Our “Best” Presidents
A Journey Through American History
Course Schedule

- Week 1: Intro, Methods, George Washington (#3)
- Week 2: Jefferson (#5), Madison (#10), Monroe (#10)
- Week 3: Andrew Jackson (#15), James Polk (#12)
- Week 4: Abraham Lincoln (#1)
- Week 5: Theodore Roosevelt (#4), Wilson (#8)
- Week 6: FDR (#2)
- Week 7: Truman (#6), Eisenhower (#7)
- Week 8: JFK (#9) and LBJ (#14)
Great by Consensus

Note the remarkable consistency across the surveys, dating back to 1948. An *asterisk denotes a possible, rare, outlier

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The 5 “Greats” (by consensus):

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Ten Others Deemed “Above Average”

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Pre-Presidency
Pre-Presidency:

- Born April 13, 1743, Shadwell Plantation, VA
- William and Mary, 1762
- House of Burgesses, 1769-75
- Married Martha Wayles, 1772-82
- Declaration, 1776
- Virginia Governor, 1779-81
- Minister to France, 1785-89
- Secretary of State, 1790-93
Personal Characteristics

- Awkward gait, bad posture
- Informal, dressed casually, mixing styles of different eras
- Suffered severe headaches during stress; could linger for weeks
His right hand was severely injured when he unsuccessfully attempted to leap a fence while strolling with Maria Cosway.
1796: one of the most acrimonious elections: country divided into parties, a development the Electoral College was not designed to accommodate
Election of 1796
Adams won stray electoral votes in VA and NC, and the presidency, by 71-68
The Election of 1796
“The First Presidential Contest”

- Adams elected president; Jefferson vice-president
- Jefferson leveraged his position as vice-president to attack Adams’ policies from behind-the-scenes
Adams wrote that Jefferson possessed “a mind, soured, yet seeking for popularity, eaten to a honeycomb with ambition, weak, confused, uninformed, and ignorant”
Presidency
One Federalist warned that, with Jefferson as president, “murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will be openly taught and practiced, the air will be rent with the cries of the distressed, the soil will be soaked with blood, and the nation black with crimes.”
Election of 1800

- Jefferson working with the Devil to pull down the stability of the federal government
- Adams & the Federalists attacked Jefferson for atheism, radicalism, immorality
“The Providential Detection”

- God and an eagle seek to stop Jefferson as he flings the “Constitution & Independence” into the fire
- He kneels at the “Altar of Gallic Despotism”
- Jefferson’s attacks on Washington and Adams fall from his pocket
Election of 1800: Voters in Jefferson’s States Possessed More Electoral Power Because of the 3/5ths Clause
“Negro President”

- Federalist Timothy Pickering characterized Jefferson as a “Negro President”
- Charged that Jefferson defeated Adams because of the extra electoral votes the 3/5ths clause gave to slave states
Key Events of Jefferson’s Presidency

- “Revolution of 1800”
- Peaceful Transition, 1801
- Ends Alien & Sedition Acts, 1801
- Lifts excise taxes, 1801
- Barbary Wars, 1801-05
- Louisiana Purchase, 1803
- Embargo, 1807-
The Political Enigma

- Publicly dismissed politics, yet a shrewd politician
- Never acquired a gift for oratory: An elegant writer, he was an unsteady and often nervous speaker
- Mumbled softly, out of earshot of audiences
Jefferson: The Hidden Politician

- Affected indifference; avoided confrontation
- Yet acted behind the scenes, in secret; ghost-wrote partisan attacks
- Opponents characterized this as duplicity
Jefferson: What His Critics Said

- Castigated Federalists, but left much of their legacy intact: Hamilton’s financial system, tariffs, Bank of US, lifetime appointment of judges
- Critics noted his hypocrisy of “strict construction” while president
President as Party Leader

- Washington and Adams sought to float above the partisan fury
- Jefferson pretended he was NOT a party man but ... he was a party man
- His Party provided him with vital support (which Adams never enjoyed)
# Jefferson’s Four Congresses

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The Racial Enigma

- Jefferson spoke of liberty, but owned hundreds of enslaved human beings.

- Others, including Hamilton, Adams, Lafayette, took note.

- Jefferson persuaded himself that he remained the apostle of liberty, despite the obvious.
Hamilton raised questions about Jefferson and race:

- Hamilton highlighted the racism in Jefferson’s writings.
- Criticized “the confusion of ideas pervading” Jefferson’s mind.
- Challenged Jefferson’s pose as an “Enlightened” “moral philosopher”.
Hamilton brought up the rampant sexual exploitation of enslaved females on plantations: “[Jefferson] must have seen all around him sufficient marks of this.”
Jefferson and Race

- Deeply committed to slavery
- Hostile to the welfare of black people, enslaved or free
- Sought to justify racism through crass pseudoscience
- Warned against racial mixing!
Jefferson and Slavery

- Many contemporaries, including Washington, freed their slaves
- Jefferson did not: he remained a buyer and seller of human beings
- Sold 85 humans in a 10-year period to buy luxury items
Not a kind master: Punished slaves by selling them away from their families, considered cruel even then.

A proponent of humane criminal codes for whites, he advocated barbaric punishments for slaves and even free blacks.
Husbands, Wives, and Families sold indiscriminately to different purchasers, are violently separated—probably never to meet again.
Jefferson and Slavery

- It is not judging him by today’s standards to analyze this subject
- Contemporary critics commented freely
- He embodies our historic national denialism and neuroses about slavery, race and racism in America
1804 Cartoon depicts Jefferson & Hemings
Rumors throughout the 1790s
The James Callender Controversy, 1802
Slave owners frequently treated enslaved women as concubines or sex slaves. Not uncommon on Virginia plantations (the epicenter of the slave breeding industry) for enslaved people to be indistinguishable from whites who owned them.
Sally Hemings

- Evidence that Sally Hemings was Jefferson’s concubine and bore his children does not rest solely on the Jefferson DNA findings

- Powerful historical case: timing: Paris (age 16), Monticello, Farm Books, parentage attribution, naming, etc.
Monticello’s complex racial and sexual politics: Sally Hemings had 3/4ths European ancestry. Daughter of a half-European enslaved woman, Elizabeth Hemings, and her owner, John Wayles, (Jefferson’s father-in-law!) Sally was thus the half-sister of Jefferson’s wife! Her children with Jefferson were 7/8ths European. Sally was aunt to Jefferson’s daughters.
The Hemings-Jefferson Children

- Hemings-Jefferson children ethnically indistinguishable from their father
- Several of the children lived as whites after manumission
- More than one Monticello guest observed that the slave serving the dinner was very likely kin to the host
Jefferson and Slavery

- Opposed private manumission and public emancipation
- His will emancipated only 5 slaves, all children of Sally (she remained a slave)
- Condemned 200 others to the auction block
Louisiana Purchase, 1803
An “Empire for Liberty”? 
800,000 square miles between the Mississippi and the Rockies. Purchased from France for $15 million. Increases US territory by 140 percent.
Louisiana Purchase: all or portions of 13 states (LA, AR, OK, MO, KS, CO, NE, IA, MN, WY, MT, SD, ND)
Foreign Affairs: Jefferson, Britain, and France

- British “Orders in Council” forbid neutral trade with France, Nov. 1807
- Napoleon forbids trade with Britain, Dec. 17, 1807
- Jefferson signs Embargo Act, Dec. 22, 1807, retaliation against Britain & France (2nd Embargo Act, Jan. 1808)
Criticizing Jefferson’s Embargo on Trade with France and Britain: “Intercourse or Impartial Dealings” depicts Jefferson held up by George III and Napoleon
The Tragedy of the Embargo Acts

- He was essentially a pacifist
- But the Embargo devastated the US economy: US exports collapsed from $108 million to $22 million!
- Economic desperation engulfed the coast and NE
Jefferson’s Reputation: A Political Ink Blot

- More projected onto than any other American
- Conservatives: limited government
- Liberals: individual, universal rights
- Radicals: revolution
Analysis: Jefferson’s Legacy

- Declaration, 1776
- Led 1st opposition party
- Peaceful transition, 1801
- Louisiana Purchase, 1803
- 1st party leader president
- Perils of a neutral nation
- Our racial paradoxes
The Remarkable Stability of Jefferson’s Historical Reputation

- His reputation has remained steady
- Placed 5\textsuperscript{th} in the very first poll, 1948, and 5\textsuperscript{th} in the most recent, Siena 2019!
Historical Reputation

- In no single poll has he EVER finished lower than 7th nor higher than 2nd
- Remarkable consistency across various surveys, voter pools, and eras (70 years of data collection)
Assessment: Jefferson

- He most frequently appears in 5th place (nine times)
- Highest marks for background (#1, A) and intelligence (#1, A) [could receive higher marks for party leadership, only #4]
- C-Span placed him 7th but that survey may have a bias for modern presidents
Renewed interest in Jefferson’s slaveholding and relationship with Hemings

- Historian Gordon Wood on the raging debates about Jefferson: “Although many historians and others are embarrassed about his contradictions and have sought to knock him off the democratic pedestal ... his position, though shaky, still seems secure.”
Jefferson: Man or Monument?
In 1938 FDR broke ground for a Jefferson Memorial. He placed Jefferson on the first class three-cent postage stamp and on the popular nickel.
Can we distinguish the man from the many monuments? Monticello, Jefferson Memorial, the nickel, Mount Rushmore, a multitude of hagiographies, the $2 bill
Jefferson’s profile was carved into Mount Rushmore in the 1930s.
FDR Laying the Cornerstone of the Jefferson Memorial

- FDR and New Deal Democrats celebrated Jefferson’s struggles for “the common man” and reclaimed him as their inspiration.
- Jefferson became a symbol of American democracy in World War II and the Cold War: 1940s and 50s saw the zenith of his popular reputation.
- 1943: 200th birthday
Madison and Jefferson

- Both Virginians, both wealthy planters and slave owners
- Political partnership: Madison long served Jefferson’s interests
Madison and Jefferson

- Madison was Jefferson’s “second,” his Secretary of State, and his successor.
- Party Building: Madison was more responsible for creating the Jeffersonian Republicans than Jefferson.
Physical Characteristics

- Shortest, slightest president, 5 feet 4 inches tall, 100 pounds
- From his youth, he was frail, sickly, weak, nervous
- Suffered from seizures
- Spoke in a thin voice, speeches often went unheard
Personality Traits

- Shy and reserved, never learned the art of small talk
- Given his shyness, small stature and weak voice, he cut a poor impression
- Deliberative: deferred decisions whenever possible until all sides had been considered thoroughly
- For this, some saw him as indecisive
Pre-Presidency

- Born in Virginia, 1751
- College of New Jersey, 1771
- Constitution, 1787
- Federalist Papers, 1787-88
- Congress, 1789-97
- Dolly Payne Todd, 1794
- Secretary of State, 1801-09
Mr. Madison’s Cabinet of Horrors

- State: Robert Smith (favor)
- Treasury: A. Gallatin (holdover)
- War: Wm. Eustis (sacked 1812)
- AG: Caesar Rodney (holdover)
- Navy: Paul Hamilton (incapable)
James Madison, 1809-1817

- Jeffersonian restiveness
- Federalist weakness
- Anglo-French War continues
- Bank of U.S. lapses, 1811
- War of 1812
- Wartime struggles
- Federalist collapse, 1815
# Madison’s Four Congresses

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Impressment
February 1811: Madison halts trade with Britain unless Orders in Council are repealed. Britain vows to continue to seize US ships.
Declaration of War, 1812

- June 1: Delivers war message
- June 4: House votes 79-49
- June 16: to avoid war, Britain revokes Orders in Council!
- On June 17: Senate votes 19-13
Jeffersonian Desire to Take Canada

Jefferson to William Duane, August 1812: “The acquisition of Canada this year, as far as the neighborhood of Quebec, will be a mere matter of marching; & will give us experience for the attack on Halifax the next, & the final expulsion of England from the American continent.”
Stop, Stop, Stop, Brother Jonathan, or I shall fall with the loss of blood—I thought to have been too heavy for you. But I must acknowledge your superior skill. Two blows to my one! And so well directed too! Mercy mercy on me, how does this happen!!

Ha, Ah, Johnny! you thought yourself a Boxer did you! I’ll let you know we are an Enterprising Nation, and ready to meet you with equal force any day.

A Boxing Match, or Another Bloody Nose for John Bull.
BROTHER JONATHAN Administering a Salutary Cordial to JOHN BULL.
A Rough Start to the War

- Jeffersonians thought war with Britain would bring about annexation of Canada
- No Bank of the US
- Army of only 7,000
- US faces dire economic and military challenges
Battles of the War of 1812

Victories: 6 (3 Indians):
- Lake Erie, 1813
- York, 1813
- Talladega, 1813*
- Autossee, 1813*
- Horseshoe Bend, 1814*
- Chippawa, 1814
- Baltimore, 1814
- Plattsburgh, 1814
- New Orleans, 1815

Defeats: 13:
- Fort Mackinac, 1812
- Fort Dearborn, 1812
- Detroit, 1812
- Queenstown Heights, 1812
- Smyth’s debacle, 1812
- Rappahannock, 1813
- Frenchtown, 1813
- Fort Niagara, 1813
- Crysler's Farm, 1813
- Fort Mims, 1813
- Lundy’s Lane, 1814
- Bladensburg, 1814
- Washington, 1814
Peace Negotiations, 1814-

- Feb. 1814: Madison appoints Henry Clay, Albert Gallatin, and John Quincy Adams as peace commissioners

- Negotiations with British in Gothenburg, Sweden, later moved to Ghent, Belgium
March 31, 1814: Napoleon Surrenders Paris
April 4, 1814: Napoleon Abdicates
May 30, 1814: Napoleon Arrives at Elba
He remains on Elba for the next 300 days
British Burn Washington, August 24, 1814, setting the White House, the Capitol, and other federal buildings ablaze.
THE FALL OF WASHINGTON... or Maddy in full flight.  

Jonathan: Where thanked you, our President will run to now!  
Why hurry to Ellis, he has now friend!  

Who would have thought this Maddy, to oppose the run from the last Cabinet meeting? I ever ordered... I hope you have taken every piece of France's promise ever made... the futility was then, and still after this...  

Don: has notes, what are they good for now? we should get building, but France... he had plenty of her black of France left, the price of that was the help we through this battle.  

I suppose this is what Maddy calls embarrassing her country!  

Why it will, versus such a fight we all that we should find it necessary to change his men and measures.  

I say Jack, what is that there the Man of War, that was to ridicule us at Nelson House next time?  

The fellow, he is a famous fighter, goes a bottle of Shakspeare, only had played, I tell with us how and lie there sit down to support...
White House Burning, 1814
US and British delegates sign Treaty of Ghent, December 24, 1814. News of the treaty does not reach the US until February 1815.
Battle of New Orleans, January 8, 1815 (Two weeks after the Treaty of Ghent). Jackson, with 4,000 militia and regular soldiers, defeats 6,000 British. Victory makes Jackson a national icon.
New England in Distress

New England had more cause for grievance than did the south in 1860.

Irony of the Hartford Convention, 1814.
Assessment: James Madison

- Highest 6th (Siena 2010); Lowest 20th (C-Span 2009)
- Began ranked 14th (1948) and recently 12th (2018)
- Again, remarkable stability over 70 years!
Assessment: Madison

- Highest marks: background (#3, A), intelligence (#2, A)
- Lowest: foreign policy (#22, B), leadership (#19, B)
- Do historians go too easy on Madison? Is it because he was a “founder”??
Madison and History

- Madison had a very shaky presidency
- His party caucus almost rejected him at the outset
- He struggled to create a functional cabinet
Madison’s Presidency

- Often felt overshadowed by Jefferson and Monroe
- Decision to go to war in 1812 nearly catastrophic
- His wartime leadership was deeply problematic
Monroe: Pre-Presidency

- One of the most qualified figures to assume the office
- Revolutionary War service
- Continental Congress
- U.S. Senate
- Gov. of Virginia
- Numerous diplomatic posts
- Two cabinet appointments
Monroe & the “Virginia Dynasty”

- He suffers from comparison to other members of the “Virginia Dynasty”
- He was not a renaissance man like Jefferson or a political thinker like Madison
Historian Walter McDougal:

- “The eyes of James Monroe revealed in Gilbert Stuart’s portrait do not gleam with passion or wit.”
- “They just stare out over a long nose and pursed mouth as if to say, here I am at my desk, doing my duty.”
Monroe’s modest estate seems overshadowed by Jefferson’s grandiose Monticello, just up the hill.
Monroe’s Presidency: An “Era of Good Feelings”?

- Landslide Election, 1816
- Co-optation of Federalists
- Support for Bank of US
- Economic Panic of 1819
- Adams-Onis Treaty, 1819
- Missouri Compromise, 1820
- Unopposed reelection, 1820
- Monroe Doctrine, 1823
One of the ablest cabinets in our history:
Vice President: Daniel Tompkins (NY)
Secretary of State: John Q. Adams (MA)
Treasury Secretary: William Crawford (GA)
Secretary of War: John C. Calhoun (SC)
Attorney General: William Wirt (VA)
Navy: Benjamin Crowninshield (MA)
Last of the Early Presidents

- A relic from the past: Last president to have fought in the Revolution
- Last to wear 18th century breeches, powdered wigs, cocked hats
- “The Last Cocked Hat”
“Era of Good Feelings”

- 16-week tour of New England, 1817
- Political contact, public appearances, meetings with Federalists, support for bank
- Fosters harmony and national unity
## Monroe’s Four Congresses

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Spain agreed to cede Florida to the US under the 1819 Adams–Onís Treaty (Skilled diplomacy)