He must have a helm to grasp, a course to steer, a port to seek.”¹⁴ The Constitution offers every president a helm, but the course and the port constitute the first requirement for presidential greatness. Great presidents possess, or are possessed by, a vision of an ideal America. Their passion is to make sure the ship of state sails on the right course.

If that course is indeed right, it is because they have an instinct for the dynamics of history. “A statesman may be determined and tenacious,” de Gaulle once observed, “. . . but, if he does not understand the character of his time, he will fail.”¹⁵ Great Presidents have a deep connection with the needs, anxieties, dreams of the people. “I do not believe,” said Wilson, “that any man can lead who does not act . . . under the impulse of a profound sympathy with those whom he leads—a sympathy which is insight—an insight which is of the heart rather than of the intellect.”¹⁶

“All our great presidents,” said Franklin D. Roosevelt, “were leaders of thought at times when certain ideas in the life of the nation had to be clarified.” So Washington embodied the idea of federal union, Jefferson and Jackson the idea of democracy, Lincoln union and freedom, Cleveland rugged honesty. Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson, said FDR, were both “moral leaders, each in his own way and his own time, who used the presidency as a pulpit.”¹⁷

To succeed, presidents must have a port to seek and must convince Congress and the electorate of the rightness of their course. Politics in a democracy is ultimately an educational process, an adventure in persuasion and consent. Every president stands in Theodore Roosevelt’s bully pulpit. National crisis widens his range of options but does not automatically make a man great. The crisis of rebellion did not spur Buchanan to leadership, nor did the crisis of depression turn Hoover into a bold and imaginative president. Their inadequacies in the face of crisis allowed Lincoln and the second Roosevelt to show the difference that individuals can make to history.

¹⁴ Henry Adams, “The Session, 1869–1870” in G. E. Hochfield, ed., *The Great Secession Winter of 1860–61 and Other Essays*, (New York: Sagamore Press, 1958), 197.

¹⁵ Charles de Gaulle, *The Edge of the Sword* (New York: Criterion, 1960), 81.

¹⁶ Woodrow Wilson, *Leaders of Men*, T. H. Vail Motter, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), 53–54.

¹⁷ Anne O’Hare McCormick, “Roosevelt’s View of the Big Job,” *New York Times Magazine*, 11 September 1932.

Of national crises, war is the most fateful, and all the top ten save Jefferson were involved in war either before or during their presidencies. As Robert Higgs has noted, five (Polk, Lincoln, Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Truman) were commanders-in-chief when the republic was at war, and four more (Washington, Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Eisenhower) made pre-presidential reputations on the battlefield. Military metaphors even accompanied nonmilitary crises. In summoning the nation to battle against the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt called on Americans to “move as a trained and loyal army” and asked Congress for “broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe.”¹⁸

Crisis helps those who can rise to it, and the association of war with presidential greatness has its ominous aspect. Still, two of the immortals, it should be noted, made their mark without benefit of first-order crisis. Jackson and Theodore Roosevelt forced the nation through sheer power of personality to recognize incipient problems—Jackson in vindicating the national authority against the state of South Carolina and against the Second Bank of the United States; the first Roosevelt in vindicating the national authority against the great corporations and against raids on the people’s natural resources. As the historian Elting Morison admirably described this quality of noncrisis leadership: “Theodore Roosevelt could get the attention of his fellow citizens and make them think. He knew how to put the hard questions a little before they became obvious to others; how to make the search for sensible answers exciting; how to startle the country into informing debate; and how to move people into their thinking beyond short-run self-interest toward some longer view of the general welfare.”¹⁹

We hear much these days about the virtues of the middle of the road. But not one of the top nine can be described as a middle-roader. Middle-roading may be fine for campaigning, but it is a sure road to mediocrity in governing. The succession of middle-roaders after the Civil War inspired James Bryce to write the notorious chapter in *The American Commonwealth* entitled “Why Great Men Are Not Chosen President.”²⁰ The middle of the road is not the vital center: it is the dead center.

The Greats and Near Greats all recognized, in the aphorism of Pierre Mendes-France, that “to govern is to choose.” They all took risks in pursuit of their ideals. They all provoked intense controversy. They all, except Washington, divided the nation before reuniting it on a new level of national understanding.

Every president would like to be loved by everyone in the country, but presidents who sacrifice convictions to a quest for popular affection are not likely to make it to the top. Harding was an immensely popular president. His death provoked an outpouring of national grief that observers thought unmatched since the death of Lincoln. Scholars are unanimous in pronouncing him a Failure.

¹⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address.

¹⁹ Elting Morison testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 19 January 1978.

²⁰ James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (London: Macmillan, 1888), I, chap. 8.

Presidents who seek to change the nation's direction know that they are bound to alienate those who profit from the status quo. Great presidents go ahead anyway. "Judge me," FDR said, "by the enemies I have made." Truman's approval rating at the end of his presidency was down to 31 percent. Look where he ranks now.

After his reelection, William Jefferson Clinton faces his rendezvous with history. Debarred by the 22nd Amendment from pursuing a third term, he must make his mark between now and 19 January 2001. This may not be easy. The 22nd Amendment, by turning reelected presidents into lame ducks, reduces their political potency. Second terms tend to be times of trouble: ask FDR, Eisenhower, Johnson, Nixon, Reagan. On the other hand, lame-duckery, by liberating presidents from the demands of reelection, does allow them to run political risks for national benefits.

Clinton brings to the bar of history a rare combination of talents and infirmities. He is a man of penetrating intelligence. He has impressive technical mastery of complicated issues. He has genuine intellectual curiosity and listens as well as talks. He is a skilled and resilient politician. When the spirit moves him, he is capable of real eloquence, and the spirit moves him most of all when he confronts the supreme American problem—race. Racial justice appears to be his most authentic concern.

On the other hand, he lacks self-discipline. His judgment of people is erratic. His political resilience strikes many as flagrant opportunism. His reactions are instinctively placatory, perhaps from growing up in a household where the wrong words might provoke an alcoholic stepfather to violence. He rushes to propitiate the audience before him, often at his own long-term expense. His scandals and cover-ups are ripe for exploitation by a vindictive opposition. Who can tell how this combination of talents and infirmities will play out?

To make a mark on history, Clinton must liberate himself from polls and focus groups. Let him put his first-rate intelligence to work on the hard problems. Playing it safe, taking it easy, sticking to the middle of the road may make for a more comfortable second term. But following this course would put Clinton alongside William Howard Taft and Rutherford B. Hayes on the ratings list. Far better to anticipate the problems of the twenty-first century, to startle the country into informing debate, to move people into thinking beyond short-run self-interest toward some longer view of the general welfare and to propose remedies sufficient to the needs of the day. Only boldness and creativity, even if at times foiled and frustrated, will earn him a place among the immortals.

SCHLESINGER 1996 POLL

Method of calculation: the following numbers were assigned to each category—Great = 4; Near Great = 3; Average = 2; Below Average = 1; Failure = -2. Failure seems such a drastic historical judgment as to require special weighting. Then each score was divided by the number of mentions.

<i>Rating</i>	<i>Voting Breakdown*</i>					<i>Mean Score</i>
	Great	Near Great	Average	Below Average	Failure	
GREAT						
Lincoln	32					4.00
Washington	31	1				3.97
Franklin D. Roosevelt	31	1				3.97
NEAR GREAT						
Jefferson	12	16	1			3.38
Jackson	11	17	1			3.34
Theodore Roosevelt	10	18	1			3.31
Wilson	11	17			1	3.21
Truman	6	21	3			3.10
Polk	2	17	8	1		2.71
HIGH AVERAGE						
Eisenhower	1	10	20	1		2.34
John Adams		10	17	1		2.32
Kennedy		9	21	1		2.29
Cleveland		8	2	1		2.24
Lyndon Johnson		15	12	3	2	2.21
Monroe	1	1	22	2		2.15
McKinley		5	20	2		2.11
AVERAGE						
Madison	1	2	20	5	1	1.83
John Quincy Adams		1	18	8		1.74
Harrison			14	7		1.67
Clinton		2	17	5	2	1.58
Van Buren			18	8	1	1.56
Taft			17	9	1	1.52
Hayes			16	10	1	1.48
Bush			16	12	1	1.45
Reagan		7	11	9	4	1.42
Arthur			13	11	1	1.40
Carter		1	15	12	2	1.37
Ford			6	20	2	1.00
BELOW AVERAGE						
Taylor			6	17	3	0.88
Coolidge			7	16	4	0.81
Fillmore			3	20	3	0.77
Tyler			6	17	5	0.68
FAILURE						
Pierce				15	12	-9
Grant				9	18	-9
Hoover			11	9	10	-9
Nixon		2	4	5	20	-21
Andrew Johnson			2	7	17	-23
Buchanan				6	22	-38
Harding			2		26	-48

* Not every respondent voted for all the presidents, hence the discrepancies in the total number of votes.

PARTICIPANTS IN 1996 POLL

Samuel H. Beer, Harvard University
John Morton Blum, Yale University
Alan Brinkley, Columbia University
Douglas Brinkley, University of New Orleans
Walter Dean Burnham, University of Texas
James MacGregor Burns, Williams College
Mario Cuomo
Robert Dallek, Boston University
Robert H. Ferrell, Indiana University
Louis Fisher, Library of Congress
Eric Foner, Columbia University
George Frederickson, Stanford University
Doris Kearns Goodwin
Norman Graebner, University of Virginia
Henry Graff, Columbia University
Stephen Hess, Brookings Institution
Morton Keller, Brandeis University

Louis Koenig, New York University
William Leuchtenburg, University of North Carolina
David Levering Lewis, Rutgers University
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Joel Silbey, Cornell University
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