The Office of United States President

Facts and Trivia

The long list of men who have served as president of the United States includes a wide variety of backgrounds, ages, educational attainments, and service. Each man in the top spot contributed in his own way—some were more popular than others. “The times make the president” is a true statement, alluding to the fact that the economy and world events often shape the public perception of the sitting president. Poor economic times are often blamed on a president who is unable to effect a turn of economic tide quickly enough to satisfy a populace weary of struggling monetarily. War is never popular; however, in many cases a war has actually made a president more popular than he would have been if left to his own devices. For example, Franklin Roosevelt’s performance during World War II made him a wildly popular president. On the other hand, Lyndon Johnson bore much of the brunt of the extremely unpopular conflict in Vietnam. His presidency suffered as a result, overshadowing even his immense strides in the area of civil rights. No matter how talented or likeable is the man who is elected president of the United States, his popularity is in large part determined by the times. Were a woman elected, her lot would most likely be no different.

The Most Influential Presidents

If several people were assigned the task of developing a list of the most influential presidents of the United States, each list would no doubt be different. That is because there is no succinct set of determining factors. What is important to one person might not be quite so monumental to another. Even so, several of the following ten presidents would most likely appear on most lists. These presidents served during times of national crisis, which proved the mettle of each man.

Abraham Lincoln served as the 16th president during the American Civil War. His election was a precursor to the Civil War, as southern states viewed the election as a threat to their way of life. His leadership during the devastating national conflict was one of unswerving devotion to cause. His actions not only preserved the union, but led to the abolition of slavery. Although he had planned for a smooth and compassionate reuniting of the wayward states after the war was over, he was not able to see his plans through. He was assassinated in April 1865, an act that plunged the country into a dark period of reconstruction.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) won four terms as president, making him the only president to serve more than eight consecutive years. Since his presidency, the office of President of the United States is limited to no more than two consecutive terms. His influence had a large impact on the United States, as he led the country out of the Great Depression and nearly through World War II. To say the least, his time in office was taxing both physically and mentally. Perhaps his biggest accomplishment was the creation of numerous programs through his New Deal.

George Washington served as the first president, having led the United States through the Revolutionary War. His Continental Army was outmanned, and often on the brink of failure, but his fortitude and leadership skills continually reignited the fervor of independence. His administration set the precedent for those who followed in his footsteps; in fact, his retirement after only two terms was followed by all presidents except Franklin Roosevelt, until it was finally enacted into law by the 22nd amendment to the Constitution. Washington’s lack of desire to be viewed as a monarch set the tone for all “citizen” presidents to follow.

Thomas Jefferson is perhaps best remembered for his purchase of land that doubled the United States overnight—the Louisiana Purchase. He was a strong states’ rights advocate who also recognized the need for a strong central government. His leadership during America’s infancy helped set a course for independence and freedom that Americans continue to value and preserve.

Andrew Jackson was the first “common man” president. He was the epitome of America’s frontier spirit, and was elected by the common populace in preference over the more genteel pattern of previous presidents. His humble beginnings and fierce zeal for the advancement of all Americans made him a hugely popular president. Not prone to backing down, he was a strong nationalist who made such controversial decisions as the removal of Native Americans east of the Mississippi River and the battle against the national bank. Andrew Jackson was the first president to hail from west of the Appalachian Mountains.

Theodore Roosevelt was a distant cousin of FDR, and an extremely influential president. His platform included a fight against corrupt business and a commitment to conservation. His flamboyant personality made him a beloved president.

Woodrow Wilson presided during America’s entry onto the world stage. Before his presidency, the United States was committed to a hands-off approach to world matters, preferring to remain in isolation across the Atlantic. However, such a stance was not feasible as World War I loomed. President Wilson successfully guided the nation through the war, and encouraged activism in the League of Nations after the war. Having served as president of Princeton University, he was the most well educated president to that point.

Harry Truman was thrust onto the world stage after the death of Franklin Roosevelt. Expectations for his service were not great, as he did not have a wealth of political experience, but he proved his mettle when he made the immensely difficulty decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan to end World War II. His leadership during the Cold War was more valued after his time in office than during.

James K. Polk increased the size of the United States more than any other president. He firmly believed that the United States would continue to prosper only with the acquisition of more land. He encouraged the entry of California and New Mexico; he also claimed the Oregon Territory after a treaty with England. Manifest Destiny was a tenet he lived and breathed, as a large part of the U.S. population rushed to the West. His dedication to increasing the borders of the United States played a part in his willingness to involve the nation in the Mexican-American War, a precursor to the Civil War. He is perhaps the most influential of the one-term presidents.

Dwight Eisenhower was another of the “general presidents,” continuing a line of successful former generals who were elected to the highest office. During his term, the United States enjoyed economic prosperity and peace. Although he was definitely a talented political and military leader, the peace and economic upswing certainly added to his popularity. As the Cold War continued through his term, he provided a firm hand in responding to what was understood as a communist threat.

Presidential Trivia

The variety of men who have held the office of United States president yields an immense amount of presidential trivia. It is always fun to consider well-known facts as well as the more obscure tidbits that are related to our top men.

1. How many men have served as president? That all depends on how you count. Since the U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1789 during Washington’s terms in office, 42 different men have served as president. However, Grover Cleveland was elected to two non-consecutive terms and is listed as both the 22nd and 24th presidents.
2. How many presidents have lived past the age of 90? Four (John Adams, Herbert Hoover, Ronald Reagan, and Gerald Ford).
3. Which president lived the longest? Gerald Ford lived longer than Ronald Reagan by only 45 days, but he has the honor of having lived the longest.
4. Who lived longest after he left office? Herbert Hoover spent 31 ½ years in retirement after having left the office of president.
5. Which president lived the shortest time? John F. Kennedy was less than the age of 45 when he was assassinated.
6. How many Vice Presidents have become President due to the inability of the president to serve? Seven vice presidents have become president due to the death of the current president. One vice president (Gerald Ford) became president due to resignation.

The office of President of the United States has evolved over the past 200 years. The presidential leadership styles, world times, and U.S. populace are all factors that influence the way the office is perceived and the way our leaders are elected. Regardless of whether a president is considered one of the most influential, the fact that he persisted and excelled is noteworthy in and of itself.