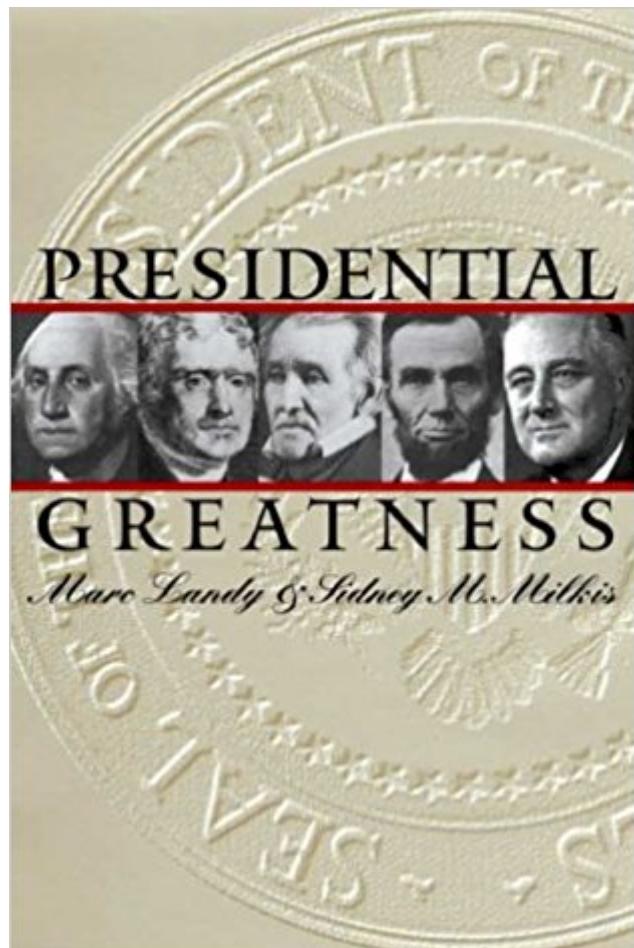


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Presidential Greatness



Synopsis

When a new president is elected in November, someone will be called to greatness. But it remains to be seen whether that call will be answered. In the wake of the Clinton scandal, the upcoming election presents an opportunity for candidates and citizens alike to reaffirm their belief that the office of the president demands greatness. But Marc Landy and Sidney Milkis suspect that the public will be disappointed once again, because the demand for greatness far exceeds the supply. In fact, they claim that we have had no great presidents in the last half of this century. In this provocative new book, they explain why. Landy and Milkis look to the past to show how five presidents—Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt—set the standards for presidential leadership and achievement. These were men who left genuine legacies, whose vision expanded the office of the presidency as they inaugurated momentous and far-reaching change. They were leaders who knew how to reconcile innovation with constitutional tradition and were able to both educate the people about their agendas and win their allegiance. They were also great builders and leaders of their parties amid times of political realignment. Searching for common threads in these five presidencies, Landy and Milkis enable us to better understand both the possibilities and the limitations of the office. They show how presidents after FDR have never risen to true greatness—not even Lyndon Johnson, an "overreacher" whose Great Society was a failed revolution, or Ronald Reagan, an underachiever whose conservative revolution never fully got under way. Our greatest presidents, they argue, sought to profoundly change the nature of the regimes they inherited and had the luck to assume office under conditions that allowed such renovation; today's leaders have lacked either the ambition, the opportunity, or both. Perhaps, the authors observe, the older our country gets the harder greatness is to come by. Our next great president might be sworn in next year, but he or she will face a daunting task in matching the stature of past leaders. Landy and Milkis's book is an evenhanded assessment of our national icons that reestablishes our understanding of presidential greatness and demonstrates the importance—and reality—of inspired democratic leadership.

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Customer Reviews

Listing their picks of the United States' five greatest presidents, political scientists Landy (Boston College) and Milkis (University of Virginia) cite the prerequisite defined by Madison in *The Federalist*. A chief executive's primary function, said Madison, is to "refine and enlarge public views." The authors tell us a great president is part visionary, part social innovator and part stern parent pointing out the duties of citizens in a republic. Landy and Milkis's first pick, George Washington, insisted that popular opinion must be enlightened by inspired rhetorical leadership. Both Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt (also on this presidential A-list), the author says, answered Washington's admonition when they inspired fickle electorates to achieve great things during times of severe adversity. Another of the top five, Thomas Jefferson, is congratulated for inoculating Americans with a healthy mistrust of elites. And Andrew Jackson makes the cut for his stand on nullification. The limit to five presidents, however, is unhelpful. Why, for example, ignore Theodore Roosevelt? An inspirational innovator in overdrive, he reshaped the language of American politics with his eloquent pronouncements from "the Bully Pulpit." How many other presidents--among them Madison--also held facets of greatness within them? Landy and Milkis don't tell us. While convincing as far as it goes, this is an arbitrarily short consideration of presidential personalities and accomplishments. (Mar.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

What constitutes presidential greatness? While there are no neutral, objective standards, Landy (political science, Boston Coll.) and Milkis (government, Univ. of Virginia) argue that greatness is "the opportunity and capacity to engage the nation in a struggle for its constitutional soul," to stage a "conservative revolution," and to bring about change and leave a legacy. But they further note the

importance of "democratic leadership," more difficult and demanding of a leader. This type of leadership involves "civic education" and the use of political party to have a lasting impact. The truly great presidents, of whom they number Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt (the usual suspects), not only performed these duties "but did so in a democratic spirit by taking the people to school and explaining why great changes had to be accomplished in a manner compatible with constitutionally prescribed liberties and republican forbearance." The authors then go on to demonstrate how the great presidents actually led democratically and effectively. While cursory, this book compels us to face the dilemma of democratic leadership. A very readable and valuable addition to the literature on presidential leadership.-Michael A. Genovese, Loyola Marymount Univ., Los Angeles Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Student learned a great deal from this book.

Excellent analysis of "Presidential Greatness". Reads well for historians and laymen alike. High praise for the author/professor as well. Definitely a good choice for all who are interested in what made our most successful executives, successful.

Overall an excellent piece of historical analysis on the role of presidential power and presidential "GREATNESS". The author's maintain that the truly great presidents (Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, FDR)"engaged the nation in a struggle for it's constitutional soul

The merits of this book are that it raises two important historical questions -- what is Presidential greatness, and who were our great Presidents -- and that it presents a great deal of evidence with which to answer those questions. The failure of the book is that it arrives at the wrong answers. There are two reasons that the book so fails. One is a faulty thesis, and the other is the authors' failure to apply that thesis rigorously to all five of the Presidents whose terms in office they conclude cleared the "greatness" hurdle. The authors' basic thesis is that to be "great," a President must effectuate fundamental change in how Americans view their government. The problem is that this standard excludes Chief Executives whose achievements were critically important to the nation but that occurred within the existing understanding of Constitutional relationships. Three candidates who are thus excluded and for whom arguments could be made were the criteria broader are Polk, Theodore Roosevelt, and Truman. By the authors' standards, a President who merely faces a

nation-threatening international crisis, makes the right choices on how to meet that crisis, implements those choices by working cooperatively with a Congress controlled for half of his term by the opposite party, and forges such a consensus around his actions that it forms the bedrock of national policy for nearly half a century, cannot be considered "great." I refer, of course, to the achievements of Truman, achievements that the authors dismiss as "inconceivable without Roosevelt." Well, of course Truman's achievements were inconceivable without Roosevelt -- as Jefferson's were without Washington, as Jackson's were without Jefferson, as Lincoln's were without Jackson, and as FDR's were without Lincoln. They go so far as to call Truman's victory in 1948 "FDR's greatest political triumph," equating the election of 1948 with those of 1808 and 1836, "when Jefferson and Jackson were the real victors" -- ignoring the facts that by November 1948 FDR had been dead for more than three years and that the electorate had thus enjoyed ample time to evaluate Harry Truman. The authors give Truman little of the credit for sustaining Roosevelt's legacy, though even they admit that after the election of 1946 many had concluded "that the New Deal could not survive the passing of FDR." They grade down Truman's performance because he did not extend Roosevelt's reforms -- when, in fact, he did, through the courageous and politically perilous integration of the armed forces by executive fiat, an action that certainly had an impact on the atmosphere in which the Civil Rights struggles of the next two decades occurred. If the thesis problem excludes worthy candidates from the authors' pantheon, the inconsistent application of that thesis lets at least one pretender slip in. That they bestow the mantle of greatness on Washington, Lincoln, and FDR is unsurprising, and essentially unassailable. They make a credible case for Andrew Jackson. But they fail to convince when they argue that Jefferson was a great President, even within the bounds of their thesis. Their argument in favor of Jefferson boils down to two achievements: he built the (original) Republican party, thus establishing a basis for popular government; and he expanded the size of the country via the Louisiana Purchase. But, as the authors point out, much of Jefferson's party-building took place not during his Presidency, but rather when he was in opposition, in the 1790s; and they admit that Madison shares much of the credit for party-building. The authors also admit that as President, "Jefferson could not bring himself to embrace the role of popular party leader." They point out that Jefferson's support of the Embargo Acts was an utter failure, that he "retired from office with the Republic in disarray," that he "never repudiate[d] a view of the Constitution that placed the cohesion of [the nation] continually at risk," and that as a consequence of his ambiguous approach to Presidential leadership "the American regime nearly imploded." That hardly sounds like the legacy of a "great" President! In their introduction, they say that "a president bears a large share of responsibility for the public's civic

education. A democratic leader is one who takes the public to school. By these criteria, the great presidents did indeed provide meaningful democratic leadership ... They taught the citizenry about the need for great change, but also about how to reconcile change with American constitutional traditions and purpose. But the authors ignore their standard of civic education when assessing Jefferson's alleged greatness. They attribute to Jefferson an "excessively restrained understanding of the democratic leadership responsibilities of the president." They say that "He remained silent when he needed to speak" and that "Jefferson did not educate the people about the meaning of the transformation they were experiencing and about how they should come to grips with it. In the face of the massive change he had instigated [i.e., the expansion of the country via the Louisiana Purchase], the author of the greatest of democratic utterances stood mute." It seems as though the authors started with a view something like: "Of course Thomas Jefferson was a great President." They had the intellectual honesty to present the substantial evidence to the contrary, but not the courage to take that evidence to its logical conclusion.

A very interesting examination of the five presidents considered by the authors to have been our only "great" ones. Milkis and Landy, both capable students of American politics, examine the politics and philosophies of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt. The authors are fair-minded in their criteria: great presidents must have both the character and the opportunity to engage the nation in a "struggle for its constitutional soul." Washington at the Founding and Lincoln in the Civil War are obvious examples. Jefferson and Jackson are less obvious, but the authors make a good case for each. Perhaps the most interesting section is the one on FDR. Milkis and Landy appreciate how the New Deal attempted to end such struggles for our constitutional soul once and for all, and effect a "final" partisan realignment that would make bureaucratic administration and entitlements permanent features of our politics. Though some readers may think the authors are too generous with the "good side" of the New Deal, the book offers interesting insights into the challenges it poses for the next great president.

Milkis and Nelson do a great job of covering two centuries of presidential history. The history is concise but intriguing and the analysis is enlightening. Particular emphasis is placed on the "Great" presidencies of Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, and FDR. An additional note: Milkis is a terrific professor at the University of Virginia. His lectures are fun and engaging - a tremendous scholar and interesting person.

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