EXERCISE 7.2 Evaluating Presidential Performance

INTRODUCTION

No one in the world is evaluated as searchingly, as frequently, or by so many as the president of the United States. A sitting president is scrutinized twenty-four hours a day. The product of all that scrutiny is public opinion, a fickle commodity at best. President Lyndon Johnson's approval rating, for example, was as high as 76 percent in his first year in office, but it later fell to 39 percent—dragged down by the widespread perception that the war in Vietnam had become a quagmire. And the scrutiny doesn't end when a president leaves office: Historians and political scientists are at the ready to dissect a former president's every action and decision for centuries to come.

All presidents attempt to shape current and future assessments of their performance. Early in his first term, President Bill Clinton met in the Oval Office with Richard Reeves, an author and historian who had published a study of John Kennedy's presidency.[1] Clinton discussed with Reeves the components of presidential greatness, presumably with the purpose of improving Clinton's own performance. To cement Kennedy's place in history, members of his family and his inner circle of advisers worked diligently after the assassination to perpetuate a number of myths about the Kennedy presidency. Richard Nixon, after resigning from office in disgrace, authored several books that he hoped would rehabilitate his reputation and encourage the public and scholars alike to see him as a great statesman.

People's perceptions of presidential performance are shaped by their expectations, which increased dramatically in the twentieth century. Before about 1900, the national government played an insignificant role in the daily lives of most Americans: Local and state governments provided the few services that governments rendered. It simply would not have occurred to most Americans to look to the president as the source of their prosperity and security.

Public expectations began to grow as Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft, and Woodrow Wilson led the national government to take on new responsibilities to ensure the nation's welfare. Roosevelt's crusades against abuses by the meat-packing and drug industries, for example, captured the imagination of many Americans and began to reshape their view of the presidency. But no president did more to inflate public expectations than Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), who promised that under his leadership the national government would restore security and stability to Americans mired in the Great Depression. Through his skillful use of press conferences and fireside chats broadcast on radio, FDR personalized the presidency and taught the nation to expect a great deal more from the office and its occupant.

In time, inflated by the rhetoric of politicians and the constant glare of the media, public expectations of presidents became unrealistically high. It may be comforting to think that presidents can take the reins of power and dispatch the nation's problems with the stroke of an executive order. But presidential power is much more constrained than that—limited by separation of powers, checks and balances, federalism, public opinion, and many other factors. An electorate that expects the president to work miracles is always going to be disappointed.

We expect public opinion of presidential performance to change day to day. Scholars' evaluations of presidential leadership also change, albeit more slowly. Early studies of President Herbert Hoover, for example, portrayed him as a rigid ideologue who was overwhelmed by the economic collapse in 1929 and incapable of making a credible response to the subsequent crisis. In the 1970s, historians began to reexamine Hoover's performance in office.[2] Today, many scholars credit Hoover with making a vigorous, if insufficient, response to the crisis. Those scholars acknowledge the constraints Hoover faced and the unprecedented use he made of the tools available to him. What accounts for the change in thinking? The passing of time yielded historical perspective and judgment. Until the 1970s, scholars seemed unable to evaluate Hoover without comparing him with his successor, FDR. Roosevelt's unprecedented use of the national government—not to mention his personality, his charm,

[1] *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

[2] For example, see Joan Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975).

and his charisma—obscured Hoover's innovative response to the economic crisis. Only decades after Hoover left office were historians able to bring him out from Roosevelt's shadow and judge him on his own merits.

For scholars evaluating presidential performance, time yields not only perspective and judgment but also a more complete record—something essential to informed assessment. Executive branch departments and agencies, particularly the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), are notoriously slow in declassifying documents. But as the documentary record is filled in, new information may lead scholars to reassess presidential performance. In the 1990s, for example, the Kennedy and Johnson presidential libraries released tape recordings these presidents secretly made in the Oval Office. Diligent historians have performed the difficult task of transcribing the tapes.[3] In Kennedy's case, the tapes reveal the president's skill and luck in negotiating the Cuban missile crisis and bringing the world back from the brink of nuclear destruction. In Johnson's case, the tapes point to the president's desperate search for a politically acceptable alternative to the mounting escalation of the war in Vietnam.

Political scientists, historians, and journalists have long debated which criteria to employ in assessing presidential performance, how to weigh those criteria to produce a balanced evaluation, and how to rank a president in relation to other presidents. The modern version of presidential assessment was pioneered in 1948, in a study by Arthur Schlesinger Sr. His son, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., produced a similar study in 1996.[4] More recently, in 2000 and in 2009, C-SPAN surveyed 65 historians and presidential experts, asking them to evaluate the presidents in a number of categories: public persuasion, crisis leadership, economic management, moral authority, international relations, administrative skills, relations with Congress, vision/agenda setting, pursuit of equal justice for all, and performance within the context of his times.

ASSIGNMENT

Table 7.2.1 on next page shows data from the 2009 C-SPAN survey and places the presidents since Abraham Lincoln in historical context. Questions 1 to 3 are based on the table.

1. List the presidents who served during periods when the level of crisis or challenge was low and who attained a near-great or great ranking.

2. What is the highest ranking achieved by a president who served when the level of crisis or challenge was low?

3. What connection exists between the crises or challenges a president faces in office and the possibility of his achieving near-great or great status?

[3]Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); and Michael R. Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964–1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

[4]"The Ultimate Approval Rating," *New York Times Magazine*, December 16, 1996, p. 46.

TABLE 7.2.1 Rankings of Presidential Performance, 1860–2008

Term of Office	Important Issues or Events	Level of Crisis or Challenge	President	Ranking: C-SPAN Survey 2009	General Assessment
1861–1865	Civil War	Extreme	Lincoln	1	Great
1865–1868	Reconstruction	High	Andrew Johnson	41	Failure
1869–1876	Reconstruction	Moderate	Grant	23	Average
1877-1896	Industrialization, urbanization	Low	Hayes	33	Below average
	Westward expansion	Low	Garfield*	28	
		Low	Arthur	32	Below average
		Low	Cleveland	21	Average
		Low	Harrison	30	Below average
1897–1901	Spanish-American War	High	McKinley	16	Above average
1901–1908	Reform, foreign policy	High	Theodore Roosevelt	4	Near great
1909–1912	Reform	Moderate	Taft	24	Average
1913–1920	Reform, World War I	Extreme	Wilson	9	Near great
1921–1923	Economic expansion	Low	Harding	38	Failure
1923–1928	Economic expansion	Low	Coolidge	26	Average
1929–1932	Economic depression	High	Hoover	34	Below average
1933–1945	Great Depression, World War II	Extreme	Franklin D. Roosevelt	3	Great
1945–1952	Cold war, demobilization, Korean War	High	Truman	5	Near great
1953–1960	Cold war, economic expansion	Moderate	Eisenhower	8	Near great
1961–1963	Cold war, civil rights	High	Kennedy	6	Near great
1963–1968	Vietnam War, civil rights, Great Society	Very High	Lyndon Johnson	11	Above average
1969–1974	Vietnam War, Watergate	Very High	Nixon	27	Below average
1974–1976	Cold war	Moderate	Ford	22	Average
1977–1980	Economic recession, energy crisis	Moderate	Carter	25	Average
1981–1988	Cold war	Moderate	Reagan	10	Near great
1989–1992	Gulf war, economic recession	Moderate	George H. W. Bush	18	Above average
1993–2000	Foreign policy, impeachment	Moderate	Clinton	15	Average
2001–2008	9/11 terrorist attack, Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq	Very high	George W. Bush	36	Failure

*James A. Garfield, elected in 1880, was shot several months into his term by an angry office seeker and died two months later. Garfield served as president for a little over six months. The early death of this president makes him difficult to evaluate and rank.

4. Read the essay by Michael Kinsley, "The Power of One."[5] (You can find the essay on the Web.) In Kinsley's view, what is the most important component of presidential leadership? Cite language from the essay to support your answer.

5. Read the essay by Benjamin Schwarz, "Bush Fibbed, and That Might Be OK."[6] (You can find the essay on the Web.) In Schwarz's view, what is the most important component of presidential leadership? Cite language from the essay to support your answer.

6. The emergence of any single document or piece of information bearing on a president's performance is unlikely to alter scholars' assessment of that president decisively. Of course, we can imagine exceptions to that general rule. For example, almost since the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941), some have accused President Franklin D. Roosevelt of knowing in advance that the attack was coming and purposely leaving the nation vulnerable so that he could galvanize public opinion behind his objective: to join the world war on the side of the Allies and to defeat Hitler. A clear majority of Americans did not want to enter the war, and Roosevelt, so the argument goes, recognized that only an attack by a foreign power against U.S. territory and citizens—2,400 people died at Pearl Harbor—would shake the public from its isolationist stupor.

Most scholars agree that the charges against Roosevelt are contradicted by the documentary record and are unlikely ever to be substantiated. But suppose the scholars are mistaken; suppose the charges are proved true. In your view, how would the revelation that Roosevelt had prior knowledge of the attack on Pearl Harbor affect scholars' assessment of his presidency?

This question is not as simple as it seems at first glance. One author who believes Roosevelt did know about the attack in advance argues that the president was right to sacrifice Pearl Harbor to achieve a greater good: the defeat of Hitler.[7] Address this author's argument in your answer. Explain and support your position.

[5] *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 2003.

[6] *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 2003.

[7] Robert B. Stinnett, *Day of Deceit: The Truth about FDR and Pearl Harbor* (New York: Free Press, 2000). David Kahn published a devastating critique of Stinnett's book in the *New York Review of Books*, November 2, 2000.

Questions 7 to 10 are based on the 2009 C-SPAN Survey of Presidential Leadership, which you'll find at www.americanpresidents.org. Notice that you can examine the total scores and overall ranking for each president as well as select from the list of individual leadership characteristics such as public persuasion and crisis leadership.

Web addresses sometimes change. If you can't locate a website, try an external search (e.g., Google) to find the website. Configurations within a website often change. If you can't find a particular link or article, for example, try an internal search of the website as well as an external search. Be resourceful! If you still can't find what you're searching for, move on to the next question.

7. Click on the list of historians and presidential experts who participated in the survey. Choose one and conduct a Web search to find his or her qualifications. For example, does this participant hold a position at a major university? Have they published any studies that would qualify them to participate in the survey? Write the results of your search here.

8. **a.** Click on Index. Select Lyndon Johnson. According to the 2009 Category Ranking, in which two categories was Johnson ranked as the second greatest president?

b. In which category is Johnson ranked lowest? What is the number of his ranking in relation to the other presidents?

c. What is the numeric gap between Johnson's highest and lowest rankings?

d. Search the Web for information on Johnson's political career and on his accomplishments and failures as president that would help explain why he is ranked so high in two categories and so low in the other.

9. Select two other presidents of your choice. Identify the two presidents, specify the category in which each achieved the highest and lowest ranking under the 2009 Category Ranking, specify the number of his ranking in relation to other presidents, and calculate the numeric gap between the highest and lowest rankings.

a. President 1:

Highest category and number for that ranking: _____

_____

Lowest category and number for that ranking: _____

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Numeric gap between highest and lowest ranking: _____

b. President 2:

Highest category and number for that ranking: _____

_____

Lowest category and number for that ranking: _____

_____

Numeric gap between highest and lowest ranking: _____

c. Was the numeric gap between either of your presidents' highest and lowest scores as great as the gap for Johnson's?

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10. a. One of the individual leadership categories in the C-Span survey is moral authority. What is moral authority? Search the Web and write a definition here that you think applies to political leaders.

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b. According to the 2009 category ranking on moral authority how are Bill Clinton and John Kennedy ranked in relation to other presidents?

Clinton's numeric ranking: _____

Kennedy's numeric ranking: _____

c. Clinton is known to have had oral sex with an intern in the White House. Kennedy is known to have had sex with a number of women other than his wife in the White House. Can you think of one or more reasons why Kennedy's ranking on moral authority would be so much higher than Clinton's?

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11. In February 2010, the Gallup poll asked over 1,000 adults nationwide this question: "Who do you regard as the greatest United States president?" Respondents to the poll ranked the top seven presidents as follows:

1. Ronald Reagan
2. Abraham Lincoln
3. Bill Clinton
4. John Kennedy
5. George Washington
6. Franklin Roosevelt
7. Barack Obama

Compare the public's ranking of the top seven presidents with the ranking by historians and presidential experts in the C-Span survey using the 2009 Category Ranking.

a. What's the numeric gap between Reagan's ranking in the Gallop poll and his ranking in the C-Span survey?

b. For which of the top seven presidents in the Gallop poll is the gap with the C-Span survey the greatest? Can you think of any factors that might account for such a large gap?