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Book Review of George Washington and the Origins of the American Presidency

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reviewed. How can Landy and Milkis not cite Bailey, Murray and Blessing, Homes and Elder, Kennon and Rice, Maranell and Dodder, Simonton, and others who have contributed both conceptually and empirically to this concept? This prior work may be worthy of contempt but how can it be ignored? Surely they should critique the criteria other scholars have used for greatness, ranging from the first Schlesinger poll in 1948 based singly on performance in office, to later judgments such as Bailey's 43 "yardsticks." Simonton provides six indicators, including years in office and intelligence, and claims to explain 84 percent of the variance in the greatness rankings. Some question these studies, but the fact that so many authors identify the same great presidents even when using very different criteria suggests at least some validity to these rankings.

Landy and Milkis think greatness is on the decline, but according to historians' polls, twentieth-century presidents average higher rankings than nineteenth-century presidents. Standardized greatness scores from nine different rankings put Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson ahead of Jackson, so it is hard to see how the five in *Presidential Greatness* were chosen. That same ranking has Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson in the top group, with only John Adams and Polk rounding out the top 12. But among the ten worst presidents, only Harding, Coolidge, and Nixon appear versus the remaining nine from the nineteenth century (Simonton, 1978). Thus, twentieth-century presidents fare better in these previous rankings.

Presidential Greatness is a very uneven book and not my cup of tea. Although it is brilliantly written, it is bereft of analysis or of systematic, let alone quantitative, comparison. This volume will have limited interest to political rhetoric scholars since it utilizes speechmaking minimally, not even as agenda setting, a topic about which substantial contributions by political scientists have appeared. Nor is there any content analysis of presidential messages for comparative purposes. The messages are used largely for illustration, with the authors citing particular passages that confirm their arguments. Landy and Milkis call the most fundamental issues in greatness the roles of public opinion, a free press, interbranch relations, and the line between private morality and public authority. But we are left to ask why these criteria and not others? Although this an important book, it also leaves much to be desired.

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George Washington and the Origins of the American Presidency. Edited by Mark J. Rozell, William D. Pederson, and Frank J. Williams. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000; pp. vi + 210. \$65.00.

It is hard to overstate the importance of George Washington in the inventing and initial operation of the American presidency. While not an active participant in the

debates at the Constitutional Convention, his very presence at that convention allowed the framers to invent an executive institution with greater independent power than would otherwise have been possible. So trusted was he that the inventors of the presidency felt comfortable institutionalizing a one-person executive with real, if limited, powers. Recall that the Articles of Confederation, which the Constitution replaced, had no executive officer at all.

Today, it is hard to distinguish Washington the man from Washington the monument. So iconized is Washington that he is a myth, a statue, and a symbol, stripped of flesh and bones, of his humanity and his essence. And yet, Washington was a man with deep insecurities, a hunger for power and station, and a burning need to be and be seen as successful. Quirky in personal habits and devoid of many of the more gregarious aspects of personality so important to a politician in a democratic culture, one cannot help but be amazed that he was such a successful and, yes, monumental figure in the world of politics.

This edited book, the result of a 1998 conference on the Washington legacy held at Louisiana State University in Shreveport, attempts to help us understand the impact of George Washington on the operation of this new political office, the presidency. Conscious that every act, every step could set a powerful precedent, Washington was well aware that even his smallest act could have significance.

In general the authors give Washington high marks for the precedents he set. There is for the most part a reverential quality to the chapters in this book. While not comprehensive in its scope, this work does provide several interesting and important glimpses into the Washington presidency and its impact. The chapters are uniformly sound, and while the book does not necessarily break new ground, the reader is given a sense of many of the key controversies of the day and how Washington tried to resolve these conflicts. Noteworthy is the attention paid (the last three chapters) to Washington's dealings with the press. These chapters provide insights into both Washington's character and his philosophy of governing a democratic republic.

This work would have benefited from a conclusion that brought the disparate strands together into a more comprehensive whole. Yet there is much to recommend this book. It again allows us to see the political operations of one of the nation's least political master politicians. Could Washington's unique style of leadership be replicated, or was he a man for one season? It is hard to imagine any modern president taking the Washington model off the shelf, dusting it off, and taking it for a political test spin. The essays in this book show Washington to be a different kind of politician and a different kind of man. It is easy to see why he has become such a monumental figure.

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