



## Presidential Leadership: Rating the Best and the Worst in the White House (Wall Street Journal Book)

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What makes a president great? Two of America's most prominent institutions, "The Wall Street Journal" and the "Federalist Society," with the help of a wide array of eminent scholars, journalists, and political leaders, tackle this question in "Presidential Leadership," the definitive ranking of our nation's chief executives. Based on a survey conducted by the Federalist Society and the "Journal, Presidential Leadership" examines presidential performance in this collection of provocative, enlightening essays written by a distinguished and diverse group of authors. The survey included seventy-eight liberal and conservative scholars, balancing the sample to reflect the political makeup of the U.S. population as a whole. It represents the first national survey in book form that provides a complete ranking of the presidents, along with an appendix that explains the methodology in detail and includes a wide range of valuable data. The result is an important, fresh, and engaging book, rating the presidents from Washington to Clinton and including an early assessment of George W. Bush's presidency by "Journal" editorial page editor Paul Gigot. Nearly fifty contributors provide their insights, with one essay on each president or on a broader issue of presidential leadership. Among them: - Forrest McDonald on Thomas Jefferson- Lynne Cheney on James Madison- Douglas Brinkley on James Polk- Christopher Buckley on James Buchanan- Jay Winik on Abraham Lincoln- John McCain on Theodore Roosevelt- Robert Dallek on Lyndon B. Johnson- Peggy Noonan on John F. Kennedy- Paul Johnson on Bill Clinton Their compelling essays, packed with fascinating and often surprising insights, analyze the best and worst of our commanders in chief. "Presidential Leadership" is the lively result, at once a valuable reference and a tremendously readable collection.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Perennial favorite George Washington holds onto the top slot in this latest incarnation of presidential greatness surveys. Wall Street Journal Web editor Taranto and Federalist Society executive vice president Leo polled experts in history, politics and law on both sides of the volatile liberal-conservative divide. This politically attuned selection process produces no real surprises, however. Abraham Lincoln and FDR join the "Father of His Country" in the exclusive pantheon of outstanding leaders. Longtime failures James Buchanan and Warren Harding anchor the bottom rungs. Ronald Reagan merits "near great" status here, compared to "average" rankings elsewhere. However, Democratic icons provoke gratuitous partisan sniping from some of the well-known conservative contributors, especially on the contentious issue of character, tilting the editors' much-vaunted objectivity rightward as a result. Peggy Noonan lingers on JFK's peccadilloes, including his use of sunless tanning products, rather than on his skillful management of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Robert Bork highlights FDR's domestic and international miscues, leaving readers to wonder how the only four-term president ever made the top three. Although George W. Bush is not ranked, he garners a glowing profile that's twice as long as FDR's. Fortunately, back-to-back essays on Lincoln by Jay Winik and Andrew Johnson by Jeffrey Tulis stand out and provide perceptive, timely appraisals of contrasting styles of executive stewardship during national crises. Complemented by William Bennett's cri de coeur against declining standards in the teaching of American history, by scholarly musings on economic policy, wartime leadership, judicial appointments and disputed elections, and by a fine concluding overview of the editors' methodology, these subtly shifting critiques of American presidents will give political junkies plenty to tussle over.

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#### About the Author

**James Taranto** is editor of *OpinionJournal.com*, the website of *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial page.

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**William J. Bennett** served as Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy under President George H. W. Bush and as Secretary of Education and Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities under President Reagan. He holds a bachelor of arts degree in philosophy from Williams College, a doctorate in political philosophy from the University of Texas, and a law degree from Harvard. He is the author of such bestselling books as *The Educated Child*, *The Death of Outrage*, *The Book of Virtues*, and the two-volume series *America: The Last Best Hope*. Dr. Bennett is the host of the nationally syndicated radio show *Bill Bennett's Morning in America*. He is also the Washington Fellow of the Claremont Institute and a regular contributor to CNN. He, his wife, Elayne, and their two sons, John and Joseph, live in Maryland.

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### Chapter 15: JAMES BUCHANAN

SURVEY RANKING: 39

BORN: April 23, 1791, Mercersburg, Pennsylvania

WIFE: None

RELIGION: Presbyterian

PARTY: Democrat

MILITARY EXPERIENCE: Pennsylvania militia (private)

OTHER OFFICES HELD: Pennsylvania state representative (1814-15), U.S. representative (1821-31), U.S. senator (1834-45), U.S. secretary of state (1845-49)

TOOK OFFICE: March 4, 1857

VICE PRESIDENT: John Breckenridge

LEFT OFFICE: March 4, 1861

DIED: June 1, 1868

BURIED: Lancaster, Pennsylvania

*by Christopher Buckley*

It's probably just as well that James Buchanan was our only bachelor president. There are no descendants bracing every morning on opening the paper to find another headline announcing: "Buchanan Once Again Rated Worst President in History."

Their only consolation is that political scientists occasionally tire of ranking him last and, just for the heck of it, bump him up to next-to-worst president, with Warren Harding (temporarily) assuming the bottom slot on the greasy pole. But then what can one hope for, of an executive whose most famous utterance was to his successor on the day he handed over the reins of the fractured nation: "My dear sir, if you are as happy on entering the White House as I am on leaving, you are a very happy man indeed"? And how would you like to be followed by Abraham Lincoln, number one or two on the top ten list of great presidents?

Considering Buchanan's curriculum vitae leads one to ask, What, oh what, went wrong? His achievements and honors positively shimmer. He was an excellent lawyer pulling down \$11,000 a year, no small sum in the 1820s. He was elected to the Pennsylvania legislature, then to the U.S. House. He was elected chairman of the Judiciary Committee, appointed minister to Russia (by President Andrew Jackson, in order to keep him from running for vice president), elected to the U.S. Senate and reelected twice, appointed secretary of state, appointed minister to Britain. James Buchanan was a résumé god, a nineteenth-century George H. W. Bush. If only he'd stopped there. But whom the gods would make worst president in U.S. history, first they convince to run for the White House.

An essay on Buchanan by the historian Jean Harvey Baker in a collection entitled -- ironically, in his instance -- *To the Best of My Ability* contains the following phrases: "ill suited...undermined his pledge...advice of cronies...inflammatory position...improperly intervened...infuriating...limited himself...passed over for renomination...schism in the party...vacillating...rudderless...bungled...presidential failure...erratic trimmer...twisted...stubbornly...deaf ear...feckless...exculpatory vehemence."

The Greatness That Was the Buchanan Era included *Dred Scott*, the economic panic of 1857, secession, and Fort Sumter. You have to look hard to find four more dismal nodes in American history. Open the Buchanan file to any random page and you'll find such accolades as: "never regarded as a brilliant speaker," "neither a

brilliant nor visionary thinker," and even "expelled from college." The one woman about whom he was serious was the daughter of Pennsylvania's leading ironmaster, who, by the way, didn't like Buchanan and tried to break up the courtship. After he fumbled the romance, she committed suicide. Later on, there were rumors that his persistent bachelorhood was owing to an abiding Uranian affection for Alabama senator -- and, briefly, vice president under Franklin Pierce -- William Rufus King.

On the plus side, Buchanan was known for a sense of humor, though alas this "seldom showed itself in his public statements" (Pennsylvania Historical Museum Commission). Well, let's not pile on. The record shows that he was "distinguished looking." And he was. In photographs, he looks out at us with a becoming, diffident sense of his own handsomeness, head tilted forward and to the left. This was not a pose. He was farsighted in one eye and nearsighted in the other. Historians have remarked on this ophthalmic peculiarity as emblematic of his karma: Some things he saw clearly up close; the big picture was -- well, a bit blurry.

Buchanan saw the major issue of his day -- slavery -- both ways, as (a) evil, but (b) a state issue. Buchanan's 1856 platform was premised on the idea that the Compromise of 1850 ought to stand, and that Congress had no constitutional mandate to intervene in the matter of slavery. It was a principled, lawyerly view. The only problem with it was that it was (a) wrong and (b) ultimately dividing. While Buchanan dithered and finessed and tried to have it both ways, a senatorial candidate named Lincoln was out on the hustings famously declaring that a house divided against itself could not stand. Tempting as it is to blame Buchanan the lawyer for his nearsightedness on the issue, Lincoln was also a member of the bar.

He *was* consistent. As early as 1826, thirty years before becoming president, he was parsing away: "I believe [slavery] to be a great political and great moral evil. I thank God, my lot has been cast in a State where it does not exist. But, while I entertain these opinions, I know it is an evil at present without a remedy...one of those moral evils, from which it is impossible for us to escape, without the introduction of evils infinitely greater. There are portions of this Union, in which, if you emancipate our slaves, they will become masters. There can be no middle course." Boldly put, sir!

The Buchanan treasury of quotations, such as it is, is marked by an on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand evenhandedness that leaves him with sores from straddling the fence:

- "It is better to bear the ills we have than to fly to others we know not of."
- "What is right and what is practicable are two different things."
- "Liberty must be allowed to work out its natural results; and these will, ere long, astonish the world."
- "All that is necessary to [abolish slavery], and all for which the slave States have ever contended, is to be let alone and permitted to manage their domestic institutions in their own way."

In 1854, two years before assuming the Mantle of Ungreatness, he championed the Ostend Manifesto. (You may remember it as a trick question on your last American History final exam.) In Ostend, Belgium, he declared that the United States had the right to purchase Cuba, or to annex it by force if necessary. Well, that's certainly bold. But this had less to do with Manifest Destiny -- which the expansionist Buchanan resolutely favored -- than with giving the South another slave state. It's hard not to level the charge of appeasement against Buchanan.

He tried to win by splitting the difference. In the end, it came to naught, as appeasements

invariably do. In January 1861, the ship he had dispatched to resupply Fort Sumter was fired on and forced to withdraw. One month later, the Confederacy was officially inaugurated in Montgomery, Alabama.

He was passed over by his own party for renomination. (Four years before, he had carried only 45 percent of the popular vote in a three-way race.) There was, at least, a happy by-product to his failure: The schism he created within his own party ultimately assured the election of the Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln. Soon Buchanan was on his way to the Capitol in a carriage with his successor, telling Abe how relieved he was to be rid of the job.

He retired to Wheatland, his estate in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where he died in 1868. Though domestically tranquil, his remaining years could not have been happy. He was blamed for the Civil War. Vandals kept defacing his portrait in the U.S. Capitol, requiring it to be removed for safekeeping. (*That* must have hurt.) Posters calling him "Judas" were plastered on walls.

He finally did what most Democratic ex-presidents do -- write a book blaming everything on the Republicans. It was not a best-seller. One of his last pronouncements upon himself has a sad quality to it. "Whatever the result may be," he said, "I shall carry to my grave the consciousness that I at least meant well for my country."

"At least he meant well" isn't quite up there with, say, Edwin Stanton's pronouncement at the deathbed of Lincoln: "Now he belongs to the ages."

Yet let's cut the poor guy some posthumous slack and grant him the benefit of the doubt that he did, at least, mean well. Perhaps historians, the next time they convene to decide who was the absolute worst president ever, will also factor in his good intentions and move him up two notches so that his ghost can experience the giddy feeling of looking down -- if only temporarily -- on Warren Harding *and* Franklin Pierce.

*Mr. Buckley is editor of Forbes FYI and author, most recently, of Washington Schlepped Here (Crown, 2003).*

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## **Chapter 16: ABRAHAM LINCOLN**

**SURVEY RANKING: 2**

**BORN:** February 12, 1809, Hardin County (now Larue County), Kentucky

**WIFE:** Mary Todd

**RELIGION:** Unaffiliated

**PARTY:** Republican

**MILITARY EXPERIENCE:** Illinois militia (captain)

**OTHER OFFICES HELD:** Illinois state representative (1834-41), U.S. representative (1847-49)

**TOOK OFFICE:** March 4, 1861

VICE PRESIDENTS: Hannibal Hamlin (1861-65), Andrew Johnson (1865)

DIED IN OFFICE: April 15, 1865 (assassinated)

BURIED: Springfield, Illinois

*by Jay Winik*

It was the loneliest of decisions. On his first day on the job, in March 1861, Abraham Lincoln, bags under his eyes, already faced a military crisis: Fort Sumter was surrounded by rebel batteries, and supplies were running dangerously low. What to do? Reinforce it? Give diplomacy a chance? Force a showdown?

Lincoln prevailed on the best and the brightest in his cabinet for advice. The legendary General Winfield Scott, hero of the Mexican War and a towering fixture in Washington, counseled surrender of the fort -- it was, he said, of inconsequential military value. Gideon Welles, Lincoln's navy secretary, also favored giving...

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