

## **Simply the Best: FDR as America's Number One President**

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In the words of Tina Turner's iconic pop song of the 1980s, to be "the best" is simply to be "better than all the rest." While this is self-evidently the case, historians and political scientists who write about the institution of the U.S. presidency are obliged to justify their preferences and to produce a more detailed set of criteria against which the best presidents can be distinguished from "the worst" or from "the average" or from "the near great." This is no easy task but the aim of this essay is more ambitious still – to distinguish between those presidents who are universally regarded as America's greatest chief executives – George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt – and to justify FDR's claim to be America's number one President.<sup>1</sup>

The starting point for this quest is the survey undertaken by Professor Iwan Morgan, Director of the U.S. Presidency Centre (USPC) at the UCL Institute of the Americas, and published in January 2011. In this survey of British experts on the U.S. presidency, FDR was placed first, Lincoln second and Washington third. This result was in contrast to similar surveys in the United States that have usually chosen Lincoln to be the greatest, with FDR and Washington jostling for second and third position. The USPC survey therefore raises three main questions which it is the purpose of this chapter to answer. Firstly, why did a survey of U.S. presidents amongst British academics lead to a different result from that usually obtained in the United States? Secondly, what criteria would it be best to use in judging the greatness or otherwise of a U.S. president? And thirdly, using these criteria, to what extent does FDR deserve the accolade bestowed upon him by these British experts of being America's greatest President?<sup>2</sup>

## **A First for FDR**

About 50 specialists in American history and politics took part in the UK poll in September and October 2010. They were asked to rate each president out of 10 in five equally weighted categories – vision and agenda setting; domestic leadership; foreign policy leadership; moral authority; and historical legacy. The average rating for from each category was then calculated. Not surprisingly, no president received a perfect 10 rating in any category although Lincoln, Washington and FDR each received at least one rating of 9 plus. The average ratings for each category were converted into an overall percentage for each president that represented the esteem in which he was held.<sup>3</sup>

Franklin Roosevelt came first in the UK survey with an overall rating of 89.32%, Lincoln came second with 88.25% and George Washington was third with 84.53%. These three were the only ones to achieve the distinction of an average of over 80% across the five categories and this confirmed their reputation as the “Big Three” amongst U.S. presidents. Trailing in their wake followed a group of four presidents who achieved an overall average of 70% or more – Thomas Jefferson (76.62%), Theodore Roosevelt (75.70%), Woodrow Wilson (74.65%) and Harry Truman (72.34%) and who might therefore be described as “near great.” The next eight presidents, in descending order – Reagan, Jackson, Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, John Adams, Monroe, Madison and Kennedy – achieved an overall average of between 60% and 67%. These results were not very different from the C-SPAN poll published in February 2009 except that, in this poll as in most U.S. polls on the presidency, Lincoln came first, with FDR in second place and Washington in third. So how are we to explain FDR’s first place and victory over Lincoln and Washington in this UK poll?<sup>4</sup>

If we look at the five individual categories in the UK poll we see that the number one position is shared between the Big Three and that, in most cases, the gap between them is very narrow. Lincoln comes first in terms of the “positive historical significance of his

legacy” as president with a score of 9.37 compared with 9.32 for FDR and 9.18 for Washington. This was the highest rating for any president in any of the five categories. In the category of “moral authority” Washington comes first with 9.20 compared with 9.13 for Lincoln and FDR trailing behind with 8.43. In the category of “vision and agenda setting” it is FDR who comes first with a score of 9.11, followed by Lincoln with 8.29 and Washington in fifth place (after Jefferson and LBJ) with 8.22. Similarly, “domestic leadership” shows FDR first again with 9.04 followed by Lincoln with 8.91 and Washington in fourth place (after LBJ) with a score of 7.78.<sup>5</sup>

If the overall result had depended on just these four categories then FDR would have had an overall percentage of 89.75% but Lincoln would have scored 90.975% and Washington 85.95%, however, in the fifth category – foreign policy – FDR far outstrips both of his closest rivals. FDR scores 8.77 compared with 7.78 for Washington and 7.73 for Lincoln – by far his biggest margin over Lincoln and Washington. So in the UK poll foreign policy was the decisive factor. FDR’s much higher rating in this category over Lincoln gave him his overall victory despite coming off second-best in terms of moral authority and also vision and agenda setting.<sup>6</sup>

Significantly, the C-SPAN poll of U.S. experts in 2009 also rated FDR as the best foreign policy president in U.S. history; in that poll FDR came first in the international relations category with 90.5 compared with Washington’s 86.4 and Lincoln’s 84.6. The difference between the two polls is that the margin between FDR and Lincoln in terms of foreign policy is much greater in the UK poll than in the poll conducted by C-SPAN. Also foreign policy is one of ten categories in the U.S. poll whereas it is one of only five in the UK poll and therefore its weighting is twice as great. If the C-SPAN and UK polls had used identical categories would they still have produced different results? This is difficult to say as the two sets of categories are not entirely comparable but if the five U.S. categories closest

to the five UK categories are compared then Lincoln still comes out slightly ahead in the U.S. poll, essentially because FDR's superiority in foreign policy is insufficient to make up for his deficiency in other areas such as moral authority.<sup>7</sup>

### **Criteria for Greatness**

“Ranking the Presidents’ has always been a Favourite Indoor Sport of history-minded Americans,” wrote Clinton Rossiter in his classic study of the Presidency published in 1960. Rossiter drew up a set of criteria based on what he described as “a rough content analysis of more than one hundred serious presidential biographies.” This resulted in a list of eight questions to be asked about every president, which constituted what he termed “the accepted standards of presidential achievement.” These questions were: “In what sort of times did he live? If the times were great, how bravely and imaginatively did he bear the burden of extraordinary responsibility? “What was his philosophy of presidential power? What sort of technician was he? What men did he call on for help? What manner of man was he beneath the trappings of office? What was his influence on the presidency? Finally, what was his influence on history?”<sup>8</sup>

In the same year that Rossiter's study was published another book on the American presidency appeared, written by Richard Neustadt. This was also concerned with the power of the presidency and the performance of individual presidents and it also played the ranking game. “In the United States we like to ‘rate’ a President,” wrote Neustadt, “we measure him as ‘weak’ or ‘strong’ and call what we are measuring his ‘leadership.’ We do not wait until a man is dead; we rate him from the moment he takes office. We are quite right to do so.” Neustadt also drew up a list of questions to use in appraising a president: “What were his purposes and did these run with or against the grain of history? What was his ‘feel,’ his human understanding, for the nature of his power in the circumstances of his time? What

was his stance under pressure in office, what sustained him as a person against the frustrations native to the place? What was his legacy?" Of the two books Neustadt's is the better known partly perhaps because he lived long enough to publish two updated editions in 1980 and 1990 whereas Rossiter died tragically in 1970.<sup>9</sup>

The current essay owes more to Rossiter's book than it does to Neustadt's. Whereas the former surveyed the entire history of the presidency and included short and very well-written appreciations of Washington, Lincoln and Roosevelt the latter dealt almost exclusively with the presidency since FDR, as did the later editions. But whatever criteria are used, the choice of who amongst the Big Three is the greatest president of all is to some extent a subjective judgement; apart from questions of criteria and weighting political preferences are also likely to be involved. Moreover, each president was in office in a different era with a different political and social context so it is difficult to compare. The methodology of this essay is to discuss each of the three presidents in turn within the five broad categories used by the UK poll and, within these categories, to focus on specific key themes in presidential leadership in order to enable some comparison between the three presidents to be made.<sup>10</sup>

### **Vision and Agenda Setting**

The first category specified in the UK poll concerned "vision and agenda-setting," that is "did the president have clarity of vision that enabled him to establish over-arching goals for his administration and shape the terms of political and policy discourse?" In the UK survey FDR came first with a score of 9.11, Lincoln was second with 8.98 and Washington trailed behind in fifth place (after Jefferson and LBJ) with 8.22. This is clearly an important area when assessing the performance of any president. In the words of Clinton Rossiter, "the President is the American people's one authentic trumpet and he has no higher duty than to give a clear

and certain sound.” The most successful presidents have been able to set out their vision and agenda in key speeches such as their Inaugural Addresses and their annual State of the Union messages delivered to Congress but aimed at the entire nation and, increasingly, the world. These occasions have lent themselves to powerful rhetoric involving great themes in U.S. history, including the central theme of America’s commitment to freedom and democracy.<sup>11</sup>

Washington necessarily began this process as the first president. Self-conscious about his lack of formal education, he was no orator, nor even a good speaker. But his vision was clear – the development of the United States as a republic enjoying liberty and a representative form of government. In his First Inaugural Address delivered on 30 April 1789, Washington declared his devotion to divine providence and his support for the new Constitution. Eschewing any specific recommendations to the new members of Congress arrayed before him, he became the first of many U.S. presidents to articulate the view that “the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, as deeply, as finally, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.”<sup>12</sup>

Washington returned to this conception of the United States as an experiment in republican government in his deservedly famous Farewell Address published on 19 September 1796. Washington’s farewell lauded the Union to his fellow Americans as “the main pillar in the edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquillity at home, your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very liberty which you so highly prize.” Mindful of the threats to the stability of the United States that had already begun to appear during his presidency – threats such as the sectional tensions between North and South, East and West, as well as the rise of political parties and deep differences over foreign and domestic issues – he continued: “Your Union ought to be considered as the main prop of your liberty and ... the love of the one ought to endear you to the preservation of the other.”<sup>13</sup>

The threats to the Union so feared by Washington were all too evident following the election of November 1860 which brought Lincoln to power as the candidate of the recently formed Republican Party. In his own Inaugural Address in March 1861, Lincoln, while confirming that he had no desire or intention to interfere with slavery in the states in which it existed, stated clearly that “the Union of these states is perpetual” and that it would be against the Constitution for any state or states to try to secede. He cautioned delay before any irreparable steps were made to attempt to dissolve the Union. “The Chief Magistrate derives all his authority from the people ... Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in the world?”<sup>14</sup>

Lincoln did not live long enough to deliver a farewell address but his Gettysburg Address on 19 November 1863 is perhaps the next best thing. Appealing to the memory of the Declaration of Independence Lincoln echoed both Washington and Jefferson: “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” The American Civil War was now “testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” Then, referring to the soldiers who had given their lives on the battlefield, he called on Americans to resolve that “these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” It was a momentous speech and one that underlined the greatness of Lincoln’s presidency.<sup>15</sup>

The situation of the Union when FDR became president in March 1933 was scarcely less perilous in its own way than that confronted by either Washington or Lincoln. Democracy itself was being questioned owing to the apparent inability of the U.S. government to cope with the unprecedented economic depression that had followed the Wall Street Crash of 1929 or even to agree the best way forward. There were those who argued,

especially in Europe, that liberal democracy could not cope with a major crisis such as the economic depression and that a dictatorship of the right or left was the most efficient method of government in such circumstances. FDR confronted these doubts head on in his First Inaugural when he famously said: “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.” With the American political system seemingly on trial he declared: “We do not distrust the future of essential democracy.” The people of the United States had not failed, he said, but their politicians had been found wanting and new leadership was required. It was in providing this leadership in the shape of the New Deal that Roosevelt, like Washington and Lincoln, staked his initial claim to greatness.<sup>16</sup>

Nor was FDR’s vision and agenda in the 1930s confined solely to domestic affairs as is commonly believed. By the end of 1935 he was all too aware of how dangerous the international situation had become as a result of Hitler’s drive for German rearmament, Japan’s growing designs on Chinese territory, and in October 1935 Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia. In his third State of the Union FDR began with the world situation and devoted almost half of his speech to this issue. He referred repeatedly to the dangers posed to democracy and the democratic nations by autocracy and the autocratic states. Making it clear that he believed that the threat to world peace came from nations “dominated by the twin spirits of autocracy and aggression,” he declared: “The evidence before us clearly proves that autocracy in world affairs endangers peace and that such threats do not spring from the nations devoted to the democratic ideal.”<sup>17</sup> As the present writer has argued elsewhere, this declaration constituted nothing less than a Roosevelt Doctrine which guided FDR’s foreign policy for the rest of the 1930s and beyond. His address was delivered in the first evening session of Congress since Woodrow Wilson’s speech in April 1917 calling for a declaration of war on Germany on the grounds that “the world must be made safe for democracy.” The need to defend American democracy from its enemies at home and abroad was a constant



theme of FDR's rhetoric throughout his presidency. In his 1936 address he explicitly linked the situation in Europe and Asia with the need to embrace New Deal reforms at home in order to avoid the economic and social inequalities that led to the rise of dictators pledged to change the status quo, by force if necessary. In his mind, the battle against autocracy abroad was linked to the struggle against economic autocracy at home and continued the progressive tradition of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.<sup>18</sup>

Roosevelt's address in January 1937, after his landslide re-election, continued this theme. Mentioning the words democracy or democratic no fewer than 20 times in a relatively short speech, he argued that social and constitutional reform was required at home. And, referring to the crisis of 1933 he said: "Ours was the task to prove that democracy could be made to function in the world of today as effectively as in the simpler world of a hundred years ago." Echoing Lincoln, he declared that: "The United States of America, within itself, must continue the task of making democracy succeed." He continued this emphasis on the struggle of democracy at home and abroad throughout the rest of his presidency, especially after the outbreak of war in Europe. But his agenda had been shaped and his vision had been demonstrated in his first term.<sup>19</sup>

### **Domestic Leadership**

The second category in the UK poll focused on domestic leadership, or whether "the president display[s] the political skill necessary to achieve his domestic policy objectives and respond effectively to unforeseen events?" FDR came first with 9.04, Lincoln was second with 8.91 and Washington was fourth (after LBJ) with 7.78. Clearly domestic leadership covers a wide spectrum of issues but one of the most important is what the C-SPAN (2009) poll of experts characterized as "economic management." Certainly, the cyclical growth of the American economy has been a major theme throughout the history of the United States

and one that has affected every president to some degree, if only in terms of his re-election prospects. For, as Rossiter pointed out, Americans give their president “small credit for prosperity and full blame for hard times.”<sup>20</sup>

Management of the economy was not seen as one of the President’s functions when Washington took office. However, Washington was very mindful of the economic instability after the War of Independence that contributed to Shays’ Rebellion. Indeed, this was one of the main driving forces leading to the Constitution of 1787. Washington’s Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, called upon Congress to pass legislation to fund the national debt, introduce excise taxes, and establish a Bank of the United States. In February 1791 Washington asked both Hamilton and Jefferson, his secretary of state, to submit their opinions on the constitutionality of a Bank of the United States. While Jefferson advocated a strict interpretation of the Constitution that would leave responsibility for banks to the states Hamilton advocated a broad or loose interpretation that would allow a National Bank to be set up. Washington supported Hamilton’s view – a decision of great significance for the future management of the economy.<sup>21</sup>

The outbreak of the Civil War soon after Lincoln took office and his consequent pre-occupation with the struggle to save the Union have naturally tended to overshadow his economic policies. But Lincoln and the Republicans had a strong economic agenda in 1860 largely inherited from the Whigs and based on the American system advocated by Henry Clay. This included a national banking system; internal improvements such as railroad construction; a public land policy that took form as the Homestead Act of 1862, offering Federal land grants in the West; and a high tariff policy that resulted in the Morrill Tariff of 1861, greatly increasing import duties on manufactured goods. This tariff policy helped to alienate the largely agrarian South and contributed to the movement for secession in 1860-61. It also annoyed the British Government during the Civil War. High tariffs may well have

contributed to the growth of U.S. manufacturing industries after 1865 but by 1929 they had become counterproductive and were considerably lowered during Roosevelt's presidency.<sup>22</sup>

The unprecedented volume of legislation that characterised FDR's New Deal – especially in his first hundred days – has left an indelible mark on U.S. history. These reforms included many which are still on the statute book such as the Securities Act of 1933 and the Securities Exchange Commission Act of 1934 which were both aimed at bringing federal regulation to Wall Street following the Crash of 1929. One of the most far reaching reforms was the Social Security Act of 1935 which included provision for federal old age pensions and unemployment insurance as well as aid to families with dependent children and financial assistance for maternal and child welfare, public health services and the blind. It provided a basic welfare system at the Federal level for the first time. Other notable reforms included the National Labour Relations Act of 1935 which established trade unions on a clear legal basis and the Fair Labour Standards Act of 1938 which introduced a minimum wage.<sup>23</sup> FDR's commitment to domestic reform has tended to blunt the criticism that, as even his admirers admit, the New Deal did not succeed in overcoming the problem of high unemployment in the 1930s. After an initial improvement from 1933 to early 1937 the unemployment rate rose sharply again in 1937-38 as a consequence of the Treasury's attempt to move towards a balanced budget. The "Roosevelt Recession" as it became known was a decided setback for the President and it was only ended by a return to large-scale federal spending and the increased demand for war supplies from 1939 onwards. While it is generally accepted that it was World War II rather than the New Deal that brought about an end to the high unemployment of the 1930s there are critics who go one or two steps further and argue that FDR's New Deal policies were misconceived and actually prolonged the depression. This debate has been sharpened by comparisons with the economic recession that

followed the banking collapse of 2008 and will no doubt run and run. The main point surely is that the New Deal involved much more than simply economic recovery.<sup>24</sup>

FDR's critics also argue that his attempt in 1937 to reform the Supreme Court – or rather to “pack” it with his own supporters – brought about a coalition of conservative Democrats and Republicans that blocked future reforms and ended the New Deal as an effective force. While this is partly true it is also the case that a number of important reforms were passed later in FDR's presidency such as the Reorganisation Act of 1939 which established the Executive Office and which has since been central to the development of the modern presidency. In fact, some historians and political scientists have referred to a third New Deal that began in 1937 and continued on-and-off for the rest of his presidency.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, FDR never entirely abandoned his progressive reforms even during the war. At the end of December 1943 he told a press conference that “Dr. New Deal” had been replaced by “Dr. Win the War,” but in his January 1944 State of the Union address he heralded an Economic Bill of Rights for the American people and addressed the continued need for reform once the war was over. A key aim of liberal Democrats was to avoid a return of large scale unemployment after the war and this led to the introduction of the Full Employment Bill in January 1945 which eventually became the Employment Act signed into law by Harry Truman in February 1946. This established the Council of Economic Advisers and the goal of full employment and may be seen as the last act of the New Deal before the Democrats' defeat in the 1946 mid-term elections.<sup>26</sup>

### **Foreign Policy Leadership**

The third category in the UK poll is foreign policy leadership, or whether the president was “an effective leader in promoting U.S. foreign policy interests and upholding national security?” As we have seen, FDR came first (8.77), Washington second (7.89) and Lincoln

third (7.73) It is obviously no coincidence that each of the three presidents regarded as the greatest leaders in U.S. history were confronted by wars that threatened the future of the nation. But the results reflect not so much “war leadership” per se as the role of foreign policy in the conduct of war – an area in which the UK experts judged that FDR’s record was superior to that of his two rivals. A major problem that they all faced and that tested the diplomacy of each of them was the issue of neutrality.<sup>27</sup>

In July 1789, soon after Washington assumed the presidency, an angry crowd in Paris stormed the Bastille – symbol of the ancient regime in France. The fall of the Bastille is traditionally, if not entirely correctly, regarded as the start of the French Revolution but the Revolutionary Wars did not begin until April 1792. In February 1793 the war widened when France declared war on Britain and the Dutch Republic. Washington issued a Neutrality Proclamation in April 1793 but opinion in Congress and more generally was sharply divided between support for Britain and support for France. This made Washington’s conduct of foreign policy particularly difficult and was one reason for the outcry that greeted the concessions made to Britain in the treaty negotiated by John Jay in 1795. Washington successfully maintained his neutrality policy throughout his presidency but, mindful of the domestic divisions caused by the war, he said in his Farewell Address: “Our true policy must be to steer clear of permanent alliances,” a statement often quoted by isolationists during FDR’s presidency. Less often quoted was Washington’s rider that “temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies” might also be necessary.<sup>28</sup>

The conduct of foreign policy during a period of neutrality was also one of the issues facing the Lincoln Administration although in this case the problem was not U.S. neutrality during a great war between Britain and France but the neutrality of those two countries during the American Civil War. In the case of Britain especially, there was an obvious temptation to support the Confederacy in order not only to maintain the supply of cotton to

the mills of Lancashire but also because a divided Union was likely to pose less of a threat to Canada than a powerful United States. William Seward, Lincoln's Secretary of State, was on record as favouring the annexation of Canada and British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston was a well-known jingoist, keen to uphold British rights and prestige and hostile to Lincoln's high tariff policy. However, British dislike of slavery and fear of backing the wrong side meant that a potentially disastrous war was avoided.<sup>29</sup>

American neutrality laws in the 1930s severely handicapped FDR's foreign policy and provided one of his greatest challenges as president. The laws originated in August 1935 when, against the backdrop of Italy's impending invasion of Ethiopia, Congress passed a joint resolution saying that the U.S. should keep out of the conflict. FDR's State of the Union address in January 1936, mentioned above, was aimed at educating public opinion about U.S. national interests in the worsening international situation but Congress passed a strict neutrality law in February 1936 that established an arms embargo in the event of a war and allowed the President no discretion in distinguishing between the aggressor and the victim. FDR's so-called "quarantine" speech in October 1937 sought to galvanise public opinion but the neutrality law was not substantially modified until November 1939, after war had broken out, when the arms embargo was repealed and a "cash and carry" system was introduced instead.<sup>30</sup>

At the time of his neutrality proclamation in September 1939 FDR said that he could not ask Americans to be "neutral in thought as well as in deed," thereby directly contradicting the advice given by Woodrow Wilson in April 1917. Cash and carry greatly favored Britain and was followed by the destroyer for bases deal and Lend-Lease Act which favored Britain even more. FDR's support of Britain as a bulwark against Nazism – while the U.S. was still officially a neutral in the war – gave rise to what Churchill called the Anglo-American special relationship, symbolized by the meeting between FDR and Churchill in August 1941

off the coast of Newfoundland that resulted in the Atlantic Charter. When the U.S. officially joined the war following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, FDR acted decisively to issue the United Nations Declaration on 1 January 1942. FDR's achievement in assembling and leading a Grand Alliance of 25 nations against the Axis powers of Germany, Italy and Japan is reason enough to rate him as the greatest of all American presidents in terms of his foreign policy record.<sup>31</sup>

But, even beyond this, he was primarily responsible for establishing the United Nations organization at the end of the War to replace the discredited League of Nations. FDR had, of course, been a member of Woodrow Wilson's administration and a strong supporter of the League when he was the Democrats' vice-presidential candidate in the 1920 election. But the strength of isolationism in the U.S. after 1920 and the need to disarm their opposition when seeking the presidency in 1932 had caused him to declare that he no longer favored U.S. membership of the League. However, in September 1939 he authorized the State Department to start planning for a new post-war international organization that would draw lessons from the failure of the League. The result was the United Nations, located in New York rather than Geneva, and safeguarding American interests by giving the U.S. (and the other great powers) a veto over major decisions taken by the Security Council.<sup>32</sup>

Roosevelt has been criticized by some historians for misjudging Stalin and for giving away too much at the Yalta conference in order to secure Stalin's support for the United Nations. On the other hand, Frank Costigliola, in a recent book on the subject, takes the view that FDR was near to success in trying to establish an understanding with Stalin, against the wishes of many of his advisers, and that it was only his death in April 1945 that ruined the attempt. This may also be a rather optimistic view given Stalin's pathological distrust of other people, but it is difficult to see how Soviet power at the end of the war could have been

contained any more successfully than it was given the considerable role of the Soviet Union in defeating Nazi Germany and the presence of the Red Army in Eastern Europe.<sup>33</sup>

### **Moral Authority**

The fourth category in the UK poll is moral authority, or whether “the president uphold[s] the moral authority of his office through his character, values and conduct?” In this category George Washington came first (9.2), Abraham Lincoln a close second (9.13) and Roosevelt a more distant third (8.43). No doubt FDR’s affair with Lucy Mercer, his wife’s secretary, and his rather complicated private life in his later years lost him some character points as did his not undeserved reputation for deviousness. But more important, surely, is what Roosevelt, Lincoln and Washington stood for and achieved as president in terms of the great moral issues of their day. One such issue that has confronted every U.S. president to a greater or lesser degree is that of racial discrimination and it is therefore instructive to examine the differing attitudes of the three greatest presidents towards black civil rights.<sup>34</sup>

When Washington was President, of course, the idea of civil rights for African-Americans hardly existed. However, the American Revolution had stimulated debate over the existence of black slavery in a nation that claimed to stand for freedom and liberty and slavery was gradually being abolished in the Northern states. As the scion of a wealthy plantation owner, Washington was brought up in a culture that accepted slavery. He seems to have been a fairly benign slave owner himself with a paternalistic attitude towards his slaves and he appears to have treated them well compared with his peers in Virginia. After the American Revolution, when he came into contact with leaders from the North, he became increasingly mindful of the contradiction between American liberty and black enslavement. In private, like Jefferson, he was critical of the institution of slavery and in favor of gradual



emancipation, although he never spoke out against it in public. Unlike Jefferson and Madison – and even Franklin – Washington freed 120 slaves in total – in his will.<sup>35</sup>

Lincoln's task as president in 1861 might have been made easier if Washington had spoken out against slavery. Lincoln's main priority was essentially the same as Washington's – to defend the Union rather than to end slavery. During the election of 1860 he had resolutely opposed the extension of slavery to the Western states but had also not supported its abolition. Perhaps the clearest statement of his position, certainly one of the most quoted, was his reply to an open letter from Horace Greeley in August 1862 when he said: "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that." Exactly one month later, on 22 September 1862, he issued a preliminary emancipation proclamation stating that the slaves in the Confederate States would be freed as of 1 January 1863. In his letter to Greeley and throughout the Civil War he distinguished between his duty as President and his personal wish "that all men, everywhere, could be free."<sup>36</sup>

Assuming the Presidency 70 years later Franklin Roosevelt could have made a similar point to those who called upon him to speak out on behalf of black civil rights. Lincoln had freed the slaves and the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments had been added to the Constitution during the era of Reconstruction that followed the Civil War but thereafter the southern states had introduced Jim Crow laws that had been upheld by the Supreme Court, most notably in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. Segregation was enforced by intimidation and violence, including lynching which, in 1933, reached its highest figure for ten years. In 1934 the Costigan-Wagner Anti-Lynching Bill was introduced into the Senate and a similar bill was introduced into the House by Joseph Gavagan of Harlem. The Costigan-Wagner Bill provided for Federal trials for members of lynch mobs in cases where the local authorities

refused to act and fines and imprisonment for officials who failed to enforce the law, but it was defeated by a filibuster in the Senate carried out by white Southerners. As Ira Katznelson has recently reminded us, the Southern bloc was a powerful force in the Democratic Party and Roosevelt shied away from tackling civil rights issues because he needed their support and he did not think he could win a battle with them in any case. His hope was that a new generation of more enlightened Southerners – such as Lyndon Johnson of Texas - would eventually reform the South from within.<sup>37</sup>

The New Deal itself has been criticized for not doing enough for African-Americans and it is true that many of them received a “raw deal” compared with whites. But the New Deal was nevertheless appreciated by black voters in the North and West who in the 1936 election began to “turn Lincoln’s picture to the wall” and to vote for the Democratic Party rather than for the Republicans who had done little for them since the Reconstruction era. By 1940 the black vote was solidly Democratic and this was an important factor in FDR’s victories in 1940 and 1944. Aware of this fact and embarrassed by the threat of a March on Washington led by A. Phillip Randolph to protest against racial discrimination in the burgeoning defense industries, FDR issued Executive Order 8802 in June 1941 setting up the Fair Employment Practices Commission to investigate such complaints – the first Federal action of its kind.<sup>38</sup>

But perhaps FDR’s greatest contribution to the cause of civil rights was the outcome of his battle with the Supreme Court. The Court-packing episode in 1937 was in many ways a great setback for FDR in terms of his own prestige and his control over the Democratic Party. However, as is often said, FDR may have lost his battle to enlarge the Court but he won the war as his campaign resulted in the retirement of two conservative justices. This meant that Roosevelt was at last able to make his own appointments to the Court, beginning with Hugo Black in August 1937. In fact, while there were unusually no vacancies during FDR’s first

term there were five in his second term and three in his third. By the time of his death in April 1945 FDR had appointed no fewer than seven of the nine justices, and made an eighth – Harlan Stone – Chief Justice in 1941, because of his liberal record, despite being a Coolidge appointment. By then the so-called “reactionary” court of 1936 had become known as the “New Deal court.”<sup>39</sup>

In 1938 the Court turned its attention to civil rights issues and ushered in a new era of emphasis on civil rights, signaled by the famous Footnote Four attached to the decision in *United States v. Carolene Products Company* in April 1938. The case itself concerned the Interstate Commerce clause of the Constitution which the Court had begun to interpret more broadly since the battle with FDR the year before. Footnote Four said that in future stricter judicial scrutiny than that applied in the *Caroline Products* case would be applied to legislation that appeared to discriminate against minorities, especially those that lacked sufficient numbers or power to seek redress through the political process. Gradually the more liberal justices appointed by Roosevelt from 1937 began to make important decisions that chipped away at segregation and white supremacy in the South such as *Smith v. Allwright* in April 1944 which outlawed all-white primaries. Indeed, it was five members of FDR’s New Deal court, reinforced by three Fair Deal appointments made by his successor Harry Truman and led by Chief Justice Earl Warren that made the historic and unanimous *Brown* decision in May 1954, finally overturning the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896.<sup>40</sup>

### **Historical Legacy**

The fifth and final category in the UK poll looked at historical legacy, or if “the President’s legacy have positive benefits for America’s development over time?” In this category Lincoln came first (9.37), FDR second (9.32) and Washington third (9.18). Clearly Lincoln’s reputation as the president who saved the Union and freed the slaves is responsible for his

high rating in terms of historical legacy. It may be argued that more than any other president he contributed to the aim of a more perfect union set out in the preamble to the Constitution although both FDR and, indeed, Washington have strong claims of their own to be considered. So, to what extent did these three presidents leave the Union in a better condition than they found it? Each president excited great controversy and met with strong opposition while in office – even Washington – so that divisions of opinion and therefore party differences were intense. But in longer term they each contributed to a more perfect Union by shaping the presidency and the Constitution in significant ways.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps Washington's greatest legacy was to put the recently drafted Constitution into practice and to make the presidency a respected institution. It was, of course, with him in mind that Article II setting out the powers of the presidency was drawn up by the Philadelphia Convention over which he had presided in largely silent majesty little more than a year before. In particular, Article II gave him and therefore subsequent presidents the crucial role of Commander in Chief while reserving for Congress the right to declare war. This helped later presidents, including Lincoln and FDR, to meet the emergencies that confronted them in 1861 and 1941. Having accepted the summons to office Washington helped the new nation to navigate its way through the perilous early years of its existence. His support for Hamilton in taking a broad view of the powers given to the Federal Government by the Constitution and his steadfast neutrality during the French Revolutionary Wars, both mentioned above, were key decisions that only the President could make. In the words of Clinton Rossiter, "he fulfilled the hopes of the friends of the Constitution and spiked the fears of its critics and ... turning both of these tricks with vigor and dignity he proved himself the best of all possible first Presidents."<sup>42</sup>

Lincoln's contribution to the Union was to make it permanent in fact as well as theory. In his first Inaugural Address, he based his opposition to the secession of the Southern

states on his reading of the Constitution and his duty as president to maintain the Union. But he was not above pushing his powers under the Constitution to their limits by justifying his actions in meeting the emergency in terms of the president's role as commander in chief during a time of war. This rationale was also applied to his issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1863 as a war measure that freed only the slaves in the Confederate states. To quote Rossiter again: "through the boldness of his initiative, through an unprecedented plea of necessity and through a unique interpretation of executive power, Lincoln raised the Presidency to a position of constitutional and moral ascendancy that left no doubt where the burden of crisis government in this country would thereafter rest."<sup>43</sup>

FDR was very much a student of the Constitution and often referred to it in his speeches. This was especially the case in his January 1937 State of the Union address, delivered on the eve of his battle with the Supreme Court, when he said that his reading of the Constitution led him to believe that the framers "were fully aware that civilization would raise problems for the new Federal Government, which they themselves could not even surmise; and that it was their definite intent and expectation that a liberal interpretation in the years to come would give to the Congress the same relative powers over new national problems as they themselves gave to the Congress over the national problems of their day." Of course Roosevelt, like Lincoln, was not averse to sidestepping the Constitution, especially during World War II – the destroyer-bases deal of September 1940 is often quoted as a case in point. But he was always careful to keep in step with public opinion and to act accordingly.<sup>44</sup>

Clinton Rossiter wrote of FDR that he "created the modern Presidency." In fact, the Presidency that Rossiter so skillfully analyzed in his classic study was the institution that FDR had bequeathed to his successors. As Rossiter pointed out, in addition to the five major formal powers of the president set out in the Constitution – which he characterized as chief of

state, chief executive, commander in chief, chief diplomat and chief legislator – there were now as many informal powers, not mentioned in the Constitution, which he described as chief of party, voice of the people, protector of the peace, manager of prosperity and world leader. FDR exemplified all of these and none more so than the first. He was not only the most electorally successful leader of any party in U.S. history but he also began the transformation of the Democratic Party from one dominated by states' rights and held hostage by the “solid South” into a liberal party deriving much of its support from ethnic minorities.<sup>45</sup>

As the voice of the people he rallied the nation in his First Inaugural and continued to do so throughout his Presidency, not only on great occasions like the annual address to Congress but in his many speeches and his fireside chats. As protector of the peace he intervened regularly in disputes between labor and management, especially during the war. When Pearl Harbor was attacked on 6 December 1941 he not only spoke for the nation in declaring it a “day of infamy” he also sanctioned the evacuation and internment of Japanese-Americans inland – an action explained, if not excused, by fear and unrest on the west coast. As manager of prosperity, FDR committed the resources of the New Deal to overcoming both the economic depression and the Supreme Court's interpretation of the powers of the Federal Government. The Employment Act of 1946 made it clear that the president now had a duty to safeguard the economy – a duty that had not existed in the eras when Washington and Lincoln occupied the presidency. Nor also did the role of world leader, which FDR made inseparable from the office of president.<sup>46</sup>

### **Simply the Best?**

“Roosevelt will never, I am sure, be ranked with Washington and Lincoln,” wrote Rossiter. Despite his praise for FDR, he did not rate him as highly as Washington “the spotless patriot” or Lincoln “the emancipator and preserver of the Union.” Nevertheless, he recognized that a

judgment made so soon after Roosevelt's death could not be the final verdict. "His influence on history is something for our descendants to assess," he continued, "They will know first-hand, as we can only guess from afar, whether the two great 'revolutions' he set in motion turn out to be blessings or curses for the American people." The first of these revolutions was the New Deal, which helped to preserve American capitalism. The second was Roosevelt's intervention in World War II and his establishment of the United Nations "both of which involved a series of decisions aimed at plunging America permanently, for America's own sake, into world affairs."<sup>47</sup>

"Franklin Roosevelt is fixed firmly in the hierarchy of great Presidents," Rossiter concluded, albeit "a sizable step, which may grow smaller over the years, below Washington and Lincoln. He had his own rendezvous with history and history will be kind to him." History has indeed been kind to Franklin Roosevelt and, as Rossiter predicted, his mistakes as president have increasingly been weighed against his many achievements. Playing the ranking game fifty years after Rossiter's work on the American presidency and therefore armed with the benefit of a hindsight that he could not possess we can see that FDR's presidency now stands in confident comparison with those of Washington and Lincoln. The two great revolutions achieved during Roosevelt's presidency – the New Deal and America's assumption of world leadership – make him the Founding Father of contemporary America and entitle him to serious consideration as the number one president. Not simply the best, for there was nothing simple about FDR's presidency, nor those of Washington and Lincoln, but certainly contending for the number one spot – as a poll of UK academics has happily confirmed.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tina Turner, lyrics to (Simply) The Best, 1989 ([www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/tinaturner/thebest](http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/tinaturner/thebest)).

<sup>2</sup> United States Presidency Centre (USPC) Survey Results, January 2011 ([www.community-languages.org.uk/U.S.-presidency-survey/results](http://www.community-languages.org.uk/U.S.-presidency-survey/results)).

<sup>3</sup> Iwan Morgan, Analysis of USPC Survey Results (<http://www.community-languages.org.uk/US-presidency-survey/pdf/analysis.pdf>).

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- <sup>4</sup> C-SPAN, 2009 Presidential Leadership Survey (<http://legacy.c-span.org/PresidentialSurvey/Overall-Ranking.aspx>).
- <sup>5</sup> USPC Survey Results.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Foreign Policy Results.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> Clinton Rossiter, *The American Presidency* (New York: Mentor, 1960), 137-40.
- <sup>9</sup> Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 1960).
- <sup>10</sup> Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership From Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: Free Press, 1990).
- <sup>11</sup> USPC Survey, Vision and Agenda Setting Results (<http://www.community-languages.org.uk/US-presidency-survey/vision.htm>); Rossiter, *American Presidency*, 31.
- <sup>12</sup> George Washington, First Inaugural Address, 30 April 1789 ([www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)).
- <sup>13</sup> George Washington, Farewell Address, 19 September 1796 ([www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)).
- <sup>14</sup> Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, 4 March 1861 ([www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)).
- <sup>15</sup> Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, 19 November 1863 ([www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)).
- <sup>16</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, 4 March 1933 ([www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)).
- <sup>17</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, Annual Address, 3 January 1936 ([www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)).
- <sup>18</sup> Tony McCulloch, "Franklin Roosevelt," in Michael Cox, Timothy J Lynch and Nicolas Bouchet (eds.), *U.S. Foreign Policy and Democracy Promotion: From Theodore Roosevelt to Barack Obama* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 69-85.
- <sup>19</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, Annual Address, 6 January 1937 ([www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)).
- <sup>20</sup> USPC Survey, Domestic Leadership Results (<http://www.community-languages.org.uk/US-presidency-survey/domestic.htm>); Rossiter, *American Presidency*, 35.
- <sup>21</sup> Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (London: Penguin, 2010); Richard Heffner and Alexander Heffner, *A Documentary History of the United States* (New York: Signet Reference, 2009), 52-64.
- <sup>22</sup> James M McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Gabor Boritt, *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).
- <sup>23</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1933-1945* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); William Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009); Anthony Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-40* (Chicago: Ivan Dee Publishers, 2002).
- <sup>24</sup> For example, see Burton W. Folsom, *New Deal or Raw Deal: How FDR's Economic Legacy Has Damaged America* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2009); Jim Powell, *FDR's Folly: How Roosevelt and His New Deal Prolonged the Great Depression* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003).
- <sup>25</sup> Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War, 1937-1945* (New York: Vintage, 1996); John W. Jeffries, "The 'New' New Deal: FDR and American Liberalism, 1937-1945," *Political Science Quarterly* 105, no. 3 (Autumn 1990): 397-418; Barry D. Karl, "Constitution and Central Planning: The Third New Deal Revisited," *The Supreme Court Review* (1988): 163-201.
- <sup>26</sup> Public Papers of the President, 144, Excerpts from the Press Conference, 28 December 1943; Franklin Roosevelt, Annual Address, 11 January 1944 ([www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)); Brinkley, *The End of Reform*.
- <sup>27</sup> USPC Survey, Foreign Policy Results (<http://www.community-languages.org.uk/US-presidency-survey/foreign.htm>).
- <sup>28</sup> George Washington, Farewell Address, 19 September 1796 ([www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)); George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Bradford Perkins, *The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- <sup>29</sup> Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*; McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln*; Perkins, *The Creation of a Republican Empire*.
- <sup>30</sup> Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); B. J. C. McKercher, *Transition of Power: Britain's Loss of Global Pre-eminence to the United States, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Tony McCulloch, "FDR as Founding Father of the Transatlantic Alliance," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 8, no. 3 (September 2010), 224-35.
- <sup>31</sup> Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*; Warren Kimball, *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).



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- <sup>32</sup> Stephen Schlesinger, *Act of Creation: The Founding of the United Nations* (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2003); Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley, *FDR and the Creation of the United Nations* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).
- <sup>33</sup> Frank Costigliola - *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances: How Personal Politics Helped Start the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).
- <sup>34</sup> USPC Survey, Moral Authority Results (<http://www.community-languages.org.uk/US-presidency-survey/moral.htm>); Robert Shogan, *The Double-Edged Sword: How Character Makes and Ruins Presidents from Washington to Clinton* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 75-92.
- <sup>35</sup> Chernow, *Washington*.
- <sup>36</sup> Louis P. Masur, *Lincoln's Hundred Days: The Emancipation and the War for the Union* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012); Abraham Lincoln to Horace Greeley, 24 August 1862 ([www.nytimes.com/1862/08/24/news/letter-president-lincoln-reply-horace-greeley-slavery-union-restoration-union](http://www.nytimes.com/1862/08/24/news/letter-president-lincoln-reply-horace-greeley-slavery-union-restoration-union)).
- <sup>37</sup> Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2013).
- <sup>38</sup> Merl Reed, *Seedtime For The Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Commission on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946* (Baton Rouge, LO: Louisiana State University, 1991).
- <sup>39</sup> William Leuchtenburg, *The Supreme Court Reborn: The Constitutional Revolution in the Age of Roosevelt* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996).
- <sup>40</sup> Felix Gilman, "The Famous Footnote Four: A History of the *Carolene Products* Footnote," *Texas Law Review* (2004): 163-79.
- <sup>41</sup> USPC Survey, Historical Legacy Results (<http://www.community-languages.org.uk/US-presidency-survey/legacy.htm>).
- <sup>42</sup> Rossiter, *American Presidency*, 85.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.
- <sup>44</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, Annual Address, 6 Jan 1937 ([www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)); Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*; Kimball, *The Juggler*.
- <sup>45</sup> Rossiter, *American Presidency*, 28-38.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-6.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-7.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.