

Bronze for Bush as Greatest President

George W. Bush takes the bronze in his debut on the nation's greatest-president list, boosted by a strong vote from the Republican judges. A more venerable Republican, Abraham Lincoln, wins the gold, with the silver medal to John F. Kennedy.

Those are the standings when Americans are asked to name the country's greatest president. Aside from Bush's sudden arrival, the biggest change is a 10-point drop in Ronald Reagan's position, from first place on Presidents Day last year, when 18 percent picked him, to a tie with Bill Clinton and Franklin D. Roosevelt for fourth place this year.

	Who's the greatest president?	
	This year	Last year
Lincoln	20%	14% (third)
Kennedy	14	16 (second)
G.W. Bush	13	0
Clinton	8	9 (fourth)
Reagan	8	18 (first)
F.D.R.	8	6 (fifth)

Reagan lost ground as Republicans in particular cited Bush, who's been riding an extraordinary wave of public approval for his response to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. Among Republicans, Bush finishes numerically first as the greatest president. Among independents he's third, and among Democrats he's fifth.

Among...		
<u>Democrats</u>	<u>Republicans</u>	<u>Independents</u>
Kennedy 21%	G.W. Bush 20	Lincoln 24
Lincoln 19	Lincoln 19	Kennedy 11
Clinton 13	Reagan 16	Bush 10
FDR 11	Kennedy, Washington 8	Clinton 9
G.W. Bush 7	FDR 6	FDR 7

Historians may differ, of course, and recency does play a role in a question like this – presidents who're fresher in the public's memory have a much better chance of making the list. Among the 19 presidents cited by respondents, all but five served in this century.

ABE – But, as Lincoln shows, greatness can have staying power. The 16th president, he had served barely over a month into his second term when he was assassinated on Good Friday, April 14, 1865, 136 years ago. But still he tops the list today as the greatest U.S. president.

The reason, perhaps, can be found in no better place than his second inaugural address, delivered as the Civil War consumed the nation. Each side, he said, “looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged...

“...Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

GROUPS – Interestingly, while Lincoln is placed first by whites, he's No. 2 among blacks, who instead overwhelmingly choose Clinton as the greatest president. Americans age 65 and older, meanwhile, have another choice – Franklin D. Roosevelt tops their list.

There's also a home-region factor. Lincoln, a son of Kentucky turned Illinois rail-splitter, lawyer and legislator, tops the list in the Midwest. But George W. Bush finishes first in the South, likely with a big push from the Texas vote.

MILLARD – Not all mentions went to the brightest lights of the American presidency. One respondent's choice as the greatest president was Millard Fillmore, the 13th president (1850 to 1853). Even at the White House's own web site, Whitehouse.gov, which might be expected to be charitable, he's described as “an uninspiring man” who reached the presidency by dint of “methodical industry and some competence.”

METHODOLOGY – This ABC News.com survey was conducted by telephone Feb. 13-17, 2002, among a random national sample of 1,025 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Sampling, data collection and tabulation by TNS Intersearch of Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet at:
<http://www.abcnews.com/sections/us/PollVault/PollVault.html>

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Here are the full results:

136. Who do you regard as the greatest United States president?

	2/17/02	2/11/01*	2/15/00*	2/99*
Lincoln	20	14	18	18
Kennedy	14	16	22	12
G.W. Bush	13	na	na	na
Clinton	8	9	5	12
Reagan	8	18	11	12
FDR	8	6	12	9
Washington	5	5	5	12
Bush, Sr.	2	3	3	5
T. Roosevelt	2	2	3	3
Truman	2	6	3	4
Jefferson	2	1	3	2
Eisenhower	2	1	3	2
Carter	2	4	3	3
Nixon	1	1	2	2
Other	1	5	3	1
None	*	2	*	1
No opinion	11	7	4	2

*Gallup