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# The Dynamics of Presidential Legacies

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Abstract:

For decades scholars and public opinion organizations have been conducting surveys of experts and the mass public alike that rate and rank American presidents. These surveys provide empirical evidence of at least one dimension of a president's legacy – their historical reputation. As the number of such polls has increased, scholars have learned that these reputations vary – sometimes quite significantly – over time, with ratings of some presidents declining over time while others slowly crawl up the rankings ladder. Similarly, some presidents exhibit relatively static reputations across decades, while public and even expert opinion swings wildly for others. In this paper, we first observe and then analyze the way presidents from John F. Kennedy to George W. Bush have performed in such polls after they left office. Upon identifying those that have changed significantly over time, we dig deeper, attempting to understand why.

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It has been said that one of the few things you can't do in life a second time is to make a first impression; however, in politics, and especially presidential politics, while it may not be possible to change that first impression, it is possible to change the public's opinion, and how one might be perceived long after their political career is over. The 43 men who have been the U.S president have been analyzed and scrutinized throughout their lives and political careers. Prior to running for president, they establish a resume that puts them in the public eye. Later, during their campaign, the American public decides whether they have the confidence in the candidate to entrust them with the duties as president. While in office, they are evaluated daily by the press and news media along with the onslaught of polls measuring the public's satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with their performance. The evaluations while in office offer them the opportunity to see how "well" they are doing, and also provide insights as to whether they may or may not be residing in the White House at the end of their first term.

After leaving office, regardless of their previous successes, American presidents are among the most visible "private citizens" in the country and depending on how public a life they lead, they may be scrutinized almost as often as they were previously by historians, political scientists and the public. Indeed, for decades scholars and other presidency experts have continually played the "presidential rankings game" (Nichols 2012), haggling over which presidents should be rated higher than their peers, both in general and with respect to key dimensions of executive leadership. Similarly, Gallup and

other leading polling organizations have continued to survey the American public about their attitudes toward former presidents, sometimes decades after they have left office.

The upshot of this continuous assessment of presidential performance and popularity is that we know a lot about what both intellectual elites and the mass public think about most presidents at multiple points in time. We know comparatively less, however, about why expert and common assessments of some of these presidents have changed over time, while the legacies of other presidents remain fairly consistent across the years. Additionally, we know little about how the assessments of the elites and masses converge and diverge. Finally, we know still less about the impact post-presidential efforts to manage historical legacies have; that is, whether former presidents can affect the first, second, and even subsequent drafts of history by their efforts to remain in the public arena even after leaving office. This paper marks an initial effort to wrestle with these questions, the answers to which, taken together, can yield remarkable insight into the dynamic nature of presidential legacies.

### **The Dynamic and Contested Nature of Presidential Legacies**

Systematic analysis of presidential legacies has been, if not constant, at least a frequent practice over the last several decades. Although these evaluations may have differing criteria, they help frame the president's legacy and determine how they will be remembered in history, as well as establish our expectations for subsequent administrations (Mercieca and Vaughn, 2014). Although sometimes the results of these surveys can appear arbitrary or even highly politicized, there would seem to be a level of consistency between how they were perceived while in office, and a retrospective look at their terms. However, that often is not the case and through retrospective evaluations

former presidents, along with historians and political scientists have shown the ability to not necessarily change history, but affect perceptions, and hence legacies. This is a key point because legacies are based on opinions, and not necessarily facts. Legacies are oft-time developed based not solely on the individual president's time in office and his successes or failures, but on the whole man and on what they did, or were perceived to have done, before, during and after their time as president. For instance, John Adams, our second president is often ranked in the top 25% of all presidents; however, for the most part his term of office was not successful. It appears much of his legacy, and subsequent rankings are based on what he did before he became president. His son, John Quincy Adams, the sixth president, likewise was not all that successful during his term of office, however is generally ranked in the middle third in presidential rankings, rankings which are probably more based on what he did before, and after he was president, than his actual time in office.

Perceptions of a number of our presidents changed dramatically after they took office and the American public measured them based on results rather than promises. Surprising as it may seem, of the 43 who have served as President of the United States only fourteen were subsequently reelected and served past their initial term. Ten were defeated in their bid for a second term. Five failed in their attempt to win their party's nomination to run for reelection and seven opted not to run for reelection. Additionally, five of the seven who died while in office, died during their first term and were not afforded the opportunity to run for a second term.

In using post presidency polls and approval ratings compiled while they were in office as guides, there are times when they seem to have little in common with the

president's actual time in office. For instance, in the first Schlesinger presidential poll of historians (1948), taken roughly 80 years after he left office, Andrew Johnson was ranked as an average president and firmly in the middle of the pack (19 of 29); however, just a few years later (1962), he was rated lower (23 of 31), and in the last Schlesinger poll (1996) he was rated as a failure when ranked 37<sup>th</sup> of 39. In subsequent polls these trends for him have continued, and today he is generally ranked among our worst presidents, probably due in large part to increased scrutiny of his time in office in light of his character flaws as viewed through the lenses of the growing social consciousness driven by the civil rights movement of the late 1950's and 1960's. On the other hand, Harry Truman was at near historic lows for approval ratings during most of his second term with a 32% approval rating, and a 65% disapproval rating shortly before he left office (Gallup 2015), yet virtually since the day he left office, and for the last 65+ years he has consistently been rated among our great or near great presidents. Cases such as these show, that while not possible in all cases, presidents, or possibly historians and political scientists, may be able to retroactively change those first impressions. Or, alternatively, as time elapses, public recollection of individual administrations becomes less nuanced. Indeed, in a report published by the Gallup organization, Jeffrey Jones (2015) observes something along these lines:

“Americans tend to be more charitable in their evaluations of past presidents than they are when the presidents are in office. Former presidents likely transcend politics when they leave office, moving into a more nonpolitical role compared with the highly political environment in which presidents operate. And Americans' retrospective views of presidents may focus more on their accomplishments as president rather than the day-to-day political decisions or the state of the nation that are big influences on their approval ratings while in office. Of course, presidents may be remembered for unflattering reasons, as is the case with Nixon and likely also Johnson.”

Jones's tentative conclusions underscore the uncertainty that currently characterizes our understanding of how and why elite and mass views of presidential legacies change. In the next section of this paper, we set out to answer the related questions posed previously in this paper.

### **Digging Deeper into the Dynamics of Presidential Legacies**

In our analyses we examine a select group of recent presidents: those considered by Richard Neustadt (1990) as among the modern presidents, those from Franklin Roosevelt forward. This delineation is significant in differentiating presidents as Neustadt goes to great lengths describing how early presidents focused primarily on their formal roles as outlined in the constitution whereas "modern" presidents lived in a faster paced environment, had to deal with strategic issues routinely and, following the lead of FDR, were expected to do far more than their authorities routinely prescribed. In looking at the presidency from this perspective, Neustadt argued that the president's power is based on personal power rather than the formal authority of the position and for the last 55+ year's scholars, students, and presidents have generally viewed presidential leadership through this prism. This philosophical environment runs through the presidencies of the nine presidents, John F. Kennedy to George W. Bush, this paper analyzes.

This is a unique group, who were not only among the first of the "modern presidents," but individually their times and experiences in office dramatically differed not only from previous presidents, but also from each other in their dealings with war and peace, recessions and positive economic growth as well as major constitutional crises, and impeachments. Their terms also ended on different notes with three serving two full

terms, one assassinated while in office, one resigning, another opting not to run for reelection and three being defeated in their bid for reelection. They were also among the first to be faced with the near daily onslaught of public performance measurements such as Gallup polls, which routinely and publically measured their successes or shortcomings through approval and disapproval ratings. Before delving deeper into our analysis, it is worthwhile to provide some discussion about what trends we observe in the post-term elite and mass assessments of the modern presidents identified above. We start with the mass public.

### **Popular Opinion and Presidential Legacies**

Gallup periodically asks Americans whether they approve or disapprove of the job past presidents have done. To date, they have reviewed Presidents Kennedy through George W. Bush and soon should be able to include President Obama in their data. Of the nine former presidents this report analyzes and whom Gallup asked for at least one retrospective job approval rating, six averaged higher retrospective ratings than their average job approval rating while in office. The figures reported below show the average retrospective approval ratings for presidents across those measurements. As Table 1 indicates, for the most part this group has fared well, with only Johnson, Nixon and George W. Bush showing a negative retrospective change, although Bush's rating is still considerably higher than his final rating while in office. Of course, Johnson and Nixon are unique in many ways from the rest of this population, not only due to the circumstances under which they left office, with Johnson being pillared for his leadership of the war in Vietnam, and at the height of the 1968 campaign shocking the nation by declaring he would not run, and Nixon being the first, and only, president in US history to resign the office rather than face both impeachment and criminal charges. Their legacies are also clouded by their mixed results in domestic and foreign policy. While Johnson was incredibly successful with domestic issues, he had great difficulties in foreign policy and was not able to balance the two. Nixon, on the other hand was the exact opposite. Nixon's low ratings are most likely related to his involvement in the



Watergate scandal, while Johnson's likely result from his overseeing the unpopular Vietnam War.

**Table 1. Presidential Approval Ratings While in Office Versus Retrospective Job Approval Ratings<sup>1</sup>**

	Final approval Rating while in office %	Average job approval while in office %	Average retrospective job approval rating %	Difference:retrospective average minus average while in office Pct. Points
Kennedy	58	<b>70</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>+13</b>
Johnson	49	55	42	-13
Nixon	24	49	33	<b>-16</b>
Ford	53	47	60	<b>+13</b>
Carter	34	46	56	+10
Reagan	63	53	64	+11
Bush (41)	56	61	66	+5
Clinton	<b>66</b>	55	60	+5
Bush (43)	34	49	47	-2

**Bold** indicates highest rating or change in category.

Johnson and Nixon’s post presidential years were also very dissimilar. For the most part Johnson, who passed away barely four years after leaving office, retired to his ranch in Texas and remained out of the public eye, with little personal opportunity to further influence his legacy (Updegrave 2006). However, Nixon, after a number of years of relative exile in California, did much in attempting to rehabilitate his reputation and

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<sup>1</sup> Data sourced from Jones (2015, 1).

affect his legacy, writing a number of books on foreign policy, providing his views on executive power, and becoming somewhat of an elder statesman. However, he was not able to overcome the effects of Watergate and was not successful in rehabilitating himself in the eyes of the American public during his lifetime.

John Kennedy's legacy is truly unique, in fact so unique that he initially was not scheduled to be part of this research project. However, due to his uniqueness, much is to be learned from how legacies can be established even with comparatively little time in office and minimum opportunity to have dramatic successes, and no opportunity to personally affect one's standing after leaving office. Entering office in 1960, he was charismatic and had both youth and a strong war record. Serving less than three years in office before he was assassinated, he was very popular and his approval ratings were consistently high, and are the highest among this group and in the years since his presidency, they have continued to rise. During his short time in office he left a memorable impact in overseeing a growing economy and making significant progress in civil rights legislation which were carried to fruition by his successor, Lyndon Johnson. He stood strong during the Cuban Missile Crisis and gave hope to the people in the Soviet Bloc nations with his West Berlin Speech. He also took the NASA program, then in its infancy and chartered it on its path to successfully put a man on the moon by the end of the 1960's. However, he also had setbacks such as the ill-fated Bay of Pigs incident and his initial stumbling during the Vienna Summit with Khrushchev as well as approving the early expansion of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. However, as the approval ratings previously outlined indicate, he was a most popular president and his personality, his young family and the aura of Camelot seem to have greatly affected his

legacy. Additionally, the successes and tragedies his family faced over the years, served to keep his name and image in the public's eye. Cut short by an assassin's bullet, that aura has remained and more so than the others, his legacy as much as anything else seems to be built his dynamic personality and a wondering of what he may have been able to accomplish if his life had not been cut so short.

Although Ford and Reagan did little in the public eye after leaving office, the years have been kind to them in large part due to their personalities. Ford came across as honest and sincere. While controversial at the time, his pardon of Nixon has been viewed in a more positive light over the years to the extent that, in 2001 the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation awarded him the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award for his pardon of Nixon. In presenting the award to Ford, Senator Ted Kennedy said that he had initially been opposed to the pardon of Nixon, but that history had proved Ford made the correct decision. No one summed up his time in office better than his successor, Jimmy Carter, who started his Inauguration speech saying: "For myself and for our Nation, I want to thank my predecessor for all he has done to heal our land."

Reagan has lived up to his nickname as the "Teflon President" and has shown himself to be one that as the general population looks back on his time in office, generally views it in a positive light. He, like John Kennedy and Bill Clinton, seems to grow in stature the longer he is out of office. He has become a conservative icon and, and with his "Reagan Revolution," realigned the American political landscape, moving it more to the right of center.

The positive trends for the other presidents appear to have been in large part influenced by activities such as their works after leaving office, which have tended to be

charitable in nature -- such as the fundraising for Hurricane Katrina led by Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush.

Carter though is somewhat of an enigma. He more so than any in this group appears to have personally affected his legacy that now seems to have been shaped as much by his post-presidential experiences as his time in office. Considered by many to be one of our greatest ex-presidents (Vaughn 2015), he has been involved with, and led many post-presidential activities such as Habitat for Humanity, and been involved with negotiations to secure the release of political prisoners, and been involved with election monitoring across the globe. He is also the only ex-president to have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, which he received in 2002 for his work to “find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and promote economic and social development.” That said, some feel the awarding of the prize was in part a response to President George W Bush's threats of war against Iraq and Carter's outspoken criticism of the Bush administration.

George W. Bush, similar to Reagan and Ford, for the most part has avoided the limelight and maintained a very low profile and his ratings, although showing very slight improvement, reflect the effects of the war in Iraq, and the economic conditions that deteriorated during his time in office were having on his successor's administration.

### **Expert Opinion and Presidential Legacies**

In 1948 Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., a noted American historian, began what has become an American ritual when he asked 55 experts, the majority of whom were historians, to evaluate each president on his “performance in office” and place them into one of five categories: Great, Near Great, Average, Below Average and Failure. Over the

years, surveys of this type have continued and while the specific criteria may vary slightly, for the most part the goal has been to identify in rank order our greatest to worst presidents. However, a number of concerns have been identified in reviews of this nature.

First, they use differing criteria. Some, such as Schlesinger's simply ask for the presidents to be placed into one of five categories previously discussed, while others use various key criteria. For example, the Siena Research Institute's 2000 and 2010 surveys use criteria including: Background (family, education, experience); Party leadership (political); Communication ability (speak, write); Relationship with Congress; Court appointments; Handling of U.S. economy; Luck; Ability to compromise; Willing to take risks; Executive appointments; Overall ability; Imagination; and Domestic accomplishments. Similarly, the 1999 and 2009 C-SPAN surveys asked presidential historians to rank order the former occupants of the White House based on the following ten specific attributes of leadership: Public persuasion; Crisis leadership; Economic management; Moral authority; International relations; Administrative skills; Relations with Congress; Vision/setting the agenda; Pursuit of equal justice for all; and Performance within (the) context of their time. Of course, as with any academic exercise, how you ask the question and who you ask it to, affects the response. While overall the results of the referenced polls are relatively consistent, you can see some variances. For instance, in multiple Siena polls, President Nixon placed considerably higher (averaging 25<sup>th</sup>) than the other polls listed (where he averaged 32d overall).

Second, in the narrative reports following many of the early scholarly surveys, it was very clear that many of the participants were unable to separate the president's time

in office from the whole man view, which biased their scores. However, due to the strength through aggregation of the multiple polls being reviewed and that this paper addresses the whole man and legacy of these nine presidents, this issue, while of some concern, is minimal at best.

Third, the potential for individual bias by the participants can affect results. There were a number of allegations of a liberal bias in the earliest polls due to the selection process of the participants (Schlesinger 1997, 180). However, the selection process of balancing backgrounds and affiliations has overcome much of this concern in the majority of later polls (Lindgren 2000). Additionally, there appears to be a bias concerning one-term Presidents. In compiling the results of the Wall Street Journal polls, James Lundgren attempted to identify predictors of high presidential ratings and noted an apparent bias against one-term presidents and that “presidents who served less than one full term rated about a half a point lower (-.45) than those who served just one full term. On the other hand, presidents who served parts of two terms (or more) rated nearly a full point higher (.95) than presidents who served just one term (Lindgren 2000, 16-19) While this might appear minor, three from our population fall into that category (Ford, Carter and Bush (41)), and this potential bias may have some effect on their standing and legacy. Additionally, in his narrative report outlining the results of his 1948 poll, Arthur Schlesinger Sr. indicated the six greatest presidents (Lincoln, Washington, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Wilson, Jefferson and Jackson) were “lucky in their times” (Schlesinger 1948, 67). Clearly, opportunity matters and not all presidents can be war time leaders or among the founding fathers; however, all have great challenges and opportunities.

Below are the results of how our population has fared in surveys of this nature conducted among scholars, primarily historians and political scientists, and in some cases legal experts. In reviewing these survey results, a number of observations can be made. As shown earlier, while approval rating taken during the president's time in office may be a good indicator as to how they will be seen post presidency (George W. Bush) that is not always the case (Lyndon Johnson). Also, presidents are not locked in to initial poll results and they are often viewed differently in later polls (Reagan). And thirdly, in cases such as Carter, as much as forty years after he left office, it appears the results are still out and his ultimate legacy is still being determined.

**Table 2. Expert Rankings of the Modern Presidents**

Polls	M-B	CT	Siena	Siena	Siena	R. McI	Schl	CSPAN	WSJ	Siena	WSJ	Times	CSPAN	Siena	USPC	ASPA	Aggr.
Year	82	82	82	90	94	96	96	99	00	02	05	08	09	10	11	15	
Kennedy	13	14(t)	8	10	10	15	12	8	8	14	15	11	6	11	15	14	11
Johnson	10	12	14	15	13	12	14	10	17	15	18	12	11	16	11	12	12 (tie)
Nixon	34	34	28	25	23	32	36	25	33	26	32	38	27	30	23	34	32 (tie)
Ford	24	23	23	27	32	27	28	23	28	28	28	25	22	28	24	24	26
Carter	25	26	33	24	25	19	27	22	30	25	34	32	25	32	18	26	27
Reagan			16*	22	20	26	25	11	08	16	16	08	10	18	08	11	15
Bush (41)				18*	31	22	24	20	21	22	21	20	18	22	22	17	22
Clinton					16*	23*	20*	21*	24*	18	22	23	15	13	19	09	19 (tie)
Bush (43)									23*	19*	37*	36	39	31	35	34	
Population	36	38	39	30	41	41	39	41	39	42	40	42	42	43	40	43	43

\*Ranking calculated while still in office

Most presidents have the opportunity to influence their ultimate legacy after they leave office. It can be affected based on their level of involvement in visible activities,

their desires to enter the fray rather than simply retiring and how long they survive after leaving office. With the exceptions of Kennedy and Johnson, all in this population had, or continue to be blessed with long lives. While four of them have made it into their 90s (Ford, Reagan, Carter and Bush (41)), all have approached their post-presidential years differently. While one died in office (Kennedy) and five truly retired and stayed out of the limelight (Johnson, Ford, Reagan and both Bush's), virtually all have either written autobiographies, or had critical biographies written about them and their times in office. In doing so, Nixon, Clinton and Carter have gone to great lengths in telling their story, in what has been perceived as attempting to change how they were seen, while others, such as George HW Bush have gone to great lengths to let others tell his story.

While Kennedy had no chance to personally influence his legacy, many others have done so for him over the years. A large number of biographies have emerged over the years and for the most part have been very favorable, although some have delved in to his personal life in a not so favorable light. However, the books and the press have done much to paint a favorable picture of him as an aggressive, dynamic leader. Additionally, his name has been kept in the public's eye through the triumphs and tragedies of his two brothers, Robert and Ted as well as his wife, who along with their children kept the Kennedy name and legacy not only alive but in the public's view for nearly 50 years after his death. And while a very slight gap exists between his approval ratings and standing among academics, with the public generally continuing to be more positive, he is the highest rated president in both approval ratings and scholarly polls of this group, and it is doubtful his place in history will significantly change in the future.



Johnson, the last of the New Dealers, is somewhat of an outlier. Although he left office in January 1969 with relatively high disapproval ratings, he has consistently been ranked in the scholarly polls as one of our top presidents and is generally ranked in the top 25% of all presidents. This is somewhat surprising considering the controversial times in which he was president, with not only a strong anti-war movement, but also a period of extensive racial issues and riots nationwide nearing the end of his time at office. Although Johnson stayed out of the spotlight, during his post-presidential years, others, most notably Robert Caro, have told his story and although not always positively, they have kept him in the public's eye. A review of Caro's books highlights the contradictory and complex sides of Johnson as both a scheming opportunist, visionary progressive, but yet one noted for signing the 1964 Civil Rights Act although during the first 20 years of his public life he voted against roughly 50 civil rights related legislative actions. If one believes the old adage, "it doesn't matter what they are saying, as long as they are talking about you," then they have successfully kept him in the public eye. If when judging presidential performance, the measure of success for presidents – is truly that Americans simply want someone who will get the job done (Cronin 1980, 43) his positives have been noted. In following this philosophy, scholars have appeared to overlook many of his personal idiosyncrasies, issues and questionable practices and in judging him have viewed him holistically and scored him on his successes and how he aggressively pursued the war on poverty, supported civil rights legislation and enacted the Great Society legislation. Although his was a troubled, complex presidency, especially his last few years in office, history has been kind to him and now nearly fifty years since he left office, his place among those considered near great presidents appears secure.

Of course, in some cases, it does matter what they are saying. Nixon's rankings have varied a bit over the last 35 years as he continues to be seen if not as one of our worst presidents, at least one of our lowest ranked. He had a number of significant accomplishments, to include ending U.S. ground and air combat involvement in the Vietnam War, bringing the POWs home, made making inroads in dealing with Communist China, establishing the Environmental Protection Agency, and being reelected in 1972 by one of the largest margins in U.S history. However, his personal behavior and Watergate will probably always overshadow these achievements. Although he made great personal efforts to rehabilitate his reputation post presidency, through his writings and other activities, for the most part he was not successful. Despite being elected president in a landslide in 1968, many even then had negative perceptions of him remembering many of his questionable actions in his first senatorial campaign in 1946, and his campaign in 1952 as Eisenhower's running mate, when he found it necessary to publically state "I'm not a crook" in defending himself against claims of accepting illegal campaign contributions in dealing with the "Checkers" allegations. With the upcoming 40th anniversary of his leaving office under the cloud of Watergate and probable impeachment hearings, much of what is coming out now concerns new insights and revelations of his involvement, or if not involvement, knowledge of criminal activities within his administrations. Though he contended he was not a "crook," some 40+ years after he left office, that is how many continue to see him. He continues to be seen as a divisive figure and at this point it is difficult to see his legacy growing more positive.

Among this most unique group, Gerald Ford stands out. The only man to have served as either President or Vice President but not been elected to either position, his

legacy is generally positive, but at best muddled. When initially entering the Office of the President, the American people had great trust in him and he was seen as one who could hopefully put the nation back on an even keel. However, with his almost immediate pardon of Nixon, his reputation was tarnished and his credibility severely damaged. However, the years have been kind to him and while he has not risen higher in the polls, he is generally viewed positively and seem as an honorable, compassionate man who put his country first in every way. Since leaving office he has consistently been ranked in the middle third of all presidents in the presidential greatness polls coming in considerably better than Nixon and slightly ahead of Carter in the rankings.

After leaving office Ford stayed out of the limelight and did little proactively to embellish his record. This lack of need to be in the public eye served him well and his behavior was exemplary and did little to significantly change or modify his legacy. However, two notable exceptions stand out. In 2001 he broke ranks with the conservatives in the Republican Party and actively supported gay and lesbian couples, stating "they ought to be treated equally, period." Additionally, after his death in 2006, comments he made concerning the war in Iraq were released. In 2004, he had told Bob Woodward (2006), in a recorded interview, that if he were still president he would not have gone to war based on the allegation that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction without further verification. Loyal to country and the presidency, he did not allow these comments to be released until after his death. These two occasions, showed much about the man and helped cement his legacy. A number of books have been written about Ford and his years in the White House, and for the most part they have been very positive as to his character. While not providing any major new revelations the nature of which might

change his placement among the upper tier of presidents, they generally present him as a good, decent man who did all he could during very troubling times to keep the country on an even keel and heal the wounds caused by his predecessor.

While some consider Carter a failure as president (Skowronek 1993, 8 and 411), in his post-presidency, he has virtually taken on a new persona and effectively changed the way many thought of him during his presidential days. His legacy appears to continue to be strengthened and he is generally considered one of our best “former presidents” (Vaughn 2015). In reviewing his post presidency rankings in presidential polls, they are very similar to his approval ratings while president, in that they are consistent in their lack of consistency. He has the highest variance in rankings on all the polls after George W. Bush, having been ranked as high as 18 and as low as 33 in presidential ranking polls.

While accomplishing much in his post presidency, he has held himself to be a man of conviction, and in doing so on a number of occasions he has been controversial. The awarding of his Nobel Peace Prize was previously discussed. Not adhering to the unwritten rules for ex-presidents of not criticizing their successors, he criticized Clinton's policies on the propriety of some of the pardons he granted prior to leaving office and has been very vocal concerning the closing of the Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba and criticized both George W. Bush and Barack Obama for the conduct of the war in Iraq and the use of drones.

During his post presidency Carter has been exceptionally visible and written a number of books, primarily reflecting on his life and experience, the most recent of which is titled, *A Full Life: Reflections at Ninety* (2015). While the majority of his books deal

with his life and Christian beliefs, in books such as *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, (2006) and *We Can Have Peace in the Holy Land: A Plan That Will Work* (2009) he has at times sparked controversy and been at odds with White House policy.

Regretfully, much of what others have said about him, especially concerning his time in office has not been positive and some, such as Neustadt (1980, 1990) and Skowronek (1993), have written about Carter and his troubled time in office in very negative terms. Additionally, although much of what he has done in his post-presidential years has been highly acclaimed, he has also been controversial at times, leading to an uncertainty as to his ultimate legacy. Nearing his 91<sup>st</sup> birthday and in ill health, he more than likely will receive a dramatic relook over the next few years. However, based on the amount of time he has been out of office and how he continues to balance good deeds with controversial statements and actions, it can be expected that as he continues to have the opportunity to affect his legacy, barring the unforeseen, his ratings and rankings will continue to fluctuate for the foreseeable future, but he will probably be considered at best, a middle of the pack president.

Reagan is unique even among this group. In reviewing his initial five rankings in polls he was generally seen as in the middle of the pack ranked in the low to mid-twenties of approximately 40 presidents. However, in surveys 1999 and later, his rankings have skyrocketed to where he is now routinely included among the top tier of all presidents. His legacy seems to grow greater the longer he is out of office, even with some of the controversies he had during his time in office such as the Iran-Contra affair, increased deficits, high inflation and questions concerning the true effects of “trickle-down economics.” He was against increases in taxes, yet supported tax increases five times

during his administration. An advocate for smaller government, but the government grew during his time in office. Though he was a former labor union president, he fired the air traffic controllers when they went on strike. In light of this, or perhaps because of this, he has become a cultural icon, and is seen as a groundbreaker in changing the political landscape and the way America, and the Republican Party look at conservative governance. In leading the Reagan Revolution, it appears in today's context almost all the Republican candidates for higher offices want to be like Reagan, but at the same time when it comes to issues like taxes, they are not actually advocating for what Reagan did, but what they believe he stood for. While unable to remain in the limelight after his presidency due to illnesses, many others have carried his name, and philosophies forward to the extent that he is remembered in almost mythical terms in conservative circles. Reagan's legacy continues to grow and he, more so than any other in this population with the possible exception of Clinton who still has considerable time and opportunity to affect his legacy, is considered a far more influential and greater president now, nearly thirty years after his administration than he was when he initially left office.

George H.W. Bush presents a curious case. Here we see a president having (at the time) record high level approval ratings (89%), and then seeing them fall to 34% barely 18 months later, which led to him receiving only 37% of the vote in his unsuccessful bid for reelection. Further confounding the situation, he saw his approval rating dramatically on the upswing as he left office and his subsequent rankings in presidential polls place him in good standing as he has subsequently been evaluated against the 42 other members of the "president's club." During his presidency he had major successes, such as in leading the global coalition to liberate Kuwait, overthrowing

the Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega during Operation Just Cause, overseeing the end of the Cold War and improved relations with the U.S.S.R., and with the passage of the American with Disabilities Act which has become the template world-wide for protection and assistance for the disabled. Yet, he had some memorable setbacks politically with internal issues within the Republican Party, a confrontational congress and problems of historical proportions with the John Towers and Clarence Thomas nominations. He also had major economic and policy issues stemming from an inherited troubled economy that caused him to renege on his “No New Taxes” commitment.

For the most part, Bush has stayed out of the spotlight in his post-presidency, preferring to leave the assessments of his presidential legacy to others (Riley 2014, 1). With the exception of joining President Clinton in generating support for disaster relief operations and soliciting funds to aid victims of Hurricane Katrina and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami as well as attending state funerals for former presidents Reagan and Ford and famously making a parachute jump on his 90th birthday he, for the most part has stayed out of the spotlight. Loyal to the core, he has written and co-written a number of books on foreign policy and his time and experiences in the White House, but to date been very careful not to publically question the behavior or policies of his successors, which at times has probably been difficult with some of the situations in the Clinton administration and that it is generally believed he was not a strong supporter of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Showing that legacies are controlled by more than simply perceptions about the individual, some feel that Bush’s post-presidential rankings to date have been somewhat negatively affected by his son’s time in office and the negative feelings toward the Bush

“brand” caused by George W.’s low approval, high disapproval ratings. Similarly, today as his second son, Jeb, makes his run for the presidency he is hindered somewhat by his brother’s administration and its issues and problems. In the scholarly polls, Bush (41) is generally ranked in the low 20s and occasionally in the high teens and based on the average of his rankings he places fifth among this group. Interestingly enough, in three of the first four polls both he and Reagan were in, he was ranked higher than his predecessor, who is now routinely seen as in the top 10-15 of all presidents. Although he has been out of office for nearly 25 years, Bush’s legacy appears to still be evolving, and as only the second president to also be father to a president and having a second son running for president, his true “legacy” may yet to be determined. While not as visible as some, such as Carter and Clinton, when he is, it is for good causes and as Vaughn (2015) indicates, “George H. W. Bush offers a model. He has been the very picture of post-presidential dignity, retiring to Houston, where he is loath to criticize his successors or appear on the national stage.” As indicated earlier, he has generally preferred to leave the assessments of his presidential legacy to others, but that may yet also change his legacy.

Similar to Reagan, Clinton appears to be an outlier in this group with, if anything, his popularity increasing the longer he is out of office. Leaving office with a 66% approval rating, he was included in polls ranking presidential greatness five times before he left office and during those evaluations he was ranked between 16th and 24th among all presidents. Since leaving office his rankings have improved, to where it is not unusual to see him ranking in the mid-teens among all presidents and the 4<sup>th</sup> most highly rated of this group, after only John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan. He had numerous accomplishments during his time in office to include overseeing the longest



period a peacetime economic expansion in American history. Yet, he had some issues with investigations (Whitewater) and womanizing, before he came into office and subsequently became one of only two presidents in American history to have been impeached. Although acquitted, this cast a most unfavorable light on his administration which will forever will be noted in the history books. However, like Reagan, who was dubbed “the Teflon President,” because it did not appear anything negative could stick to him, Clinton left office with the highest recorded end-of-office approval ratings of any U.S. president. Clinton has had much written about him in his post presidency years, both by himself and others. He has written two books concerning his life, *Between Hope and History* (1996), and *My Life*, (2004), both of which told his life story in a very positive tone. The second book was noted primarily for not addressing head on many of the controversial issues and actions that took place during his administration. Additionally, a number of books have been written by others with mixed reviews. While some applauded his progressive agenda, successes and ability to reach across the aisle to get tough legislation passed, a number address his personal indiscretions and difficulties continue to linger in the minds of many.

Leaving office at age 54, if his health does not become an issue once again, he has the potential to have one of our longest post-presidencies and to date he, along with Carter have probably been our most visible ex-presidents. He has kept in the public’s eye due not only to the Clinton Foundation, his involvement at President George W. Bush’s request for disaster relief victims, but also because of the visibility of his wife who has been a most active politician and Secretary of State. While there is a level of controversy concerning donations to his foundation and with his wife’s actions while she was

Secretary of State, with her currently running for president herself and the Clinton Foundation becoming a global enterprise, it should be expected that he will continue to be in the limelight. Similar to George H.W. Bush, at this point, Clinton's ultimate legacy may be affected not only by his actions, but by others. With his wife running for president and there being considerable controversy over some of the issues she was involved with during her earlier political career, regardless of the election's outcome and his subsequent actions, it could greatly affect Clinton's future and how he will be viewed in the history books. More so than any in this group, barring any unforeseen circumstances he will clearly have the opportunity to continue to affect his legacy.

Conversely, similar to both Johnson and Nixon, George W. Bush's legacy will probably continue to be a controversial issue for years to come. A galvanizing figure virtually from the start of his administration, entering office in 2000 after a contested election, requiring Supreme Court validation, which many still question, and while receiving record high approval ratings immediately after 9/11, his approval ratings during the 2008 financial crisis and at the end of his administration were among the lowest ever recorded. He has been greatly criticized for his handling of the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina and the economy. As seen in the presidential surveys and polls previously outlined, he has been routinely ranked in the bottom 10-15% of all presidents. Since leaving office, for the most part he has not been in the spotlight with the exception of very limited public service activities, and writing his memoirs, *Decision Points*, where he indicated his greatest accomplishment was in keeping "the country safe amid a real danger."

Bush has steadfastly refrained from making comments concerning his successor's policies, and has not been as aggressive as President Clinton in taking actions that could affect his legacy. While there has been some limited improvement with his standing in some of the surveys recently taken, he continues to receive low marks. Both liberals and conservatives hold very strong opposing views as to his successes. Supporters believe that his aggressive counter-terrorism policies prevented further attacks from occurring post 911. But, many hold him responsible for the war in Iraq basing it on faulty intelligence and unfounded claims of weapons of mass destruction, as well as his poor handling of Hurricane Katrina, tax policies and, the 2008 financial crisis.

To date most of what has written about Bush (43) and his administration, with the exception of what he has written himself, has generally been negative in nature.

Questions continue to arise concerning his policy making decisions, the failure to find the weapons of mass destruction that led to war in Iraq, his handling of the economy, and the influence of the Vice President Dick Cheney and neoconservative factions had on his administration and its governance. Without considerable new insights or explanations of events that happened during his administration, it is not unrealistic to believe that his rankings in presidential polls will not improve significantly at least in the near future. As such he will probably continue to be relegated to near the bottom in rankings of all presidents.

## **Analyzing Legacy Dynamics**

Having discussed in detail both the popular and elite assessments of these modern president in the years since they left office, we now turn to a brief discussion of some of the more interesting analytical questions one can attempt to answer using the data discussed in the previous section. In particular, we can consider where scholars and the public diverge, and which presidents have relatively stable legacies compared to those whose are continuously contested.

### **Elite-Masses Convergence and Divergence**

Though not precisely correlated, by and large public assessments and expert evaluations of presidential legacies track together. This is not uniformly the case, however. Indeed, two quite noteworthy examples of presidents where the public and presidency experts are hold differing perspectives are Presidents Kennedy and Nixon. For Kennedy, the mass public has consistently increased its approval of his presidency in the years since Gallup first started regularly asking about post-presidential approval in the early 1990s. Today almost 85% of the public approves of Kennedy's presidency, up from about 70% while he was in office. Scholars over about the same time-span have shown a very different pattern of assessment. While we cannot say that the opposite trend is occurring, we can point to two very different aspects of how presidency experts have ranked JFK. First, in the first few rankings after his presidency, Kennedy was consistently ranked within a few places above or below 10<sup>th</sup> among all presidents. Over the last two decades, however, scholarly assessments have begun to swing rather wildly, with his rank yo-yoing from as high as 18 to as low as 6.

Assessments of Nixon show a similar story, albeit reversed. The mass public has indicated a stable, slightly intensifying disdain for the president whose administration was cut short by the Watergate scandal, with approval varying early on between 30% and 40%, but in the past two decades flattening out in the upper-20s/lower-30s. Scholars, however, are less stable in their assessments. While he still consistently ranks below the other presidents of his more immediate era (i.e., Kennedy, Johnson, Ford, and Carter), there has been considerable and increasing fluctuation in his ranking, with some polls having him as high as the mid-20s and others as low as the high-30s. For both Kennedy and Nixon, we see a public that has taken an overly positive/negative view of these administrations and settled into it comfortably over time, while experts for both have indicated increasing variance in the rankings of both.

### **Dynamic Legacies**

Joining Kennedy and Nixon in the group of modern presidents with the most dynamic legacies is Jimmy Carter. Unlike Kennedy and Nixon, who are respectively deified and vilified, assessment of Carter is far more complex, difficult, and ambivalent. This is reflected in the significant variation that persists between each public and expert poll that has been conducted. Among the public, his post-presidential approval has ranged from the lower-mid-40s to nearly 70%, before dipping back down to the 50% mark. Even over the past few surveys approval of the last one-term Democratic president varied by as much as 10 points. Similarly, scholars have ranked Carter in the low to mid-30s before going up to the high teens, then back down to the mid-30s, up to the high teens, and back down again. Because of the relative infrequency of these polls – both general and elite – it is difficult to identify clear causal factors that determine these shifts. Perhaps by

mapping on salient developments – the death or significant illness of a president, a moment of controversy – or even more systematic factors such as public mood or partisan control of the White House, we can develop better predictive understanding of these fluctuations.

### **Stable Legacies**

Of course, not all presidents demonstrate the kinds of assessment instability that Kennedy, Nixon, and Carter do. For some we actually see comparatively little over-time evolution. Two examples where public and elite attitudes are relatively stable can be found in Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush. For Ford, scholars have consistently ranked him somewhere between the mid to high 20s, with most of the observations clustering around 27-28<sup>th</sup>. Scholars have also been consistent on George H.W. Bush, though there has been a slow growth in his ranking, climbing from about 30 to the high-teens, but in a steady manner, not at all like the indecisive swings noted above concerning Kennedy and Nixon.

Public assessment of both of these one-term Republicans has also been stable. With the exception of a single bounce between polls of nearly 20 points, all of the other increases/decreases between polls for Ford have indicated significant stability, as have the considerably fewer number of observations available for Bush 41.

### **Conclusion**

This paper represents a preliminary foray into determining why presidential legacies change over time, both in general and at different rates and in different ways when compared across presidents. Although our discussion and analysis have generated several suggestive observations, the overarching conclusion remains tentative: we still do

not know exactly what causes these dynamics. Moreover, were a recent ex-president to request advice on how they might improve their legacy after leaving office, there is not yet a clear answer to give them. For that reason alone, there is cause to continue investigating this phenomenon.

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