



## Historical Reputations

BY STEPHEN DAVIES

In an election year it is useful to try to remove oneself from the hubbub of daily campaign news and advertisements and to imagine how the candidates will be viewed by historians. This is not a simple exercise, and the attempt will reveal a number of widespread attitudes that affect our view of both past and present, as well as our thinking about many issues of policy.

One reason this effort is difficult is that the retrospective view we have of historical figures is not fixed. They shift with time, as increasing chronological distance brings greater perspective and as current issues and debates lead to reassessments of past figures.

One result is that people who were once thought of as prominent figures can sink into obscurity. Less commonly the reverse happens, and individuals who have languished in obscurity suddenly rise to retrospective prominence. Another well-known phenomenon is the reassessment of a person's quality and reputation as he comes to be viewed in a different light. Some, who during their lifetime and shortly afterwards enjoyed a glowing historical reputation, have the gloss come off their name and are increasingly viewed in a critical light. Others, unpopular and maligned in their own times, are presented in an ever more positive fashion and find their stock rising. This is particularly true of political figures.

Thus John F. Kennedy is now regarded much less highly by the majority of historians than he was in his own lifetime or the aftermath of his death. Harry Truman, one of the most unpopular presidents in U.S. history when he left office, is now given high marks by most historians. Eisenhower, seen for many years as an ineffectual and lightweight president, is another whose reputation is steadily rising.

### The Present Influences Our View of the Past

The opinion you have of a past political figure tends to be influenced by the view you take of contemporary political events or of particular public-policy issues. This will lead you to regard past figures with a positive or critical perspective depending on how their career and actions can be interpreted in the light of current controversy. Thus if you favor an expansionist and interventionist foreign policy, you will tend to have a higher opinion of Theodore Roosevelt than you would if you opposed such a policy. As public opinion about policy shifts, so do the reputations of past politicians.

In other words, the historical reputations of political figures such as former U.S. presidents have a strong ideological component. The political reputations of past presidents and other politicians, then, are an important indicator of attitudes and world-views among both the wider public and intellectuals. With this in mind, the many surveys into the historical standing of U.S. presidents have a revealing, and depressing, quality. As noted, the reputations of several have

changed over time, with Eisenhower showing the most impressive gain, from 22nd position to eighth among professional historians between 1962 and 2005. Ronald Reagan is another "riser," from 16th in 1982 to sixth in 2005, while Lyndon Johnson shows a steady decline, from tenth in 1982 to 18th. There are also some notable differences between the opinions of historians and those of the general public, with the latter having a consistently higher view of Kennedy than the former does.

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However, alongside all this change there is also some notable consistency. Certain presidents are always in the top ten, and the top three or four remains impressively consistent. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt are consistently in the top four, while Theodore Roosevelt, Truman, Andrew Jackson, and Woodrow Wilson are consistent top-ten rankers. Washington's role in founding the United States partly accounts for his position, while Lincoln and FDR are both seen as leaders who confronted an existential crisis.

But the list also suggests a number of other things that reveal an underlying set of ideological presumptions. Presidents who expanded the functions of government receive high marks. Preserving or establishing the modern state is also seen as creditworthy. It helps to have been a wartime leader (unless the war is regarded as unsuccessful) and to have had an interventionist or expansionist foreign policy.

### Cleveland and Coolidge

This is made even clearer by the contrast between the posthumous reputation of these individuals and that of others. There are several presidents who consistently rank low, although a different set of criteria would rank them much higher. Two of the most notable are Grover Cleveland and Calvin Coolidge, both of whom have ratings that would put them in mid-table to lower. Yet an examination of their records both suggests that they should have a higher rating by some criteria and indicates why this is not so far the case.

Cleveland, a man of great personal integrity and independence, was a consistent advocate of limited government, fiscal and monetary responsibility, a laissez-faire economy and free trade, individual responsibility, a pacific foreign policy, and opposition to government corruption and political patronage. Among other things, he blocked the annexation of Hawaii and regularly vetoed bills to give public funds to special interests.



Grover Cleveland



Calvin Coolidge

Coolidge reformed the public finances, reduced taxation, and presided over an unprecedented economic boom. He also (along with his predecessor Harding) reversed the major assault on civil liberties that had taken place under Wilson. Yet each of these presidents gets a C or B- rather than an A.

What surveys and the historiography reveal is a deep-seated set of ideas among both self-defined "liberals" and "conservatives." The core idea is that the central, most important aspect of history is the growth and maintenance of the modern, territorial state, rather than economic development, scientific and technological innovation, or the well-being of the people. These are seen as important but secondary. There is a fascination with power, and politicians who employ it are viewed as more significant or successful than those who try rather to reduce its application. From this point of view the division between "liberals" and "conservatives" is over how power should be used, rather than whether political power is a good thing.

There is, however, a different way of thinking about both dead politicians and living ones. This would apply the test not of what they managed to achieve by using power or of how they preserved or extended the state, but rather of how far they avoided the use of power or limited it and of how far they put their trust in the good sense and ingenuity of ordinary people and voluntary interactions—as well as that of how far they relied on peace and trade rather than war and armaments. If these standards were applied, Cleveland would rank as one of the greatest American presidents and Coolidge as one of the "near-greats."

That this is not the case shows how deep the worship of power runs today. However, this should not stop us from trying to escape from the consensus and look at things from a truly different angle. One cheering point is that slowly but surely Cleveland and Coolidge are rising up the league of reputation. Maybe one day they will receive their proper evaluation. If so, this will reflect a profound change in thinking more generally. **FEE**