

George Washington was the outstanding American general of the eighteenth century; Grant the most successful in the nineteenth; and Eisenhower in the twentieth.

There are several other generals who have become president. Zachary Taylor, a hero of the Mexican War and a career soldier, was elected in 1848 but died sixteen months after taking office. Andrew Jackson, the victor at the battle of New Orleans, was elected in 1828. And William Henry Harrison, “old Tippacanoë”, was elected 1840, but served less than a month before dying of pneumonia contracted at his inauguration.

Other generals have run for the presidency and lost. Winfield Scott, another hero of the Mexican War, was the Whig candidate in 1852 and lost to Franklin Pierce. John C. Fremont stood as the first Republican candidate in 1856; George McClellan ran against Lincoln in 1864; and Winfield Scott Hancock lost narrowly to James Garfield in 1880.

But to look at Washington, Grant, and Eisenhower, together they served twenty-four years as president. Did they have anything in common, anything that set them apart? As generals, let me suggest they had an extraordinary ability to understand larger political issues.

Washington personified the Revolution and the American desire for independence. He was appointed general and commander in chief on June 16, 1775, and served in that capacity until December 23, 1783—eight and a half years. He lost more battles than he won, and the victory at Yorktown was mainly attributable to the French, but Washington’s ability to keep the Continental Army intact during those eight and a half years was a unique historical accomplishment.

Said differently, Washington was as great between battles as he was on the battlefield. There was scarcely a time during the war when Washington didn’t have to grapple with a crisis that threatened to disband the army and abort the Revolution. He constantly had to exhort Congress and the thirteen states to remedy shortages of men, clothing, weapons, and ammunition. In that sense, Washington’s job as commander in chief was as much political as it was military. His command of the army was a masterly exercise in nation building. Washington had to blend troops from different states into a functioning national force, and the constant turnover of manpower meant that training was continuous. But in defining the culture of the Continental Army, Washington molded the character of the country.

For Grant, the Civil War was about the preservation of the Union and the restoration of peace. The shortest road to that led through the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Cold Harbor. Like Washington, Grant represented the calm at the center of the storm of battle. Three times Grant took the surrender of a Confederate army and his terms were always generous. At Vicksburg, he paroled the southern soldiers rather than making prisoners of them. At Appomattox, Grant wrote out the terms in longhand. As at Vicksburg, the men were paroled and sent home. This time they were allowed to keep their horses for the spring plowing. Acting on his own authority as general in chief, Grant concluded with a sentence that took a massive step toward bringing the nation together. The officers and men who turned in their weapons and went home were “not to be

disturbed by United States authority so long as they observe their parole and the laws in force where they reside.”

With that sentence Grant pardoned the Army of Northern Virginia and undercut the vengeance that was festering to hang the Confederate leaders for treason.

It is not widely known today, but after Lincoln’s assassination, President Johnson ordered the United States attorney in Norfolk to indict Lee, and Longstreet, and Joseph E. Johnston for treason. The indictments were handed down, and Lee wrote Grant asking if it was consistent with the terms of surrender. Grant immediately went to President Johnson and said Lee and Longstreet and Johnston could not be tried for treason. “When can they be tried?” Johnson asked. “Never,” said Grant. Grant’s denial of vengeance was crucial in bringing the Union together.

Eisenhower was similarly politically attuned. Let me mention two instances: the taking of Paris in the summer of 1944, and his refusal to drive on Berlin the following year. In the summer of ’44, after German resistance in western France collapsed, Eisenhower planned to bypass Paris and pursue the German army. Out of the blue, General von Choltitz, the German commander in Paris, sent the Swedish consul-general through German and Allied lines to tell Eisenhower that he had been ordered by Hitler to destroy Paris, but had decided not to. But he could only hold out for 24, perhaps 48 hours before Hitler would relieve him and send in a commander who would destroy the city.

Eisenhower immediately changed plans, ordered General Le Clerc’s French 2nd Armored division to break off contact with the Germans in the Falaise pocket and head to Paris. Le Clerc covered the 130 miles in a little over 24 hours, von Choltitz surrendered the city to Le Clerc, and Paris was saved from destruction. Not only that, but Eisenhower did it with French troops, not American or British. And with Le Clerc went Charles de Gaulle, who was immediately established in the Élysée Palace as acting head of state, and who led that immense parade down the Champs de Élysée the next day.

Eisenhower, who had lived in Paris for a year and a half in the late 1920s, understood the significance of the city for the French, and wanted de Gaulle to reap the credit for its liberation. (I should add that FDR and the State Department were livid, but Eisenhower prevailed.)

The second incident involves Eisenhower’s refusal to take Berlin in 1945. The occupation boundaries had already been drawn, Marshal Zhukov’s army was on the Oder River just 30 miles from Berlin, and the Allies were just breaking out from the Rhine, some 150 miles away.

Churchill wanted the Allies to drive to Berlin. He believed it would be a useful bargaining chip with the Russians. Eisenhower was opposed. He wanted to link up with the Russians at the closest point, somewhere along the Elbe, and divide Germany in two. He thought Berlin was a prestige objective without any military significance, and would be costly to take. So instead of fighting with Churchill and the Combined Chiefs of Staff, Eisenhower wrote

directly to Marshal Stalin and proposed a link up with the Russians on the Elbe. Stalin agreed, and that was that. Just as FDR had been furious that Ike installed de Gaulle in Paris, Churchill was apoplectic that Ike had written to Stalin. When you outmaneuver both FDR and Churchill on major issues, you can scarcely be considered a political amateur.

As president, Washington, Grant, and Eisenhower also shared at least one characteristic. The three had seen war at its worst, and they were determined to keep the United States at peace.

No president has had a more decisive impact on American foreign policy than George Washington, and no president has been more effective in keeping the United States out of war. In 1793, most of Europe was at war. The monarchical powers—Austria, Prussia, and Great Britain versus the French Republic. In April of that year, Washington issued a Neutrality Proclamation stating that the United States would remain neutral and impartial, and instructing American citizens to do the same. The wars of Europe were not something the United States would engage in, said the president.

Washington expanded on the idea of American neutrality in his Farewell Address. Said Washington,

The duty of holding a neutral conduct may be inferred from the obligation which justice and humanity impose on every nation. With me a predominant motive has been to endeavor to gain time for our country to settle and mature, and to progress without interruption to that degree of strength and consistency which is necessary to give it the command of its own fortunes.

Washington's Neutrality Proclamation of 1793 ranks second only to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in its historical significance, and it set the course for American foreign policy from 1793 to our entry into World War I in 1917.

With Grant, it was a question of bringing peace to the domestic scene. Grant's "peace policy", as it was called, ended the slaughter of Native Americans on the Great Plains. This was a bit of a surprise. In the election of 1868, Grant swept the frontier states because the settlers thought he would do to the Indians what he had done to the Confederates. But Grant had great sympathy for Native Americans. He appointed a Native American to head the Bureau of Indian Affairs, replaced the corrupt agents on Indian reservations with Quaker ministers, and invited the war chiefs of the Indian tribes (Red Cloud) to the White House. Grant's peace policy brought peace to the West and paved the way for the eventual assimilation of Native Americans into American society.

I should add that Grant twice faced down congressional demands for war with Spain over Cuba, and with the Treaty of Washington of 1872, ended the friction with Great Britain stemming from the Civil War.

With Eisenhower it was much the same. We all remember the election of 1952. Ike said that if elected he would “go to Korea.” Everyone assumed that he would take command and defeat the North Koreans and Chinese.

Well, Ike went to Korea, flew in an Artillery spotter plane—a little Piper Cub—along the entire battle line, and concluded the war was unwinnable. Over the objections of the commanders on the spot—Generals Mark Clark and James Van Fleet, South Korean president Syngman Rhee, and John Foster Dulles and much of the Republican Party, Eisenhower immediately made peace in Korea along the battle line, roughly the 38th parallel. And once he did, not one American was killed in combat for the remaining eight years of his presidency.

For Eisenhower, the phrase “limited war” was a contradiction in terms. He firmly insisted the United States would not engage in armed conflict unless national survival was at stake.

Eisenhower, by the way, had no National Security Advisor. He was his own national security advisor.

As president, Eisenhower slashed defense spending, reduced American ground forces, and introduced the “New Look” to defense strategy. The United States would not fight wars beneath the nuclear threshold, and if it did go to war, it would be with massive retaliation.

Under Eisenhower, that kept the peace. Twice the joint chiefs of staff and members of the NSC recommended the use of nuclear weapons—once at Dien Bien Phu to relieve the embattled French garrison, and one during the Formosa Straits crisis—and both times Eisenhower refused.

When England, France, and Israel invaded Egypt to seize the Suez Canal one week before the election in 1956, Eisenhower was determined to force their withdrawal. He instructed George Humphrey, his secretary of the treasury, to mount a run on the British pound on international currency markets. As a result, the British had no alternative but to withdraw.

For twenty-four years, Washington and Grant and Eisenhower kept the peace. They knew war first hand, and were determined to avoid it. That does not mean they were unwilling to use military force. Washington used the Army to crush the Whiskey Rebellion in western Pennsylvania in 1794—and indeed, took personal command of the troops in the field, the only president ever to do so. Grant kept the Army in the South for the eight years of his presidency to enforce Reconstruction and suppress the Ku Klux Klan, and Eisenhower dispatched the 101st Airborne division to Little Rock in 1957 to enforce the district court’s order integrating Central High.

But sending men into combat was something these men wanted to avoid. To give this a contemporary note, some of you may remember the commencement address General H. Norman Schwarzkopf gave at West Point in May 1991, just after Desert Storm. Schwarzkopf warned the graduating cadets of what he called “military fairies in Washington.” Civilians who had never been in combat but who always wanted to send troops into battle. [Personal note: Norman and I

were good friends. We served together for two years, 1958 and 1959, in the Sixth Infantry regiment in Berlin, and lived next door to each other in the BOQ.]

What did these men accomplish as president? It is impossible to overstate the prestige George Washington brought to the presidency, or the significance of that for the establishment of the government. As Chief Justice John Marshall—who wrote a five volume biography of Washington while he was chief justice—observed, “The attention of all was directed to General Washington as the first president of the United States. He alone possessed so entirely the confidence of the people, that under his auspices a government of sufficient firmness could be established that could resist the open assaults and secret plots of its adversaries.”

When Washington took the oath of office in 1789, there were only eleven states in the Union. North Carolina and Rhode Island had not yet ratified the Constitution, and were waiting for a Bill of Rights to be added. And the Bill of Rights, which ultimately would become the first ten amendments to the Constitution, encountered heavy resistance in Congress. (To amend the Constitution requires a 2/3’s majority in both the House and Senate, and then the approval of ¾’s of the states.)

Almost as his first order of business, Washington wrote a letter to James Madison announcing his support for the Bill of Rights. Armed with Washington’s letter, Madison was able to steer the Amendments through both Houses, and in September 1789 they were sent to the eleven states for ratification. The Amendments were quickly ratified, and North Carolina joined the Union in November, and Rhode Island in May 1790. Without Washington’s intervention, the Bill of Rights would not have made it through Congress, and North Carolina and Rhode Island would not have joined the Union.

As the nation’s first president, Washington confronted the need to create the executive departments and define their responsibilities. He had to put the government on a sound financial basis and establish its credit. He had to create an Army and later a Navy, and appoint all the judges to a federal judicial system that had just been created. He also had to confront a Spanish government that had closed the mouth of the Mississippi to American commerce; deal with border disputes with Great Britain in the Northwest Territory (Ohio); and pacify hostile Indians on the frontier.

I believe it is symbolic of Washington’s political dexterity and to his openness to competing ideas that his first cabinet included Thomas Jefferson as secretary of state and Alexander Hamilton as secretary of the treasury. Jefferson and Hamilton symbolized the division in the country, the rift between state power and national authority. They did not like each other. But they worked effectively under Washington for his first term.

The reason the nation’s capital is in Washington is due to a deal Jefferson and Hamilton cut over a private dinner in Philadelphia in 1790. Jefferson agreed to support Hamilton’s plan for funding the public debt and the assumption by the federal government of state indebtedness acquired during the Revolution, and Hamilton in return agreed to support moving the capital from Philadelphia to the Potomac—to a ten-square-mile federal area granted by Maryland and

Virginia (the Virginia portion, Alexandria, was ceded back to the state in the 1830s). Washington approved the negotiations, and the new federal district was named “Washington” in his honor.

It was at the end of Washington’s first term that the issue of establishing a national bank arose—Hamilton in favor, Jefferson against. Washington sided with Hamilton, and most historians trace the formation of political parties in the United States to that dispute over the bank in 1791.

Washington was reelected unanimously in 1792. Jefferson resigned as secretary of state, and the United States under Washington’s leadership repaired its relations with Great Britain. The Jay Treaty of 1794 committed the British to removing the last of their troops from the Northwest Territory, and commercial relations were improved. Relations with France suffered accordingly. It was also in his second term that Washington took to the field to suppress the Whiskey Rebellion in western Pennsylvania. Washington assembled a large military force and actually put down the rebellion without firing a shot. He left office with his reputation intact. “First in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen,” said John Marshall, who delivered the eulogy to Washington in the House of Representatives.

As for Grant, it is an armchair pastime among historians to rank presidents, and until recently Grant was always placed near the bottom along with Harding and Buchanan. Given the fact that during his lifetime Grant was the most popular man in the country—1.5 million people lined Broadway to watch his funeral procession—why has his reputation been so tarnished?

Basically, it was what he stood for. As president, Grant fought for Black equality. Frederick Douglass once said, “Grant was the last of the radicals.” So long as Grant was president, he kept the Army in the South to ensure that the rights of former slaves were protected. But for the next three generations that view of racial equality was rejected. We lived in a world of segregation, and Grant’s reputation suffered accordingly.

To put that in personal terms, look around. We have no Black classmates. There were none in the class of 1952 or 1953 or 1954 or 1955. For three generations Grant was swimming upstream. The histories of the Civil War and Reconstruction were written by white segregationists, and Grant’s reputation suffered accordingly.

Let me briefly mention some of Grant’s accomplishments as president, in addition to making peace on the Great Plains and protecting the rights of African Americans. It was Grant who established the first Civil Service Commission, who established the national park system with the founding of Yellowstone in 1872, and who tamped down efforts to bring religion into public schools.

But even more important were the economic accomplishments of the Grant administration. The fact is, Grant rescued the economy after the Civil War. He weaned the country from the greenback inflation lingering from printing too much money during the war,

returned the nation to the gold standard, and established a sound currency that facilitated the nation's growth for the remainder of the nineteenth century.

I should add that Grant also provided stability. After eight years of war and upheaval he steadied the nation and hastened the return to normalcy. His calming presence in the White House reassured the country during the Hayes-Tilden election dispute in 1876. The electoral vote of three states—South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana—was in doubt. Grant stepped in, devised a 15-man commission composed of five congressmen, five senators, and five Supreme Court justices to decide the issue, and there was never any question of its legitimacy.

Eisenhower's presidency has been similarly underrated. Remember those bumper stickers in 1956. "Ben Hogan for president. If we are going to have a golfer, let's have a good one." Or the comment that Ike had a thirty-six hole workweek.

Eisenhower was a progressive conservative. In the United States today, that is a contradiction in terms. On fiscal matters Ike was militantly conservative. He insisted on a balanced budget and resisted deficit spending.

But he also recognized that government had a positive role to play. He firmly believed that "traditional American values" included progress and change.

When the economy turned down after the Korean War, Eisenhower launched the Interstate Highway Program. The program not only put people to work, but revolutionized the transportation system in the United States. The costs of the interstate system exceeded the total expenditures of the New Deal from 1933 to 1941. And the entire program was funded without impacting the Federal budget by simply increasing the tax on gasoline.

Eisenhower, together with Canada, constructed the St. Lawrence Seaway, a mammoth public works project opening the Great Lakes to ocean traffic.

Eisenhower expanded the Social Security system, adding 11 million self-employed persons and another five million domestics to the rolls. And he raised the minimum wage by 25%.

Eisenhower also took on Senator Joseph McCarthy, and restored the nation's sanity after a decade of anti-Communist hysteria. He orchestrated the Army-McCarthy hearings that most of us watched in Whig-Clio, and at a crucial point during the hearings issued one of the most far-reaching executive orders ever promulgated prohibiting government employees from testifying before Congress. But he handled all of this indirectly and behind the scenes. (Fred Greenstein, *The Hidden Hand President*.)

Eisenhower's appointments to the Federal judiciary led the way to racial equality in the United States. And it was not just Earl Warren and William Brennan to the Supreme Court, but the host of liberal Republican judges that Ike appointed to the 5th Circuit in the South who were in the vanguard of the civil rights struggle.

Perhaps Eisenhower's most notable judicial appointment was that of John Marshall Harlan II to the Supreme Court, just after the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Harlan was the grandson of the great Justice John Marshall Harlan—who had been the only dissenter in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the infamous segregation case (“separate but equal”) in 1896. By naming Harlan to the Supreme Court, Eisenhower was sending a message to the South that was unmistakable.

Grant and Eisenhower made mistakes. In Grant's case it involved excessive loyalty to friends, some of whom were proved corrupt. In Eisenhower's case, it involved an excessive concern for Communist political penetration and a willingness to listen too uncritically to the CIA. The coups in Guatemala and Iran trace to that, as does the U-2 flight of Francis Gary Powers on the eve of the Paris Summit in 1959.

Finally, let me say that all three, Washington, Grant, and Eisenhower, had an almost perfect command of the English language, and Grant and Eisenhower proved to be great writers. Grant's memoirs, written as he was dying of cancer, are generally considered the finest military memoirs ever written, and Eisenhower's *Crusade in Europe*, which he wrote without editorial help, is easily the best memoir to emerge from World War II.

Finally, let me say this has been a great treat for me to speak to classmates after sixty years. I think for all of us Princeton was an experience we will never forget. I learned that the week has seven days. Shortly after we arrived in 1950, I decided that of the 750 people in our class, 749 were smarter than I was. The only way I was going to survive was to work harder than they. So I started working on Saturdays and Sundays. It's a habit I have continued. I get up every morning, seven days a week, at 5:30, get to my desk at 7:30, and work until 12:30. Hopefully, that will allow me to finish my next book, which is on the Liberation of Paris in 1944.