



From the Office of Secretary of State

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Honoring all presidents on President's Day

Some think President's Day is to honor George Washington, our first president. Others say the day celebrates Lincoln's Birthday on February 12. Some argue for both.

George Washington's birthday on February 22 was indeed a federal holiday for a while. Abraham Lincoln's birthday on February 12 never was a federal holiday on its own.

Some four decades ago Congress created a series of Monday federal holidays, and the February one became President's Day, essentially abandoning Washington's birthday. So the question becomes, who are we really honoring?

There are two answers. First, we are honoring the office, the highest office in the land regardless of who may have occupied it. Secondly, we are honoring the office holders, but probably not in equal proportion.

The cable channel C-Span conducted a survey in 2000 and in 2008 of the presidents based on the perceptions of 65 historians and professional observers. The survey was based on a list of 10 leadership qualities including: relations with Congress, public persuasion and moral authority.

In both surveys, the top nine were the same: Lincoln, Washington, Franklin Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, Thomas Jefferson, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Woodrow Wilson. Ronald Reagan and Lyndon B. Johnson were the next two on the list.

By comparison the worst five were: Warren G. Harding, William Henry Harrison, Franklin D. Pierce, Andrew Johnson and James Buchanan. Those names certainly don't carry as much recognition or weight in our presidential history.

None of these men, not even those in the top ten, were perfect leaders. They were flawed, like the rest of us. Washington was highly criticized at the end of his second term for a treaty with Great Britain that was intended to prevent a second war, but was highly unpopular.

Lincoln had to guide the nation through civil war, and made his own mistakes with poor generals and at times, poor strategy.

Franklin Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman faced similar challenges for ending the Pacific and Atlantic wars of World War II. They were both criticized for aspects of their leadership.

While our presidency may not have always been occupied by the most able, most experienced and most visionary, the election of our presidents has been a profound process – representing the will of the people as expressed through the Electoral College in the greatest and the oldest representative democracy in the world. By and large, our presidents have helped us remain economically and militarily strong and our people free.

So, pick your favorite presidents and honor them on President's Day. But, also give thanks that we have a presidency, our highest office, created by a Constitution (some 225 years old) which provides great powers of governance like that of commander in chief and chief executive.

Remember also that well-devised systems have been put into place to ensure that our presidents operate with restraint. That includes our Constitution which lays out the equal but shared separation of power among the executive, judicial and legislative branches, the power of the purse and power to declare war granted to Congress, by amendment with the establishment of a two-term limit presidency and by the will of the people who elect a president every four years through the electoral process.

So while we celebrate President's Day in the short term on February 18, if you genuinely want to honor our presidents long-term, adopt these resolutions: be active in community leadership, support solid candidates with qualities of integrity and leadership and last, but not least, remember to vote in every election.

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