

Rating the Presidents — and Obama

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Special Report

Paul Kengor *February 20, 2017, 12:04 am*

C-SPAN's latest rankings of our presidents sure has spoiled this year's Presidents Day.

I've been getting emails from bewildered colleagues asking about a survey of presidential scholars that determined that Barack Obama is the 12th best president in the history of the United States, putting him near the top quartile of our presidents. How can this be? I, too, was mystified, especially given that I participated in the survey.

The survey was conducted by the impeccably fair C-SPAN. Few sources do their job like C-SPAN does. If you want truly unfiltered news, C-SPAN is unrivaled for its ability to simply place a camera in a room and let reality speak for itself.

When it comes to surveys of presidents, C-SPAN likewise has no peer. I remember the nauseating presidential surveys in the 1980s and 1990s. They were mere measurements of the liberalism of the academy — that is, liberal historians and liberal political scientists expressing their liberalism by their liberal rankings of presidents. It was a farce.

C-SPAN, fortunately, has endeavored to provide a valuable corrective. In 2000, 2009, and 2017, C-SPAN set out to do its own survey and has indeed assembled a more rounded group of scholars. (I was among those surveyed for the 2009 ranking, as well.) To be sure, most (if not the vast majority) of the scholars surveyed are clearly on the left, but there are a decent number of conservatives: By my estimate, over a dozen, possibly as many as 20. Of course,

that's still far out of proportion with the population at large, where self-identified conservatives have outnumbered liberals for decades (usually in the range of 35-40 percent self-identified conservatives vs. 20-25 percent self-identified liberals). C-SPAN needs to do better next time around. A field of 10-20 conservatives among 91 participants isn't good, albeit better than the nonsense we used to see in biased surveys.

Likewise befitting C-SPAN's fairness, the ranking criteria for the presidents are commendably nonpartisan. The criteria are obviously intended to remove ideology from those doing the judging. Here are the 10 criteria:

For each of the 10 criteria, a president received a score ranging from one ("not effective") to 10 ("very effective"). I'd like readers to pause and look at those criteria carefully. Imagine if you were doing the judging.

Given these criteria — again, essentially non-ideological criteria — I personally had no choice but to score very highly presidents like FDR and Woodrow Wilson and LBJ, all of whose presidencies I either did not approve of or outright despised or found destructive. But facts are facts: These presidents were extremely effective. No, I personally didn't like how they were effective, but they were effective nonetheless. Did Wilson have an agenda and vision and get it through? Oh, yes. You bet he did. So did FDR and LBJ.

And yet, those same criteria prompted me to rank Washington, Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, Reagan, and Eisenhower very high. I will not here share exactly how I tallied each, but I will say that those presidents in my top 10 were very similar to those in the overall top 10. Here's the top 10 that C-SPAN compiled:

1. Abraham Lincoln
2. Washington
3. FDR
4. Teddy Roosevelt
5. Eisenhower
6. Truman
7. Jefferson
8. Kennedy
9. Reagan
10. LBJ

Following at 11 and 12, respectively, were Woodrow Wilson and Obama. (For the record, I gave Kennedy a decent rating, but to place him in the top 10, and ahead of Reagan, is just plain stupid. Gee, the guy wasn't even president three full years.)

But what about Barack Obama at 12? I'll say this as nicely and professionally as I can: I find this utterly perplexing. Do the exercise yourself. Go through those 10 categories. Ascribe Obama a score of 1 to 10, and do so relative to other presidents you've ranked. Where would you give Obama a 10? How many (if any) scores above a 5 would you give Obama? For that matter, how would you not score Reagan so much higher than Obama? Yes, Reagan finished with an overall ranking of nine, which is better than Obama, but his total composite score wasn't much higher than Obama's.

Seriously, are even liberals that happy with the Obama presidency? Try to remove your ideological lens, whether left or right, and assess these questions:

What did Barack Obama accomplish? What is the Obama legacy? What was the Obama vision/agenda and (more important, since we're measuring effectiveness) how successful was he in implementing it? In 2012, at the Democratic National Convention, Obama's promoters could do no better than come up with silly placards about how Obama "got Osama" and "saved GM." Unlike the vast majority of two-term presidents, Obama's re-election

numbers were much worse. In fact, Barack Obama was the first president ever re-elected with fewer popular votes, fewer Electoral College votes, a lower percentage and percentage margin of victory, and winning fewer states. He never had a sustained period of high favorability. He couldn't elect a successor to carry on his legacy. To the contrary, Donald Trump plans to repudiate any Obama legacy.

Where is the list of signature domestic achievements by Obama? Obamacare maybe? It was a disaster from the roll-out, and it's going to be repealed and replaced.

What were Obama's defining moments of crisis leadership? Where's his Cuban Missile Crisis? Did he even have a crisis to lead? How about Benghazi as a candidate?

Where was Barack Obama's Camp David? What did he do for the Middle East, for Arab-Israeli relations, for relations with Russia, the EU, NATO, the G-20? Where's his NAFTA? Where's his summit with the Russian leadership? Where's his missile-reduction treaty? Where's his chemical weapons ban?

As for Obama's economic record, it was colossally bad. My economist colleague Mark Hendrickson calls it a "shocking historically weak economic performance," as many others have shown. During the eight years of Barack Obama's presidency, the average annual real GDP growth was 1.5 percent, notes Hendrickson, "the weakest economic performance of any post-WWII president, and the fourth worst ever." And to try to still blame that failure on George W. Bush after eight years is ludicrous. Obama's GDP growth in 2016 (eight years after Bush) was a terrible 1.6 percent.

Bush's economy grew better than that, and he inherited a recession and was hit with 9/11 his first year, which devastated the economy. In fact, not only was George W. Bush's economic-growth rate better than Obama's, but so was Jimmy Carter's. Yes, Carter — typically upheld as the dubious yardstick of economic incompetence — actually had more than double Obama's GDP growth (3.3 percent)!

Any deficit reduction under Obama (after he exploded the deficit to unprecedented record highs in the first two years of the Pelosi-Reid Congress) is attributable in large part to the Republican Congress that liberals excoriated for spending cuts (and now want to take responsibility for the subsequent deficit reduction). The Obama debt exploded way worse than the debt under Reagan and George W. Bush.

So, where would you score Obama on "economic management"? I can't imagine anything beyond a 3.

In what way was Obama a master at public persuasion? What new constituencies did he generate? Where are the Obama Republicans, akin to the Reagan Democrats? How were his relations with Congress? Did you observe stellar "administrative skills" in Obama? His notorious lack of meetings with his NSC and intelligence and security staffs were breathtaking in their lack of any administration. As I reported here in 2012, Obama attended only 44 percent of his Daily Briefs in the first 1,225 days of his administration. For 2012, he attended a little over a third. This was totally contrary to Bush and other predecessors. Reagan and Ike both had hands-off leadership styles, but at least they attended meetings.

Who gave him a 10 for that category?

And if you're extolling Obama's attempted fundamental transformation of America's public-school toilets via executive order, or his illuminating the White House in rainbow colors to celebrate the Supreme Court's *Obergefell* decision, or his suing the Little Sisters of the Poor via the HHS Mandate, sorry, but those are not among the categories for evaluation.

I want to see the case made by the guy or gal who thinks that Barack Obama merits being listed near the top 10 presidents in history. Actually, some must have rated him in the top 5, because I guarantee my score for Obama (low as it was) surely dropped him a few pegs.

In short, I'm stunned. Based on the criteria we were given for ranking these presidents, I cannot conceive how Obama could possibly score well. I don't see how Bill Clinton didn't rate higher than Obama.

As noted, there were some conservatives on C-SPAN's list. I'm wondering if the conservatives didn't send in their surveys. The liberal historians must have gone bonkers in merrily giving Obama the highest scores in every category. But forget about that. This shouldn't be a liberal-conservative thing. That's the point. Literally half of my top 10 or 12 were Democrats, and I'm no Democrat.

Clearly, the liberal scholars were not able to separate their partisanship when it came to objectively judging Obama. There's no way that Barack Obama should rate the 12th-best president in U.S. history. Not a chance.