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Waiting in Line at Mount Rushmore: Understanding the Rankings of Presidential Greatness

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Waiting in Line at Mount Rushmore: Understanding the Rankings of Presidential Greatness

Abstract
Carved into a granite cliff six thousand miles above sea level in rural South Dakota is where we find ourselves. It was here in October 1927 that a Danish-American man, Gutzon Borglum, and his son, aptly named Lincoln, began sculpting a monument to greatness. Construction took fourteen years and four-hundred workers with a price tag of nearly $1 million. Three million people will visit this year, which is more than three times the state's population.1 The architect of this pantheon explains the rationale best by saying, "The purpose of the memorial is to communicate the founding, expansion, preservation, and unification of the United States with colossal statues of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt."2 Arthur Schlesinger would not publish the first rankings on Presidential Greatness for another twenty one years, but in the fall of 1927, Borglum' s team had already registered an unofficial vote in what would become a central debate in American life: Who are the great presidents?

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By

Neil Weinberg

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It's a cliché for people to say they couldn't have completed a given task without the help of Persons X, Y, and Z. I firmly believe I could have finished this project without any help; it just wouldn't have been any good.

For the success of this paper I'd like to give special thanks to my advisor, Dr. Ed Sidlow. He would refuse to accept the term mentor, but in the four years I have spent at Eastern Michigan and the twelve months I spent working on this paper, his guidance has been extremely valuable. My mind would be less sharp, my standards would be lower, and I would take things too seriously if not for his help.

While many professors have influenced my thinking as a budding scholar, I would also like to make special mention of Dr. Jeff Bernstein. No one pushed me to improve my skills and abilities more than he did. If you're impressed with the methodology and thoroughness of what you are about to read, he is the man to thank.

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Most of all, I'd like to thank my wife, Becky. I'm constantly grateful for her ability to be impressed and amazed at things I write even when I think they're terrible. Her genuine appreciation for my work and her support while I do it are things I simply couldn't do without.

Neil Weinberg
Eastern Michigan University
March 26, 2012

\[1\] Well, she'll be my wife by the time anyone actually reads this!
Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 4

Method .................................................................................................................. 6

The Rankings ....................................................................................................... 9

The Greats ........................................................................................................... 12

Abraham Lincoln ................................................................................................. 12

Franklin Delano Roosevelt .................................................................................. 15

George Washington ............................................................................................ 19

Thomas Jefferson ................................................................................................. 22

Theodore Roosevelt ............................................................................................. 25

Hypothesis ........................................................................................................... 28

Test Cases ........................................................................................................... 31

James Monroe ...................................................................................................... 32

James Polk ............................................................................................................ 34

Results ................................................................................................................ 36

Wisdom of Others ............................................................................................... 37

Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 41

Notes .................................................................................................................... 43

Appendix A .......................................................................................................... 51

Bibliography ....................................................................................................... 52
Introduction

Carved into a granite cliff six thousand miles above sea level in rural South Dakota is where we find ourselves. It was here in October 1927 that a Danish-American man, Gutzon Borglum, and his son, aptly named Lincoln, began sculpting a monument to greatness. Construction took fourteen years and four-hundred workers with a price tag of nearly $1 million. Three million people will visit this year, which is more than three times the state’s population.¹

The architect of this pantheon explains the rationale best by saying, “The purpose of the memorial is to communicate the founding, expansion, preservation, and unification of the United States with colossal statues of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt.”²

Arthur Schlesinger would not publish the first rankings on Presidential Greatness for another twenty one years, but in the fall of 1927, Borglum’s team had already registered an unofficial vote in what would become a central debate in American life: Who are the great presidents?

Presidential Greatness matters and it matters differently to three distinct groups. Presidents, scholars, and the general public all have opinions on the subject and all have different reasons for caring about it. Presidents care about Greatness because they’re striving for it. Scholars care because they are trying to predict it, analyze it, and learn from it. The public cares because they are affected by it. Yet we find ourselves with forty-four presidents and no clear formula for determining Greatness. You cannot input variables into an equation and churn out a Greatness Coefficient. It is a supremely subjective measure. Often times we shy away from trying to answer subjective questions because we cannot be one hundred percent certain we have the right answer. But with clear methods and thorough discussion, we can find an answer. It may not be as ironclad as a natural law of physics, but it will teach us something about a subject that matters a great deal. We will certainly not be worse off for trying.
Various scholars and journalists have polled presidential experts on the subject of Presidential Greatness since Arthur Schlesinger began the practice in 1948. Over more than sixty years, we have added new presidents, but rarely have we seen significant fluctuation in the rankings. We find widespread consensus on who the Great Presidents are. Yet despite that consensus, we have had little success at really explaining why a certain handful of men rise above the rest to earn the title of “Great President.” Plenty of scholarship offers analysis on why some presidents end up near the top of the list and some end up near the bottom, but almost no work has been done to study the very distinct group of five presidents that are a clear level above the rest. Only Marc Landy and Sidney Milkes’ Presidential Greatness takes this approach, but their sample of Great Presidents does not match the historical consensus found in the rankings. Landy and Milkes seek to answer the fundamental question, what is common about the Great Presidents, but their work still relies too much on assessing the individual presidencies. In most cases, scholars evaluate a presidency to determine if it was great. The present study will look at the five Great Presidencies and ask, what are the common themes among these presidencies? Landy and Milkes have the right idea to study the Great Presidencies together, but they do so incorrectly and fail to actually study the correct five presidencies.

The goal of this study is to determine the characteristics of a Great Presidency. This study does not seek to uncover variables that lead to success, it seeks to find Greatness, which is a distinct quality even if some use the terms interchangeably. To do so, I will evaluate the rankings on Presidential Greatness, study the Great Presidencies, and then test the possible variables against a Successful Presidency that is not considered Great.

Determining the characteristics of a Great Presidency is important because it will help presidents understand their office and how to exercise their authority. It will help scholars
understand something about how they evaluate leaders, when most admit to ranking presidents by gut reaction. Finding the determinants of Greatness will also help lead the public into electing better presidents if we find that the factors that traditionally help a candidate win the presidency are different from the factors that lead to Greatness. It seems self-evident that all Americans would prefer a Great President to a Non-Great President, so this study will help them understand how better to find a Great one. This study will by no means assure that all future presidents are Great because even if we find out what makes a Great President, not all officeholders may be capable of it and not all situations may call for it. For scholars, even if we find a perfect variable, we may not be able to predict it because it will only be evident after a president takes office or a certain set of circumstances arises. For the public, even with a perfect method for finding Great Presidents, they may not want to run, they may not be given the right opportunity, and they may not even be eligible to run.

Finding out the characteristics of a Great Presidency will not solve every problem about the office, but it will help improve it. If we know what Greatness really looks like, it will be easier to find it and it will make it easier to find new faces to put onto the side of a cliff in South Dakota.

Method

If the central question we seek to answer is, “What Makes a Great President?” then we must first start by settling on which presidents are Great. By, “Great,” I mean which presidents are considered Great by the leading historians and scholars of the presidency. Who do the best informed people on the matter consider to be the elite Commanders-in-Chief?

To determine which presidents are Great, we must study the various scholarly rankings on Presidential Greatness. To the best of my ability, I have identified sixteen such rankings
dating from 1948 to 2011.ii Most of the rankings poll historians, but some included a variety of other well informed observers. In the more recent surveys, those conducting the surveys have tried to remove any bias from their samples by diversifying the participants to include more conservatives, women, and minorities. Each survey furnishes a list of participants, which you can find by going directly to the source. Despite changing the sample of participants, the rankings have changed very little. It is my opinion that the rankings accurately reflect the consensus of presidential historians.

To select the sample of Great Presidents, I analyzed the rankings very closely. I went into the study without a particular number of Greats in mind, and thought best to let the data lead me to the sample, rather than to let the sample lead me to data. First, I calculated the simple average of each president’s rankings by summing each rank and dividing by the number of polls that included them.iii This offered a starting point about how the rankings collectively order the presidents. From there, I introduced time as a variable, giving more recent surveys more weight. By doing so, the top five presidents from the basic average ranking held their noticeable lead over the sixth ranked president. At this point, I began to think that those top five presidents were my likely sample. Next, I considered how each president fared as a percentage of the entire ranking. In other words, Schlesinger’s 1948 ranking has fewer presidents than CSPAN’s 2009 poll, so I sought to evaluate this by considering each ranking as a percentile. The top five presidents continued to stand out, which a noticeably distinct top three as well.

After that, I eliminated each president’s best and worst ranking and then calculated the basic average again in order to see if one excellent or terrible ranking of a given president was

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ii See Appendix A for complete list of rankings.

iii Ronald Reagan, for example, had yet to serve when the first three rankings were published. William Henry Harrison and James Garfield are rarely ranked because they were assassinated or died early in their terms, but are included in my sample with a smaller n than the others in the name of completeness.
creating an artificial result. At the top of the rankings, this did not appear to matter. The most
telling manipulation came when I totaled each president’s time in a given set of rankings. I
counted how many times each president was ranked 1-5, 6-10, and 11-44. At this point, a distinct
group truly emerged. The top three presidents were ranked in the top five places in all sixteen
surveys. The fourth and fifth presidents were ranked in the top five in fourteen and thirteen
times, respectively. Only three other presidents were ever ranked in the top five, and never more
than twice. As a result of this, four Near Great’s seem to emerge ranking in the 6-10 window.
Following this, I tried to consult the number of times a ranking distinguished a group of
presidents as Great, but only five did so, so it was relatively inconclusive. After this, I considered
each president’s highest and lowest rankings and the midpoint of the two. The same five
presidents ranked at the top of each list.

In seven manipulations of the collective rankings, the top three presidents were
uncontested and the fourth and fifth only varied in two cases. The first was the Time variable in
which the fourth and fifth presidents switched places. The other was the Number of Great
Distinctly Mentioned variable, which was incomplete. I feel confident in saying the top five
presidents across my aggregation of the rankings are the presidents considered by the
participating historians to be Great. That said, there is a clear delineation between the top three
and the fourth and fifth.\textsuperscript{iv}

With the sample of Great Presidents decided, I then did thorough study of each of the
Greats by reading two scholarly accounts of their presidencies. In doing so, I identified a variety
of characteristics of each presidency. I stayed away from the easily quantifiable qualities like
height, years in office, or number of Supreme Court appointments. Other scholars have analyzed
those metrics as we will see later. I searched for broader concepts and themes like

\textsuperscript{iv}I will address this gradient nature later.
"Communication Skills" and "Legislative Success." The goal of this part of the project was to identify the aspects of each presidency deemed important to history. I believe I was successful in doing so. From there, I compared the variables from each of the five presidencies to determine which were common to all of them. Several stood out.

Yet to prove that any or all of those variables were causal factors in a Great ranking, I had to study other presidencies. I jumped over the Near Great category I mentioned before because true separation would be needed to consider multiple variables. I intentionally picked two presidents who historians consider Above Average or Successful to test against these variables. My goal was to find the difference between variables that lead to success and variables that lead to Greatness. I then studied those two presidencies exactly as I studied the first five. When I completed that, I searched for the characteristics common to the top five that were missing in the "Successful Two." The results of that analysis informed my hypothesis.

After completing my study and developing my hypothesis, I set out to read everything else every published on Presidential Greatness or Ranking. If I did not succeed, I came close. I did this to inform the discussion, but also to see if my theory was support or, more importantly, refuted elsewhere by more experienced researchers with better resources. I did not find any research to suggest my findings were inaccurate.

The Rankings

Even a cursory assessment of the sixteen presidential rankings used in this study would make several things clear. First, the rankings are very similar. Dwight Eisenhower\(^v\) does better in more recent surveys and Herbert Hoover tends to do worse. Aside from that, presidents have not improved or declined with time. We might think that our opinions have changed over time,

\(^{v}\) I will discuss this jump in Test Cases.

\(^{v}\) Many suggest this rise came from the opening of the Eisenhower papers.
but when it comes to the well informed historians, little revision appears to take place. Second, the same handful of presidents tops every list. Third, no clear pattern jumps out about why the rankings look the way they do.

To sort out which presidents are great, I performed the analysis described in the "Method" section of this paper. Five presidents seemed to stand out, in this order: Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt (FDR), George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Theodore Roosevelt (TR). The only other presidents to be ranked in any top five were Harry Truman (twice), Woodrow Wilson (twice), and Andrew Jackson (once). In contrast, the top five presidents ranked in the top five sixteen, sixteen, sixteen, fourteen, and thirteen times, respectively. In fact, Lincoln and FDR never ranked lower than third, while Washington's lowest point is fourth. Jefferson and TR each carry two seventh places as their nadir. By every measure, the top five presidents exist in a distinct class above rest. They are the subject of this study.

Also worth mentioning is a noticeable second class or Near Great set of presidents. They are all within shouting distance of the top tier, but fail to make the cut. Wilson, Truman, Jackson, and Eisenhower populate this group. None in this group ever rank higher than fourth, and in some cases, they rank as low as twenty-first. I would have a hard time justifying the claim that any of these presidents warrant a Great distinction based on the rankings, but they are clearly worthy of a Near Great, Good, or Successful distinction depending on how you wish to classify them.

From there, we find another important class of presidents that are viewed well by historians, but are not within the proverbial shouting distance of Greatness. These presidents are James Polk, John F. Kennedy, John Adams, James Madison, Lyndon Johnson, and James Monroe. Few would consider any of these men among the class of Lincoln, but they all have a
number of successes on which to rest their names. These presidents fit into the Above Average or Successful category. It is from this group that I will draw the two test cases to determine the difference between Success and Greatness. Beyond this, only Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, and Ronald Reagan ever rank in the top ten.

Lincoln, FDR, Washington, Jefferson, and TR are America’s Great Presidents according to the rankings. Determining that was the purpose of studying the rankings, but a few other things are worth mentioning at this time. While no clear mathematical formula points to this, poor performance in the White House tends to come in bunches followed by an excellent performance. For example, of the six presidents that preceded Lincoln, only Polk escapes the Below Average or Failure distinctions. Similarly, FDR followed three Below Average or Failure presidents into office: Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. TR came into office after a long period of Average and Below Average presidents as well. Generally, my assessment is that a few terrible presidents or a larger number of relatively poor presidents will usually be followed by a Great one. Anecdotally, this probably puts the United States on track for a Great President within the next couple of presidents, but it is too early to be sure.

Additionally, as you might expect, more recent presidents yield more varied results. Reagan and Kennedy are much more debated among the historians than the vast majority of presidents. I would imagine that as the history settles, their rankings will stabilize as a single narrative emerges about each presidency. We are still learning about the more recent administrations, but it is unlikely we will ever uncover much else about the McKinley years, for example.

Ultimately, the rankings give us five Great Presidents: Lincoln, FDR, Washington, Jefferson, and TR. From the group of Successful Presidents, I chose James Monroe and James
Polk as the test cases because my previous encounters with their work told me that they both achieved significant success in the White House, and the purpose of this study is to determine what makes Greatness different from Success.

**The Greats**

No two presidencies are alike and as columnist Nancy Gibbs says, "Presidents seldom get the presidencies they hoped for." Yet in determining what sets certain presidents apart, we cannot dwell too heavily on the differences. The purpose of this study is to find the similarities among the Greats in order to test those similarities against Non-Great Presidents. What follows is an overview of some of the major aspects of each of the Great Presidencies. It is important to consider that this paper is not a history lesson, so I will not discuss every act, decision, or circumstance completely and in perfect context. This section will illustrate the important unquantifiable themes of the Great Presidencies. As I mentioned before, I will not discuss the easily quantifiable aspects of each presidency because my predecessors have already done so, and I will introduce their findings after my own.

This section is arranged by ranking, not chronology because that is the order I studied them. Given that this study pertains to rankings, it seemed appropriate.

**#1: Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of the United States**

When discussing Lincoln’s Greatness, it is hard to decide where to begin. I chose the following categories as a matter of organization after reading the historical perspective. Another set of eyes might have labeled them differently, but nothing is lost in fitting the themes into these groups.

The first category is *Circumstances*. Lincoln faced big challenges when he took office and had clear goals. The nation tasked him with preserving the union and winning a *War* started

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*vii* Please consult the bibliography for detailed histories of each administration.
by others. In addition, the presidents who came before him were of low quality. "No president had larger challenges than Abraham Lincoln"⁴ is the way Phillip Shaw Pauldan summed it up. Lincoln became president as the South was seceding from the Union and no policy existed to handle such an event,⁵ meaning that he faced a crisis without a blueprint for solving it. He had clear goals⁶ and a clear enemy,⁷ but the solution was far less obvious. Additionally, Lincoln came to power at a time of high voter participation with 81 percent of the eligible population voting in 1860.⁸ Those circumstances were all outside of his control and set up a large challenge for him to overcome on his first day in office, and it was a challenge that many people were paying attention to as indicated by the voter participation.

In turn, Lincoln also claims an impressive list of Accomplishments. Simply put, he "saved the Union and he freed the slaves."⁹ If you delve a little deeper, Lincoln is responsible for preserving the Constitution, keeping a large portion of the nation's geographic area, keeping a significant portion of the population, and freeing men and women from slavery.¹⁰ He played a major role in winning the Civil War by being the one who "chose the generals, gathered the armies, set the overall strategy; he restrained the dissenters and opponents of the war; he helped to gather the resources that would maintain the Union economy and that would enable the Union military to remain strong and unrelenting."¹¹ Without Lincoln "the Union would have lacked the capacity to focus its will and its resources on defeating the Confederacy."¹²

Lincoln was also a master of Communication and the public aspects of the presidency. He was a shaper of public opinion¹³ and carried a reputation as a "tough debater."¹⁴ He often appealed to the "better angels"¹⁵ and "knew the importance of providing the story, the meaning, the interpretation of events that would determine how people understood the history that was unfolding."¹⁶ More simply, he was a story-teller who called upon the best intentions of his fellow
countrymen. He always made his positions and policies clear and “defined his course” so the people knew where he stood and where he planned to go. He also strung words together brilliantly in famous speeches such as the “Gettysburg Address” and his “Second Inaugural.” Lincoln also managed to wrap “change in a conservative cloth,” and in addition to preparing the country for change, he also waited for the right moment to unleash it, as was the case when he waited to announce the “Emancipation Proclamation” until after a key victory.

Lincoln’s Personal Approach to the presidency was another important aspect of his administration. While Lincoln was not particularly well prepared for executive duties, he was a good manager of men who “believed in restraint and control. He urged that reason replace passion in facing the changes of the age.” His best traits were “his compassion, his tolerance, his willingness to overlook mistakes” and was “a deliberate man who had learned to control himself and to move quietly and cautiously toward his goals.” Lincoln’s “speeches were carefully crafted and he thought deeply about the problems he faced.” Similarly, he was “a man who studied and thought and drafted options for himself before acting.” Yet when he did act, he acted swiftly and decisively and exercised authority any way he could. His was a strong presidency and while he sometimes did not move fast enough for the radicals, he maintained good personal relationships with them.

Lincoln made sure to keep his attention on grand strategy instead of specific details and always sought long term solutions. He selected cabinet officers whom he trusted and gave them a free hand to do their jobs. He was a skilled political operator who made it clear he listened to both wings of his party and “knew how to organize political strength, how to encourage his supporters to achieve his ends.”
Lincoln inherited a strong *Economy* and the war worked to foster further economic growth during his presidency, but not everyone benefited.\(^3\) He also had *Electoral* success as he was reelected by a landslide margin in 1864.\(^3\) Lincoln also knew he had to work with *Congress* and was extremely successful passing *Legislation*, as the session from 1861 to 1863 passed more bills than any previous session.\(^3\) He can also claim a number of *Iconic* moments such as the "Emancipation Proclamation,"\(^4\) the "Gettysburg Address,"\(^5\) and his "Second Inaugural."\(^6\) Lincoln was certainly also a *Transformative* president as he dramatically increased the scope and power of his office in addition to the massive role he played shaping the country.\(^7\) John Wilkes Booth added to Lincoln’s lore as he became a martyr and had people asking *What Could Have Been?* He was killed before he could truly finish his task and his end came at his finest hour, causing Edwin Stanton to say, “Now he belongs to the ages.”\(^8\)

The important themes of Lincoln’s presidency include challenging circumstances (including a war\(^8\)), big accomplishments, excellent communication skills, an effective personal approach to the presidency, a strong economy, a successful legislative record, electoral success, iconic moments, transforming the presidency, and being assassinated at the height of his success. Some combination or subset of these variables define a Great Presidency because, as we have already seen, Lincoln is unquestionably a Great President according to the rankings.

**#2: Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), 32\(^{nd}\) President of the United States**

*Circumstances* also paved FDR’s path to Greatness. The 1930s were a time of great change in the United States and he came to power with the Great Depression in full swing.\(^9\) FDR stepped into office amid the banking crisis\(^9\) following a poor president\(^9\) and fought a *War* started by others.

\(^8\) Many scholars believe wartime presidents are ranked higher than presidents who did not serve during a war. This will be addressed later.
FDR met his challenges with big *Accomplishments* as well, many of them in *Foreign Affairs*. His domestic record was also strong as he “restored the country’s confidence” with a successful first “Hundred Days” that ended the banking crisis. By the end of his first term, things had improved markedly in the United States and the nation’s course had been “decisively altered.” FDR ended the Depression and created the modern welfare state. Yet some of his more impressive accomplishments came overseas. FDR faced an international crisis in the form of a war started by others, World War II. While FDR had wanted to help the Allies earlier, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor simplified things, giving him the support of the American people to enter the war. Things got even easier for FDR as Hitler declared war on the United States, offering FDR the occasion to say, “The militarists of Berlin and Tokyo started this war. But the massed, angered forces of humanity will finish it.”

FDR faced isolationist opposition to helping the allies before Pearl Harbor, but he did manage to offer them some support. He called for an expansion of American airpower in 1938 and continued to expand the military at every opportunity after. FDR also devised the Lend-Lease program to help the Allies in 1941 and shepherded the American public to support it. Additionally, he expanded the American naval patrol zone in the Atlantic Ocean to take the burden off the British, allowing them to use their resources for direct confrontation.

Pre-war cleverness was by no means his only contribution to the Allied victory, however. FDR was a successful manager of the war once the United States entered the conflict in late 1941. Selecting Eisenhower as commander was the last major decision he made, and it was an excellent one. FDR led the nation through the war and “when it ended, America was the most powerful nation in history.” In addition, FDR played a key role in the creation of the United Nations.
Communication was one of FDR’s great strengths and he, too, mastered the public aspects of the presidency. He possessed an “extraordinary gift for personal relations” and saw his mission as educational. He was a superb manager of the press and relied heavily on persuasion. FDR appealed to America’s “better angels” and spoke of American greatness. He tied campaign issues to one another instead of discussing them separately and “galvanized the nation with an inaugural address.” He was very popular and went “to the people” to guide their opinions toward his ultimate policies. His best acts of communication were his fireside chats, which were “meticulously researched and rehearsed” and were met with overwhelmingly positive reviews.

FDR’s Personal Approach to the presidency was another key aspect of his time in office. He was “the most gifted American statesman of the twentieth century,” kept a positive outlook, and was Well Prepared to be Commander-in-Chief. FDR was a natural on the campaign trail and displayed “energetic leadership” from the moment he took office. He called Americans to action immediately and put himself in the spotlight right away. He took quick and decisive action when it needed to be taken and had a deep understanding of how to use power. FDR sought a diverse cabinet and insisted on opposing viewpoints before coming to a final decision. He favored a personally loyal staff and instituted a management style that “was a legendary mixture of straightforward delegation, flow chart responsibility, Machiavellian cunning, and crafty deception.” In addition to his success managing the West Wing, he also dominated national party politics more than any president since Lincoln.

FDR clearly oversaw an improving Economy that was later aided by a wartime economic boom. He also had phenomenal Electoral success, winning each of his four elections very comfortably. FDR had great success in dealing with Congress and passed significant
Legislation. He helped create the “greatest production of legislation in American history”\textsuperscript{90} that included a “sweeping domestic agenda.”\textsuperscript{91} It seems superfluous to mention each piece of legislation by name, but “when the hundred days ended in the early morning hours of June 16, Congress had shattered all precedent for legislative activity.”\textsuperscript{92} FDR had also overcome a great Personal Struggle in dealing with polio to become president.\textsuperscript{93}

Several Iconic pieces of American history are also tied to FDR. The “Hundred Days,”\textsuperscript{94} “New Deal,”\textsuperscript{95} Social Security Act,\textsuperscript{96} fireside chats, and a whole host of wartime moments are written under his name in history books. FDR himself is a “mythic figure”\textsuperscript{97} that hangs over American history.\textsuperscript{98} He, like Lincoln, also begs the question, What Could Have Been? as he died in office at the peak of his success.\textsuperscript{99} It is also important to consider that FDR did make Mistakes. Not all of his New Deal policies worked\textsuperscript{100} and the Supreme Court struck some of them down.\textsuperscript{101} His plan to pack the Court was also a disaster and he “paid dearly” for it.\textsuperscript{102} FDR also signed the Executive Order that resulted in Japanese internment during World War II, which was popular at the time, but is considered shameful today.\textsuperscript{103}

Above all, FDR was a Transformative president. He revolutionized campaigning and political parties,\textsuperscript{104} while also reorganizing the White House.\textsuperscript{105} He broke tradition and sought a third (and later, fourth) term.\textsuperscript{106} His Social Security Act “redefined” the responsibility of the nation\textsuperscript{107} and he built a political coalition of big city bosses, the White South, farmers, workers, Jews, Irish Catholics, minorities, and blacks.\textsuperscript{108} Simply put, FDR’s presidency was an “historical phenomenon.”\textsuperscript{109}

The important themes of FDR’s presidency include challenging circumstances (including a war), big accomplishments, excellent communication skills, an effective personal approach to the presidency, helpful pre-presidency experience, economic success, a successful legislative
record, electoral success, iconic moments, notable mistakes, transforming the presidency, and
dying at the height of his success. Some combination or subset of these variables define a Great
Presidency because, as we have already seen, FDR is unquestionably a Great President according
to the rankings.

#3: George Washington, 1st President of the United States

Americans worship George Washington for many things, but historians do, in fact,
consider him a Great President independent of his extraordinary pre-presidential career. Yet that
Prior Accomplishment cannot be ignored when evaluating important factors of his
administration. Washington had led the Colonial Army to victory in the American Revolution
and then relinquished his power, giving him a “transcendent status” after the war.\textsuperscript{110} The country
would not let him rest and called him to lead and legitimize the Constitutional Convention.\textsuperscript{111}
Once the Constitution was ratified, it was clear the country wanted Washington to serve as
president, and “he stood in a league of his own, his stature inimitable.”\textsuperscript{112} Simply put, “the nation
wouldn’t let Washington enjoy the ease of a private citizen, and he had to learn to manage his
celebrity.”\textsuperscript{113} He walked into the presidency more accomplished and popular than any man who
would follow.

Circumstances defined Washington’s presidency much like they would for Lincoln and
FDR. Essentially, there “was no such thing as a viable American nation when he took office as
president,”\textsuperscript{114} and no republican government this large and diverse existed in the world.\textsuperscript{115} While
no president walked into the office more accomplished than Washington, “only two presidents –
Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt – faced comparable crisis.”\textsuperscript{116} He faced a herculean
task of forging a nation with no model for doing so.
Washington met the crisis with his own list of Accomplishments. Setting aside for a moment his biggest accomplishment,\textsuperscript{ix} Washington sports a “catalog of accomplishments [that are] simply breathtaking.”\textsuperscript{117} He restored credit, created a bank, mint, coast guard, customs department, diplomatic corps, an accounting system, tax procedures, and budget procedures. He shored up American defenses, fostered peace, built infrastructure, regulated commerce, and prevented rebellion.\textsuperscript{118} Economically, under his leadership, exports soared, shipping boomed, and the Mississippi was opened to American commerce.\textsuperscript{119}

Washington also handled the Communication and public aspects of the presidency well for a man who was not as verbally gifted as Lincoln or FDR. He knew the public well and was “perceptive” when it came to their mood and beliefs.\textsuperscript{120} He often traveled as president to gauge public opinion and to show the people who he was.\textsuperscript{121} Washington sat for portraits\textsuperscript{122} to create an image\textsuperscript{x} and called on the “better angels” of America.\textsuperscript{123} John Adams summed up Washington’s communication and public skills well, saying “if Washington was not the greatest president, he was the best actor of the presidency we have ever had.”\textsuperscript{124}

Washington’s Personal Approach to the presidency also defines his administration. Above all, historians cite his honesty and ability to be above any suspicion. He was “a model president in making appointments, he never cut deals or exploited patronage.”\textsuperscript{125} He sought merit and “refused to favor friends or relations in making appointments.”\textsuperscript{126} Washington’s decision making is also highly praised as he made a point to higher capable people and kept his eye on the broader picture.\textsuperscript{127} He was open to conflicting ideas\textsuperscript{128} and took his time when making decisions.\textsuperscript{129} He delegated well\textsuperscript{130} and “excelled as a leader precisely because he was able to choose and orchestrate bright, strong personalities.”\textsuperscript{131} Simply put, “his genius was his

\textsuperscript{ix} Washington’s biggest accomplishment is creating the presidency, see Formative in this section. It deserves separate discussion for continuity.

\textsuperscript{x} The 18\textsuperscript{th} century photo op!
judgment."\textsuperscript{132} Additionally, Washington was always a reluctant servant, which eliminated the feeling that he was seeking personal glory above national well-being.\textsuperscript{133}

Washington certainly had \textit{Electoral} success, as he was reelected without any real opposition.\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Iconic} aspects of American history are another important piece of Washington's legacy. Aside from the pre-presidency aspects mentioned before, he was the first president, surrendered power voluntarily,\textsuperscript{135} and offered his "Farewell Address" that became an "American classic."\textsuperscript{136}

Yet Washington's biggest impact came through being the \textit{Formative}\textsuperscript{27} president. He gave an inaugural address, even though one was not required and set the tone for all future inaugurals.\textsuperscript{137} He "foraged the executive branch"\textsuperscript{138} and "set out to...construct a sturdy, well-run government."\textsuperscript{139} Washington seized the lack of clarity in the Constitution about the cabinet\textsuperscript{140} and "put a premium on efficiency, good manners, discretion, and graceful writing"\textsuperscript{141} in creating executive departments. With no precedent or model, Washington "introduced procedures that made his government a model of smooth efficiency."\textsuperscript{142} He turned the State of the Union into a formal speech\textsuperscript{143} and "tried...persistently to set an example of good conduct."\textsuperscript{144}

Washington signed the National Bank into law, which "endorsed an expansive view of the Presidency and made the Constitution a living, open-ended document."\textsuperscript{145} He selected the site for the capitol\textsuperscript{146} and turned the president into the "principle actor" in foreign affairs.\textsuperscript{147} Washington set precedent\textsuperscript{148} and showed the world that a republican government could prosper.\textsuperscript{149} Everyone assumed that Washington would be president for life,\textsuperscript{150} but he was firmly set on leaving power after two terms and gave up power willingly.\textsuperscript{151} He would not be king.

Washington also created the custom of presidents offering parting wisdom in farewell addresses.\textsuperscript{152} Importantly, he knew the importance of creating the presidency from nothing,

\textsuperscript{21} Think of Formative and Transformative in the same way.
saying to John Adams, “Many things which appear of little importance in themselves...at the beginning may have great and durable consequences, from their having been established at the commencement of a new general government.” Certain accolades offer perspective. Joseph Ellis writes Washington “shaped the basic contours of American history” and that no one else could have done it. Ron Chernow, perhaps as boldly, writes that “Washington’s accomplishments as president were no less groundbreaking than his deeds in the Continental Army.”

The important themes of Washington’s presidency include prior accomplishments, challenging circumstances, big accomplishments, good communication skills, a successful personal approach to the presidency, economic growth, electoral success, and the formation of the presidency. Some combination or subset of these variables define a Great Presidency because, as we have already seen, Washington is unquestionably a Great President according to the rankings.

#4: Thomas Jefferson, 3rd President of the United States

Thomas Jefferson would certainly have gone down in history even if his countryman had never elected him president. That Prior Accomplishment is worth noting when considering his Greatness. While Jefferson was not particularly successful as a public servant prior to the presidency, he was well studied and accomplished having, among other things, been the principal author of the Declaration of Independence. He was revered, even in his own time, and valued his pre-presidential accomplishments so much so that his own tombstone does not mention his presidency. Circumstances did not play a major role in Jefferson’s presidency, with the only important factor being that 1800 was the first major shift of political power from one party to another in American history and it occurred without bloodshed.
Jefferson does claim a significant number of *Accomplishments* with some coming in *Foreign Affairs*. His first term was better than his second,\(^{162}\) with "monumental achievements for his administration" coming during his first four years.\(^{163}\) He took charge in the First Barbary War with Tripoli, which is a lesser *War* the United States would win.\(^{164}\) On the home front, Jefferson won a series of negative reforms like the repeal of the Alien and Sedition Acts, the abolition of various taxes, and the reduction of the military.\(^{165}\) He also reformed the judiciary\(^^{166}\) and handled conflicts over public land.\(^{167}\) Jefferson’s maneuvering led to the purchase of New Orleans and Florida\(^{168}\) and his Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the United States.\(^{169}\) The lasting impact of Louisiana and his other accomplishments inspired historian Forrest McDonald to write that "the achievements of the Jefferson administration during its first three years rivaled those of Washington’s first three; they would never be matched again, not by Jackson, by Lincoln, or by either Roosevelt."\(^{170}\)

*Communication* skills and the public aspect of the presidency are fundamental to the Jefferson presidency. He was "immensely popular,"\(^{171}\) especially early in his presidency, and used that popularity to his advantage.\(^{172}\) He often wrote to Congress to make his positions and intentions clear\(^{173}\) and excelled in influencing members of his cabinet and Congress.\(^{174}\) In addition, Jefferson had a keen sense of the ritualistic and symbolic aspects of the presidency and performed well in those roles.\(^{175}\)

Jefferson’s *Personal Approach* to the presidency is another important factor. Jefferson replaced Federalists with Republicans in government,\(^{176}\) but did not simply purge the ranks.\(^{177}\) He surrounded himself with loyal and dedicated Republicans,\(^{178}\) but sought merit above all else.\(^{179}\) Jefferson had a close relationship with his cabinet and Congress\(^{180}\) and "handled his
subordinates masterfully.”181 He was self-disciplined142 and an “ambivalent pragmatist.”183 Additionally, Jefferson was gifted in international affairs,184 being called a “superb diplomat.”185

Electoral success was another hallmark of Jefferson’s presidency as he won reelection in 1804 rather handily.186 He worked well with Congress187 and passed significant Legislation. The major initiatives are listed in the Accomplishment section, but it is worth noting that Jefferson was very involved in the legislative process to the point that he “wrote Congress’s agenda.”188 Aside from his pre-presidency fame, Jefferson can claim an Iconic piece of American history with the Louisiana Purchase.189 Additionally, his ideas are stitched into the American mind.190 He, like FDR, had notable Failures, as well. His relationship with Congress waned as time went on191 and he began to struggle in world affairs.192 Jefferson’s efforts to retire the debt resulted in a weaker military force that later presidents would inherit.193 While events dictate some of these failures, much of the blame does in fact belong to Jefferson himself.194 In fact, much of the second term of this Great Presidency was a “painful ordeal.”195

Jefferson, too, can claim a Transformative presidency. He “reversed the flow of history with his agenda”196 during an “innovative” presidency.197 He made the presidency about his ideas198 and cemented Washington’s two term precedent.199 Jefferson also changed how the president acted in foreign policy200 and as we saw before, put the president atop a party system and grabbed power for the office by adding land to the United States under presidential authority.

The important themes of Jefferson’s presidency include prior success, big accomplishments, excellent communication skills, an effective personal approach to the presidency, a successful legislative record, electoral success, iconic moments, notable mistakes, and transforming the presidency. Some combination or subset of these variables define a Great
Presidency because, as we have already seen, Jefferson is a Great President according to the rankings.

#5: Theodore Roosevelt (TR), 26th President of the United States

Lewis Gould calls the final Great President, Theodore Roosevelt, the “most exciting” president in the twentieth century. TR’s Prior Accomplishment did not match Washington or Jefferson, but he was a public figure before his presidency from his role in the Spanish-American War. Circumstances mattered to some of the Greats, but aside from taking over after an assassination, he faced “no crisis to overcome and no war to wage,” and did not govern in a time of “intense foreign policy crisis or social upheaval.”

The lack of challenging circumstances, however, did not prevent TR from accruing a long list of Accomplishments, with some coming in Foreign Affairs. He did not have his own agenda, but he articulated the right questions, if not the right answers. TR would address regulation, conservation, and America’s role in the world. He set out to improve the government and believed in duty in foreign policy. He would exercise power with careful restraint and took things slow because the public was weary of too much involvement in world affairs. TR sought to strengthen American armed forces and handled numerous foreign issues well. Issues came up in Cuba, the Philippines, and Panama early in his presidency and he handled them well. He could show tangible foreign accomplishments and the expansion of U.S. power during his first term. TR mediated the Russo-Japanese War and would win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906 for his role in settling the conflict. The mediation showed his diplomatic skill and won praise the world over. He expanded American involvement abroad and declared the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. Some historians criticize TR’s foreign bona fides, but a significant number believe he was the greatest foreign affairs president
in American history. Regardless of the position, historians concur that “Roosevelt demonstrated the capacity of the president to be world statesmen.”

At home, TR was no less accomplished. During his presidency, the government’s finances were good with spending rising, but debt declining anyway. He intervened in the coal strike of 1902 and settled the dispute. TR championed regulation, especially of trusts, and furthered the cause of employer liability laws. The Antiquities Act also belongs to TR, giving the president the power to proclaim protected land. His environmental policy earns him the accolade “one of the great conservationist presidents in the nation’s history.” Again, “with no crisis to overcome and no war to wage, Roosevelt achieved important legislation and set constructive precedents at home and abroad.”

TR’s Communication skills and public presidency was also impressive. He was reassuring as he took over following the McKinley assassination. Coining popular phrases like “speak softly and carry a big stick,” “bully pulpit,” and “the strenuous life,” show his communicative skills. TR was keenly aware of the emerging media and technological changes occurring during his presidency and he effectively managed news flow by “mastering” the press. He was “careful to make his ideas clear, his language direct, and his message striking.” TR was also unmatched as a “popular politician.” He played into the public’s fascination with him and used his popular family as an asset politically. Ultimately, “he wove the office into the fabric of daily life as no previous president had done.”

His Personal Approach reinforces this idea. TR had “personalized the presidency,” deriving “its major strength from an emphasis on his unique personal qualities.” He was a “strong president” and not a partisan. TR selected qualified people, let them work, and was a talented administrator himself. For his era, his information sorting system was also

More on this later.
extensive. While his executive skills were strong, he “also proved to be good at politics.” Grover Cleveland remarked that “Roosevelt is the most perfectly equipped and the most effective politician this far seen in the presidency.” Edmund Morris called TR a “formidable force by virtue of his popularity, tactical skill, and unequaled political intelligence.”

TR passed productive Legislation, but not on all issues as he had a very strained relationship with Congress. On the whole, he presided over an expanding Economy, with credit “to the man in the White House.” TR’s Electoral success was won as an “overwhelming mandate” in 1904 by way of an “unprecedented landslide” that was “colossal” in nature. He can also claim a Unique quality, by being the youngest president. Like the other Greats, TR also claims Iconic parts of American history like the “Square Deal” and his additions to the lexicon like “speak softly...”

Following the other Greats, TR was a Transformative president. In settling the coal strike, TR became “the first head of state to confront the largest problem of the twentieth century” which the Times of London called a “big and entirely new thing.” He took part in off year Congressional elections, which heretofore had been extremely rare for the president. He became the first president to leave the continental United States during his presidency by traveling to Panama and also was first president to “preach the conservation of natural resources.” He literally remade the White House by improving the grounds and structure, but also remade the White House figuratively. The modern presidency was starting to surface before TR, but he truly launched it. His prime contribution was the exercise of presidential power. “His importance to the presidency endures” through his expansion of presidential muscle, but also in another important way. TR “dramatized and personalized the modern form of his office and made it a living reality for Americans of his day and for the generations that
followed.” Two characterizations make this even clearer. TR “was more than an important contributor to the evolution of the modern institution of the presidency. He personalized the office in a way that had not occurred since Andrew Jackson. In many respects, none of Roosevelt’s successors since 1909 had equaled his impact on the popular mind,” is the way Lewis Gould sums it up. Morris concludes that the “folk consensus [is] that [TR] had been the most powerfully positive American leader since Abraham Lincoln.”

The important themes of TR’s presidency include prior success, big accomplishments (including in foreign affairs), excellent communication skills, an effective personal approach to the presidency, a successful legislative record, electoral success, iconic moments, some difficulty with Congress, economic success, and transforming the presidency. Some combination or subset of these variables define a Great Presidency because, as we have already seen, TR is a Great President according to the rankings.

**Hypothesis**

From the data gathered about each of the five Great Presidents, we find a number of non-empirically measurable themes. Prior accomplishment, circumstances, war, foreign affairs, accomplishments, communication skills, personal approach and political skill, economic conditions, electoral success, relationship with Congress, legislative success, iconic moments, uniqueness, and transforming the presidency are all variables that I considered, and I considered them based on the historical accounts. Those variables came from the history; I did not go to the history looking for them.

Considering them individually allowed me to decide if any or all of them were worth pursuing. *Prior accomplishment* does not appear to be a relevant factor. Lincoln entered office with no previous accomplishments and is rated as the Greatest President. FDR and TR each sport

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xiii The empirically measurable qualities have previously been studied, more on them later.
modest pre-presidency success, while Washington and Jefferson can claim significant accomplishments before becoming president. If you can be Great with or without previous accomplishments, accomplishment prior to taking office seems to be an unlikely factor in Presidential Greatness. Additionally, both of our test cases were well accomplished prior to taking office, and neither is considered Great by the rankings.

_Circumstances_ are often thought to be one of the key factors in Greatness. “The times make the man,” is commonly said. Lincoln, FDR, and Washington all faced trying times. Jefferson and TR did not. On the face of it, this could indicate that you become a top three president by facing the most challenging crises. This variable warrants consideration, but there must be more to it. Hoover faced the Great Depression before FDR did, but he is far from Great according to the rankings. Buchanan sat in the Oval Office as sectional rivalries flared to the precipice of war, but is often considered to be among the very worst presidents. Facing a serious challenge appears to increase a president’s odds of Greatness if he is able to overcome the challenge. However, Jefferson and TR are often explicitly referred to as Great. Additionally, Wilson does not make the top tier despite World War I and Kennedy fails to reach the pantheon despite his steady hand during the Cuban Missile Crisis. If overcoming an existential challenge was the driving variable, Wilson and Kennedy would be Great and Jefferson and TR would be Near Great.

_War and foreign affairs_ issues run closely alongside the circumstance variable. Lincoln fought a war and faced a somewhat foreign crisis. FDR did as well. Washington did not. Jefferson and TR also dealt with lesser, but important foreign issues during their time. All were reasonably or very successful on this front. However, many other presidents faced foreign crises and many did well in handling them. Kennedy’s Cuban Missile Crisis is a prime example.
Certainly that was an existential foreign threat, and he routinely gets high marks in dealing with it. Many other presidents fought wars. Madison, Polk, McKinley, Wilson, Johnson, and Truman all did with varying levels of success. While some scholars cite “number of years spent at war” is a key variable, it is hard for me to make that case. Accomplishments is a variable worth careful study. All five of Greats achieved many important things and were successful in their efforts to implement their agenda. Yet taking a broad view of history, many presidents can claim matching accomplishments. I will test this variable, however, because it does meet the criteria of being common among all five Greats.

Strong communication skills and an effective personal approach appear to be common themes as well. I will test these variables, despite my inclination that many Non Great Presidents had both. Economic success does not appear to be a strong indicator for Great Presidencies as each Great did moderately well, but were by no means the most successful when it comes to the economy among their fellow presidents.\textsuperscript{xiv} Each of the Greats had impressive electoral success, as well. I will test this variable, but many Average and Below Average Presidents had electoral success, so I do not expect it to matter. All of the Greats did well in passing legislation, so I will consider that variable, but not all had good relationships with Congress, so that variable will not be tested. Each Great can claim iconic moments in American history, but they are different degrees of iconic, and many other presidents can claim those as well. Kennedy immediately comes to mind. Unique elements also do not seem particularly important, as almost any sample of forty four will have a lot of unique qualities.\textsuperscript{xv}

The final variable is being a transformative president. In other words, all of the Greats dramatically impacted the institution of the presidency. This variable has legs. Each of the Greats

\textsuperscript{xiv} Economic success could very well determine whether or not a president is a success or failure, but it does not seem to indicate Greatness.

\textsuperscript{xv} Unique in the sense of youngest, oldest, tallest, smartest.
played a significant role in shaping the presidency, and transforming the presidency also explains some of the finer points of this study. It explains why the top three are a distinct group over the fourth and fifth. Lincoln, FDR, and Washington are the most transformative presidents, with Jefferson and TR close behind. This would also explain the Near Great group. They were somewhat transformative, but not in the same way that the top five are. The remaining presidents did not leave a lasting impact on the office, even if they did leave one on the country. This variable absolutely warrants consideration.

Based on a study of the rankings and five Great Presidents, six characteristics span the Great Presidents. Accomplishments, communication skills, effective personal approach, electoral success, legislative success, and transforming the presidency were worthy of study as I proceeded into the next phase of the analysis. My prediction was that the first five characteristics listed above would prove useless as many other presidents can claim all five without earning the Great title. Given that, I predicted that in order to be considered a Great President by the community of scholars that ranks presidents, a president much transform (or form) the office of the presidency.

Test Cases

The two presidents I chose to test my hypothesis were James Monroe and James K. Polk. In order to properly delineate between Success and Greatness, I had to select presidents that historians praise, but do not call Great. Monroe and Polk fit that criteria, but they are also useful as test subjects because they are clearly in a separate class from the Greats. Earlier, I made the case that the top five presidents were in a class by themselves, and while I stand by that claim, I did not want to choose a president in the Near Great category for the test cases because it could cause problems in analyzing the results. That would be the case if I were to use Andrew Jackson
because while the rankings do not consider him a Great President, there are individual scholars who often do. This seemed like a hazardous line to walk, so selecting two Successful, but not Near Great, Presidents was more appropriate. If my hypothesis is not supported by Monroe and Polk, it would be suspect. If it is supported by Monroe and Polk, it would likely suggest my findings are meaningful because then the only real question about this study would be where I drew the cutoff line between Great and Non Great.

The sections on Monroe and Polk are shorter because I am only including information relevant to the variables in question, but I conducted the study in the same manner.

#15: James Monroe, 5th President of the United States

Depending on which statistical manipulation I used, James Monroe fell between eleventh and sixteenth in the presidential rankings. The simple average places him fifteenth. It is not particularly important to determine exactly where Monroe falls except to say that he is, on average, nowhere near the top. Of the sixteen surveys included in this study, only two place him in the top ten. When one of the rankings offers a description of Monroe's place, Above Average is common.

Let us settle the simple variables first. Monroe's Electoral success is impressive. Monroe won the presidency in 1816 easily\textsuperscript{268} and faced no challenge to his 1820 reelection campaign.\textsuperscript{269} If landslide victories mattered in determining Greatness, Monroe would be at the top of the list only rivaled by Washington. Instead, he and many other presidents who won election and re-elections handily are dispersed throughout the rankings. While electoral success may be necessary to be Great, electoral success does not make you Great given Monroe’s overwhelming wins.
Monroe’s *Communication* skills do not rank with Lincoln and FDR, but they were strong. Early in his presidency, he toured the country and made special mention of the military that had helped with the recent War of 1812.\(^{270}\) His first message to Congress was extremely well received\(^{271}\) and his final message did an excellent job outlining the successes of the Monroe administration.\(^{272}\) These examples may not show the presidency’s most brilliant orator, but they do indicate that Monroe successfully used the communication paradigm of his day. His words may not echo in our minds, but given his time period and his lack of serious crisis, Monroe was a good communicator. Again, this tells us that you may need good communication skills to be Great, but good communication skills do not make you Great.

An effective *Personal Approach* to the presidency is also something Monroe claims. He was a “hands on”\(^{273}\) president who had “close involvement in administrative duties.”\(^{274}\) Monroe was a good decision maker\(^{275}\) who “sought to achieve specific, attainable objectives.”\(^{276}\) While not often associated with it in history textbooks, Monroe also helped direct the Missouri Compromise from behind the scenes.\(^{277}\) Historians do not consider Monroe to be as brilliant as some of the other men who have held the office, but they think highly of him as he more than made up for it.\(^{278}\) Here, we see that once again an effective personal approach may be necessary in order to be Great, but an effective personal approach does not make you Great.

Monroe also had success passing *Legislation*. He might not have been a master operator of Congress, but he did work well to pass measures important to him.\(^{279}\) His tax plan breezed through\(^{280}\) and his impact on the Missouri Compromise was already noted in addition to his well-received messages to Congress. He did not pass a flurry of legislation like Lincoln or FDR, but he succeeded in passing legislation which brings us back to the idea that you might need legislative success to be Great, but legislative success does not make you Great.
Accomplishments are not hard to find during Monroe's years as president. He added five states to the Union and shrunk the national debt. He presided over the Era of Good Feelings and pushed internal improvements and sound finances as the United States marched west. Monroe grew the executive branch, supported revolutions in Latin America, and left his "most lasting legacy" by declaring the Monroe Doctrine. Monroe also quieted the "most critical domestic crisis of his two terms" by shepherding the Missouri Compromise in 1820. Again we find that accomplishments might be necessary to have a Great Presidency, but accomplishments do not guarantee a Great Presidency.

James Monroe did not Transform the presidency. Despite living in "an ever changing world" that was a "more critical [period] than is often recognized," he did not leave the presidency much different than he found it. He grew the executive branch, but not in a way that changed the political power relationship or capabilities in any significant way. He declared the Monroe Doctrine, which while being a transformational act for the country, did not transform the office of the presidency as it fit with the previous understanding of presidential prerogative.

"Although Monroe is widely remembered in history for the Monroe Doctrine his impact on his times was much broader, though never so great as such predecessors in the presidential office as George Washington of Thomas Jefferson," is the way Noble Cunningham assessed Monroe's time in office. That comment is telling. Monroe was successful and had a big impact on the country, but he did not change the presidency in a dramatic way. It appears that a president must transform the presidency if he wants to be considered Great. In comparing Monroe to the Greats, transforming the presidency is the only variable that appears to differentiate.

#10: James K. Polk, 11th President of the United States
James Polk tends to rank a little higher than Monroe. Depending on which manipulation I used, Polk fell somewhere between ninth and fourteenth and of the sixteen rankings, he falls between eighth and sixteenth. Historians, too, label Polk as Above Average.

Settling the easiest variable first, Polk won the presidency in 1844 by a suitable, but unimpressive margin, yet he pledged to only serve one term, so there is no telling how he would have done in a reelection bid. Polk’s Electoral margin was not a landslide, but James Monroe’s electoral success already proved that winning by a big margin does not make Great Presidents. It remains possible that you must have big electoral success to be a Great President, but my inclination is that presidents are reelected because they are Great, not visa versa, but I cannot absolutely guarantee that.

Not much is written about Polk’s Communication skills, but one thing that historians do mention is that Polk used the press skillfully to influence Congressional activity. Polk may not have been the best orator of his day, but he clearly demonstrated a proficiency in presidential communication and there is no mention of any serious errors in that respect. He may not have been Lincoln or FDR, but his lack of superhuman oratorical ability did not hold him back as we will see shortly.

Polk’s Personal Approach to the presidency was very effective as well. He was a “strong executive” who utilized his cabinet well. Polk mastered details and always impressed people with his knowledge and skill. He was a representative of the people, but it was Jackson’s model, not his own invention. Polk was “impressive” as Commander-in-Chief and shows that an effective personal approach might be necessary for a Great Presidency, but it does not assure one.
When it came to *Legislation*, not much more needs to be said aside from the simple statement that Polk “dominated the legislature.” He almost always held the upper hand with Congress, which again shows us that legislative success might be necessary for Greatness, but it does not guarantee it.

Polk’s *Accomplishments* are especially impressive with one historian putting his diplomatic achievements “among the most remarkable in American history.” He finished off the annexation of Texas and put America on a collision course with expansion. Polk tapped into the desire for expansion and skillfully won the Mexican War. As a result, the United States gained much of what is the present day southwest. The war strengthened the United States, but it was not his only foreign success. Polk worked tirelessly for sixteen months to bring Oregon into the Union and took the United States to the brink of war with Great Britain before effectively adding the Pacific Northwest at almost no cost. Additionally, Polk resolved the bank issue and reformed tariff policy. His accomplishments are very significant, meaning that while accomplishments might be necessary to have a Great Presidency, they do not assure it.

Not much is said about Polk truly *Transforming* the presidency, although he did fundamentally transform the country. Polk used the office that Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson built to fulfill America’s Manifest Destiny. The four presidents who followed Polk were pretty weak and often rank very low, which suggests Polk did not leave the office much different than he found it. It would take Lincoln to really change the office. From this, we can again suggest that transforming the presidency is a necessary quality of a Great Presidency.

**Results**

Through study of the rankings, the five Great Presidencies, and two Successful but Non Great Presidencies we learn two lessons. First, it appears that in order to be a Great President you
must leave a lasting impact on the office itself. All five of the Greats made important contributions to the presidency itself in addition to their impact on the country at large. It is hard to point to any Non Great Presidents that really reshaped the office with the possible exception of Andrew Jackson or Woodrow Wilson.\textsuperscript{xvi} Even those two did so to a lesser extent that the presidents who we currently call Great, so this likely reinforces the idea even more. Lincoln, FDR, and Washington are the principal shapers of the office. Jefferson and TR follow them and Jackson and Wilson are another step down. The logic holds up, even if it can never be empirically proven.

The other lesson we learn is more subtle. In addition to shaping the presidency, the Greats had other things in common. What this means is that transforming the presidency may be necessary for Greatness, but it may require other elements as well. To be Great, a president might also need communication skills and significant accomplishments. Think of it this way. Greatness demands transforming the presidency, but transforming the presidency alone might not be enough. We do know, however, that the other qualities alone are not enough.

This study tells us that the quality necessary to have a Great Presidency, according to the historians who cast the ballots, is transforming the office of the presidency.

**Wisdom of Others**

Many other scholars have come before me and have studied the rankings on Presidential Greatness. At this point, it is important to include their findings. If you wonder about why we did not review these findings prior to the study, the reason is simple. If we had done so, our views would have been colored by what others have said. It remains important, however, to compare these findings to the rest of the literature to see how they fit in the overall conversation.

\textsuperscript{xvi} Jackson and Wilson are Near Greats, so perhaps the cutoff line could be adjusted.
One interesting take on the question of Greatness is Phillip Abbott’s study of “Badness.” He wondered if Greatness and Badness were opposites, which means understanding Badness would teach us something about Greatness. His thesis is that presidents can be bad in two ways. They can either be inept or ruthless.\textsuperscript{310} From my perspective, Abbott teaches us more about Failure versus Success than he does about Greatness and Non-Greatness, given my explanation that Success and Greatness are separate qualities.

Moving forward, John Balz evaluated prior political experience. My results indicated the previous experience did not dictate Greatness and Balz confirms that belief. Studying every office holder, Balz found that there “is no evidence that political experience improves the chances of extraordinary presidential performance, and there is some weak evidence that certain political positions...lead to poor performance.”\textsuperscript{311} Arthur Murphy tried to isolate variables as well and found the only age might play a role as Great presidents usually take office when they are younger than 64 and on average around 52 years old.\textsuperscript{312}

Dean Simonton looked to isolate variables and found several. Generally speaking, they amount to length of time in office, being reelected, and years spent at war.\textsuperscript{313} While that criteria holds up statistically, it is pretty worthless in a practical sense. Time in office and reelection could easily be the effects of Greatness, which means there is no real causal link. It also does not solve our specific question of why the top five presidents rise above the rest because Lincoln and TR did not serve two full terms. Years at war could be a causal link, but the nature of the war should matter. Surely Lincoln’s four years are worth more than Johnson’s six.

Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky seem to get close to the answer, but they only consider early presidents. They astutely mention that we have these rankings and polls because we do not have an agreed upon criteria of evaluation, and then seek to find one. They believe that
Greatness is the result of a president who offers a solution to a cultural dilemma.\textsuperscript{314} They cover Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln but do not carry on to TR and FDR. It is my assessment that they are picking up on something important, but that "cultural dilemma" is too loose of a concept to really teach us very much. I think solutions cultural dilemmas are more common than Great Presidents, meaning that dilemmas offer opportunities for Greatness that are not always taken.

Gary Maranell sought to evaluate each president on different dimensions to see if we might learn anything. He used current prestige, strength, activeness, idealism, flexibility, accomplishments, and amount of information.\textsuperscript{315} Based on how historians ranked the presidents in those categories, it appears that prestige, strength, accomplishments, and activeness are somewhat correlated with Greatness.\textsuperscript{316} The statistics do not overwhelming point to any of those as causal, but as we have seen, most of those qualities fit Great Presidents and presidents who are Successful but Non Great as well.

Patrick Kenney and Tom Rice lead those who believe context matters. They do a fine job of proving that in the aggregate, war, the economy, legislation, and scandals matter.\textsuperscript{317} However, as we saw earlier, if their model predicted Greatness, James Polk would be king. David Mervin argues that the political bias of the historians skews the rankings to favor activist presidents.\textsuperscript{318} Tim Blessing refutes that claim rather well.\textsuperscript{319} Interestingly, Paul Sommers finds that height is somewhat relevant. The Greats and Near Greats are a mixture of tall and short, but almost all of the other presidents are less than six feet tall.\textsuperscript{320} Tall men are unlikely to be poor presidents, but tall and short alike can be Great, so that does not help us very much.
Jeffrey Cohen assessed how historians and the public compare\textsuperscript{xvii} in their rating criteria and found that they use similar measures.\textsuperscript{321} Jill Curry and Irwin Morris like Simonton's model, but thought it should include more performance based measures. They looked at military success and economic growth and found economic growth to be important. It was, however, more important for some than others and did a better job predicting Success or Failure than Greatness.\textsuperscript{322} This is consistent with my assessment that economic success matters in the rankings, but great economies do not make Great Presidents.

Ron Deluga looked at the relationship between Machiavellianism and Greatness and found some correlation. He explains that factors like self-confidence, delivery, competence, charisma, and image building all play into this idea.\textsuperscript{323} The quality of the image a president presents does seem to matter, but success makes building a nice image easier.

Fred Greenstein's \textit{Presidential Difference} assesses the modern presidents, but offers one particularly important lesson for this study. Context is not the only thing that matters; the person does also. Greenstein outlines two decisions that Eisenhower and Johnson made that their vice president disagreed with, showing that the person does matter because a different person would have made a different choice.\textsuperscript{324} James David Barber, most famous for defining the active/passive, positive/negative matrix of presidential character offers insight into the men who shaped the office in support of this study's results. Barber writes that the presidency "is an institution made a piece at a time by successive men in the White House."\textsuperscript{325} The founders trusted Washington to "invent a tradition as he went along."\textsuperscript{326} As for the remaining Greats, Barber says "Jefferson reached out to Congress to put together the beginnings of political parties; Jackson's dramatic force extended electoral partisanship to its mass base; Lincoln vastly expanded the administrative reach of the office, Wilson and the Roosevelts showed its rhetorical

\textsuperscript{xvii} Remember this!
possibilities."³²⁷ Of all of the scholars who have written on Presidential Greatness, Barber comes closest to finding the same answer that I did to our question.

Robert Murray and Tim Blessing authored a strong study, which included an original set of rankings, and came to the conclusion that "a vigorous, active presidency that combines 'the times,' personality traits, strength of character, and administration accomplishments into a balanced whole still possesses the most valid claim to true greatness."³²⁸ They, too, come to a good conclusion, but fail to define what truly separates Success from Greatness.

We now return to Marc Landy and Sidney Milkis. They tried to answer the Greatness question like I did by finding the common themes among the Greats. Their findings indicated that presidents who set critical precedent, fill gaps in the Constitution, and launch the trajectory of the country are Great.³²⁹ The major flaw in their work is that they include Jackson and not TR. I do not challenge their decision to call Jackson a Great President, as they are free to apply their own cutoff line, but their failure to include TR is a fatal one. TR is almost always ranked higher than Jackson and to not include him is puzzling and incomplete.

Landy and Milkis sought to answer the question in the same way, and Barber offers the most similar answer. Nowhere has anyone successfully refuted this study, or truly defended an alternate hypothesis.

**Conclusion**

We started with a granite cliff in South Dakota that had cast the first vote in the rankings on Presidential Greatness. We ended with a single characteristic that is necessary to earn a place on that mountainside. In order to be counted among Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and TR,³⁸ⅷ a president must transform the office of the presidency. Now that we know that, we have to ask ourselves an even better question: So what?

³⁸ⅷ FDR wasn't president when the monument was erected.
This study matters for presidents because they are all striving for Greatness. Kennedy believed that Greatness came from “concrete accomplishments.” FDR thought “all our great presidents were leaders of thought at times when certain ideas in the mind of a nation had to be clarified” and presidential descendent Henry Adams defined a great presidents as someone who “resembles the commander of a ship at sea. He must have a helm to grasp, a course to steer, a port to seek.” It seems each man sought the same ends, but thought the means of getting there were different. Two things stand out. Presidents can now see the path to Greatness and know that in order to rise to the very top of the list, they must leave a lasting impact on the office. More importantly, presidents can learn from this study that not all men are destined for the mountainside. Not every president can transform the office and not every president should. Some presidents need to take the institution built by others to achieve other goals. James Polk is good company to keep and more presidents should strive for Success instead of Greatness.

Scholars, too, can learn from this study. The important thing to learn reiterates Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.’s comment that any yardstick for measuring Greatness is “too general to warrant mathematical precision.” For all of the great science done with presidential rankings, none of the studies tell us very much. Trying to boil Greatness down to a variable you can plug into a spreadsheet is next to impossible and we should not shy away from more qualitative measures. Big questions rarely have easy answers. Another thing we should learn clearly is that Success and Greatness are very different things. Many presidents have done well, but few are Great. Ultimately, scholars can learn what qualities matter to them as it was originally “assumed that historians would recognize greatness – or failure – when they saw it, as Justice Stewart once proposed to recognized pornography.” Greatness has always been a “know it when you see it” thing in presidential politics, but with this study, we have a better idea of what “it” is.
For the public, this study is important because we can learn something about who to elect. During the process of this study, we saw plenty of qualities of Above Average Presidents, which is what people should look to find. Greatness is elusive and rare. Greatness is almost accidental. It comes from a mix of exceptional ability and timing. Presidents must have an opportunity and a need to transform their office to meet new challenges if they are to be Great. Not everyone can be Great, but many can be Successful. The other characteristics, the ones shared with Monroe and Polk, are the characteristics we should seek. The rest is up to history.

Overall, the presidents scholars consider to be Great are ones who left a lasting impact on their office. Incidentally, the same men happened to have left a lasting legacy for the country. Other presidents have left legacies, but shaping the presidency sets the Greats apart. All presidents change the world, few change the job. Those who do, find themselves carved into the side of a mountain, or waiting in line for the next available sculptor.

NOTES
5 David Herbert Donald, Lincoln (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 257.
6 Donald, Lincoln, 295.
7 Donald, Lincoln, 302.
8 Pauldan, Presidency of Abraham Lincoln, 13.
9 Pauldan, Presidency of Abraham Lincoln, xiii.
10 Pauldan, Presidency of Abraham Lincoln, xiii-xiv.
11 Pauldan, Presidency of Abraham Lincoln, xvi.
12 Pauldan, Presidency of Abraham Lincoln, 319.
13 Pauldan, Presidency of Abraham Lincoln, xvi.
14 Pauldan, Presidency of Abraham Lincoln, 15.
15 Pauldan, Presidency of Abraham Lincoln, xvii.
16 Pauldan, Presidency of Abraham Lincoln, 28.
17 Donald, Lincoln, 259.
18 Pauldan, Lincoln, 53-56.
19 Pauldan, Lincoln, 228.
33 Pauldan, *Presidency of Abraham Lincoln*, 123.
44 Donald, *Lincoln*, 599.
48 Smith, *FDR*, xi.
49 Smith, *FDR*, 305.
50 Smith, *FDR*, 315.
51 Smith, *FDR*, 327.
52 McFimney, *Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt*, 287.
54 Smith, *FDR*, 534-540.
55 Smith, *FDR*, 548.
57 Smith, *FDR*, 428.
58 Smith, *FDR*, 446.
59 Smith, *FDR*, 489.
60 Smith, *FDR*, 492.
62 Smith, *FDR*, 598.
63 Smith, *FDR*, xv.

McJimsey, *Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt*, 293.

Smith, *FDR*, 368.


Smith, *FDR*, xi.


Smith, *FDR*, 347.


Smith, *FDR*, 315.

Smith, *FDR*, xi.

Smith, *FDR*, xiv.

Smith, *FDR*, 370.

Smith, *FDR*, xi.

Smith, *FDR*, 302.


Smith, *FDR*, 338.

Smith, *FDR*, xiii.


McJimsey, *Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt*, 120.

Smith, *FDR*, 332.


Smith, *FDR*, xii.


Smith, *FDR*, 636.


Smith, *FDR*, 378.

Smith, *FDR*, 390.


Smith, *FDR*, xi.


Smith, *FDR*, 456.

Smith, *FDR*, 353.

Smith, *FDR*, 374.


Ellis, *His Excellency*, 177.


Ellis, *His Excellency*, 188.
Ellis, *His Excellency*, 188.
Ellis, *His Excellency*, 188.
Ellis, *His Excellency*, 198.
Ellis, *His Excellency*, 200.
Ellis, *His Excellency*, 271.
Ellis, *His Excellency*, 274.
Ellis, *His Excellency*, 235.
Ellis, *His Excellency*, 189.
Ellis, *His Excellency*, 40.
Ellis, *His Excellency*, 271.


274 Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 42.
276 Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 188.
279 Cunningham, *Presidency of James Monroe*, 188.


David Mervin, “Political Science and the Study of the Presidency,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Fall 1995): 672.


Schlesinger, “Rating the Presidents,” 186.

Schlesinger, “Rating the Presidents,” 186.

Schlesinger, “Rating the Presidents,” 181.

Schlesinger, “Rating the Presidents,” 179.
Appendix A

List of Rankings Included in Sample

1948: Arthur Schlesinger in Life Magazine


1982: Chicago Tribune also in Complete Book of U.S. Presidents

1982: Siena Research Institute

1990: Siena Research Institute

1993: Murray and Blessing in Greatness in the White House

1994: Siena Research Institute

1996: Ridings and McIver in Rating the Presidents

1996: Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in Political Science Quarterly

2000: Wall Street Journal

2000: CSPAN

2002: Siena Research Institute

2005: Wall Street Journal in Presidential Leadership

2009: CSPAN

2010: Siena Research Institute

2011: United States Presidency Center
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