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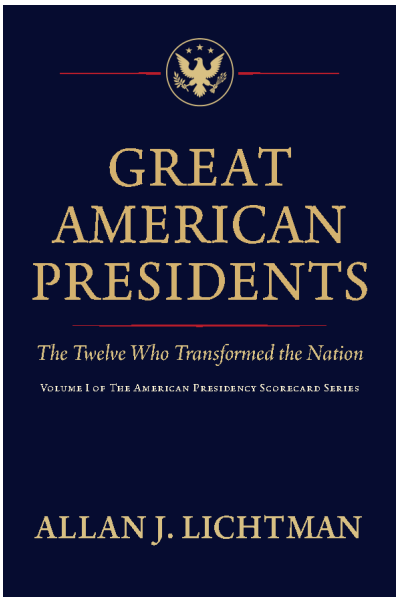
GREAT AMERICAN PRESIDENTS

The Twelve Who Transformed the Nation

by Allan J. Lichtman

Volume I of The American Presidency Scorecard Series



THE BOOK

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From Predicting Presidents to Grading Them

For four decades, Allan J. Lichtman has been the historian who calls presidential elections before the votes are counted — never more famously than in 2016, when he was among the very few who called Donald Trump. Now he turns the same machinery around: from forecasting who wins the office to judging what they did with it.

In GREAT AMERICAN PRESIDENTS: THE TWELVE WHO TRANSFORMED THE NATION, he introduces the TEN KEYS TO PRESIDENTIAL GREATNESS, a framework that sets aside charisma, likability, and party loyalty. “Greatness is not a personality trait or a popularity contest,” he writes, “but a form of historical performance.”

The results unsettle readers across the spectrum. Washington slips out of the top tier. Lyndon Johnson vaults past the Founders. Kennedy finishes last among the greats. And no president since Reagan makes the list at all.

AVAILABLE FOR INTERVIEW: Lichtman is based in the Washington, D.C. area and available for broadcast, podcast, print, and virtual interviews.

“Drawing on decades of research, Allan Lichtman sheds new light on how America’s greatest presidents recognized — and seized — the power needed to shape their times. Filled with vivid anecdotes and little-known history, this is both an important and thoroughly engaging read.”

—BOB SCHIEFFER, longtime CBS News correspondent, anchor, and moderator of Face the Nation

About the Book

GREAT AMERICAN PRESIDENTS is a landmark reassessment of presidential leadership built on decades of research and a long-acclaimed lecture series. Lichtman examines the lives, achievements, and legacies of the twelve presidents his framework identifies as historically great: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Ronald Reagan.

Through richly detailed narratives and little-known anecdotes, Lichtman presents these men as both extraordinary leaders and deeply complicated human beings. Readers move through the founding era, westward expansion, the struggle over slavery, the Great Depression, two world wars, and the Cold War — each seen through the decisions made in the Oval Office and the character of the person making them.

Each profile illuminates not only the public acts that defined a presidency but the private backgrounds, formative failures, and guiding convictions behind them. Despite wildly different origins and styles, the great presidents shared three things: relentless ambition, an instinctive connection to the American people, and a core of principle they would not trade away.

The book does more than recount history. It grades it — forcing a question the country is asking with new urgency: what does greatness in the presidency actually require, and can the office still produce it?

Loglines

- Twelve presidents who shaped America — Allan J. Lichtman reveals the leadership, humanity, and lasting legacies behind the nation's most pivotal presidencies.
- From Washington to Reagan, the historian famous for predicting presidents debuts a rigorous new system for grading them.
- The "Nostradamus" of American elections turns his framework on history itself — and finds that presidential greatness has been dead for nearly forty years.

Seven Reasons to Cover This Book

1. **A brand-new framework, not another ranking.** The Ten Keys give journalists and readers a transparent, reproducible method — not a historian's pronouncement from on high.
2. **The author is a proven media draw.** Lichtman is among the most-booked historians in America and has an established national audience of his own.
3. **The findings make news.** Washington demoted, LBJ elevated, Kennedy last, Polk in the top twelve — each is a story on its own.
4. **It is deliberately nonpartisan.** Reagan and FDR both make the list, measured by identical criteria. The system rewards and punishes both parties.
5. **It speaks directly to this political moment.** Lichtman's argument about why greatness has become structurally impossible lands in the middle of a national argument about the presidency itself.
6. **The portraits are human, not hagiographic.** Jefferson and Sally Hemings, Lincoln and habeas corpus, Johnson and Vietnam — Lichtman refuses to look away. Drawn from a celebrated lecture series, the book is built for classrooms and book clubs.
7. **It launches a series.** This is Volume I of The American Presidency Scorecard Series; Lichtman is already at work on the companion volume on the worst presidents.

The Ten Keys to Presidential Greatness

The framework measures consequence, not popularity. A president "turns" a key or fails to; the total determines where he lands.

- **Crisis Management:** Performance when the nation's survival or stability is genuinely at stake.
- **Transformation:** Whether the president permanently changed the country's direction or scale.
- **Moral Vision:** Expanding the circle of justice, often at real political cost.
- **Hidden Hand Leadership:** Governing effectively behind the scenes without appearing heavy-handed.
- **Stewardship:** Stretching executive authority to meet a moment the Constitution never anticipated.
- **Realignment:** Reordering the nation's political and social architecture for a generation.
- **Institution Building:** Structures that outlive the administration: Social Security, NATO, the Voting Rights Act.
- **Narrative Control:** Explaining the country to itself and carrying public opinion along.
- **Diplomatic Pivots:** Decisive redirection of America's posture in the world.
- **Adaptability:** Whether the president learned, adjusted, and grew in office.

The Scorecard Shocks

The Washington Anomaly

Revered as the "Indispensable Man," Washington lands in a tie for fifth (6.5 Keys), penalized for leaving the legislative heavy lifting to Congress rather than moving the machinery of the state himself.

The LBJ Surprise

Defined in popular memory by Vietnam, Johnson finishes third overall (8.0 Keys) — ahead of Washington, Jefferson, and Theodore Roosevelt. The scorecard rewards the "Legislative Leviathan" behind the Great Society, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, Medicare, and Medicaid. His "extraordinary depth and breadth of domestic accomplishment," Lichtman argues, "merits the designation as a great president, despite the tragedy of Vietnam."

The JFK Tragedy

Kennedy ranks last among the greats (4.5 Keys) in what Lichtman calls a "Tragedy of Potential" — he turned the Crisis Key during the Cuban Missile Crisis but never converted vision into law before his death.

The Polk Case

Largely forgotten today, Polk makes the twelve at eleventh. "Although a one-term president, a racist, and an imperialist, James K. Polk transformed the nation," Lichtman says. "He basically doubled the size of the continental United States." At the top of the list: Franklin D. Roosevelt first, Abraham Lincoln second.

The Post-Reagan Plateau — and Trump at the Bottom

No president since Reagan qualifies, and Lichtman argues the drought is structural: "In the last several decades, systemic factors have arisen that make presidential greatness virtually impossible." He points to polarization that forecloses compromise, social media's widening of partisan chasms, and the complexity of a multipolar world.

The book's preliminary ranking of presidents since Reagan places Donald Trump at the very bottom. "We have never seen a president who so fundamentally threatens American democracy," Lichtman says. Trump turns the Transformation key — he has broadened the office into a far more authoritarian one — but fails against every criterion that rewards greatness in leaders of both parties.

About the Author

Allan J. Lichtman

Photo available in high resolution on request.

Dr. Allan J. Lichtman is Distinguished Professor of History at American University in Washington, D.C., where he has taught since 1973. He is one of the nation's most authoritative voices on the American presidency and political history.

He is best known for developing "The Keys to the White House," the election prediction system he built with geophysicist Vladimir Keilis-Borok. Grounded in historical patterns and the strength of the incumbent party rather than transient polling, it called the winner of nearly every presidential election from 1984 through 2020 — including Donald Trump's 2016 upset, which almost no forecaster saw coming. The streak ended in 2024.

Lichtman is the author of numerous influential and award-winning books. WHITE PROTESTANT NATION: THE RISE OF THE AMERICAN CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT, his history of modern conservatism, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in Nonfiction. FDR AND THE JEWS, co-authored with Richard Breitman, won the National Jewish Book Award in American Jewish History and was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. THE CASE FOR IMPEACHMENT was called the most important book of the year by major outlets on release, and THE EMBATTLED VOTE IN AMERICA is a sweeping history of voting rights.

A lifelong advocate for civil rights, Lichtman has served as an expert witness in more than 110 civil rights and voting rights cases across the United States.

He is a frequent commentator for CNN, MSNBC, and FOX News, and reaches a global audience through his YouTube channel and live stream, Lichtman Live. He graduated magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Brandeis University and earned his Ph.D. in history from Harvard as a Graduate Prize Fellow. He is also a former steeplechase champion — winner of the 3,000-meter title at the USATF Masters Outdoor Championships — and a Senior Olympian in track. He lives in the Washington, D.C. area.

Online

- YouTube: youtube.com/@AllanLichtmanYouTube
- Facebook: facebook.com/AllanJ.Lichtman

Recent Media

- Raw Story — feature interview, August 25, 2026
- On Balance with Leland Vittert, NewsNation — live interview
- The John Fugelsang Show — podcast interview
- On Democracy with FP Wellman — interview
- The Mark Thompson Show — interview, September 16, 2026

Interview Angles

- **THE NEW STANDARD.** How the Ten Keys work, why they reshuffle the familiar rankings, and what changes when greatness is measured as performance rather than popularity.
- **THE DEATH OF PRESIDENTIAL GREATNESS.** Why no president since Reagan qualifies, and why Lichtman believes neither party can produce one under current conditions.
- **FROM PREDICTING TO GRADING.** What four decades of forecasting elections taught Lichtman about judging the people who win them — and where he thinks American democracy goes next.
- **POWER VERSUS VIRTUE.** Whether a deeply flawed man can be a great president; Jefferson and slavery, Lincoln and habeas corpus, Johnson and Vietnam.
- **THE MODERN SCORECARD.** How recent presidents fare under the same criteria, why Trump lands at the bottom, and what the coming midterms mean for the legacies of Roosevelt and Johnson.
- **WHAT THE COUNTRY CAN STILL BE.** Why he wrote a book about greatness in a moment of national gloom — "the needed antidote to the despair that so many Americans seem to be showing right now."

Sample Interview Questions

1. Your framework strips away the varnish of traditional presidential history. Why does your scorecard knock an icon like George Washington out of the top tier while a controversial figure like Lyndon Johnson surges past the Founders?
2. You classify John F. Kennedy's administration as a "Tragedy of Potential" and rank him last among the greats. Which keys did he fail to turn, and why do you argue his legacy is more about style than structural outcome?
3. James K. Polk is largely forgotten today, yet you call him a master of execution. How do you square that effectiveness with an agenda driven by what you describe as a racist war of conquest?
4. You claim no president since Reagan qualifies as great. Why has the executive branch entered what you call the post-Reagan plateau — is it a failure of talent, or have polarization and gridlock made transformational leadership impossible?
5. Can a president be a genuinely bad or deeply flawed person — even an autocrat — and still be a historically great leader by your measure?
6. Your Stewardship key rewards presidents who expand executive authority beyond literal constitutional limits. Are you saying greatness requires bending or breaking institutional rules in a crisis?
7. You mark Lincoln down slightly for suspending habeas corpus — yet he saved the Union. How does your system weigh the survival of democratic institutions against the temporary exercise of near-autocratic power?
8. You spent your career forecasting elections with the 13 Keys to the White House. How did turning that analytical lens backward change your view of where American democracy is heading?
9. Your book asks who sat in the crucible and did not melt. Do our institutions today prepare a leader to survive that heat — or ensure they fail?
10. You're already at work on a companion volume about the worst presidents. Who else joins Donald Trump in that rogues' gallery, and what does the bottom of the list teach us that the top does not?

Advance Praise

"Drawing on decades of research, Allan Lichtman sheds new light on how America's greatest presidents recognized — and seized — the power needed to shape their times. Filled with vivid anecdotes and little-known history, this is both an important and thoroughly engaging read."

—Bob Schieffer, longtime CBS News correspondent, anchor, and moderator of Face the Nation

"An absorbing, illuminating study… clear-eyed appraisals that eschew partisanship, hagiography, and knee-jerk outrage. His deftly argued rankings invite disagreement but always reward readers with insight, knowledge, and a spirit of common purpose."

—Publishers Weekly / BookLife

"Thoughtful, provocative, and timely."
.**—Booklist**

"No one knows presidents like Allan Lichtman. He not only has successfully predicted who gets elected time and time again, he lets you know who actually made a difference and how."

—Alan Wheat, former U.S. Congressman and youngest-ever member of the House Rules Committee

"A thoughtful and compelling study of presidents who wielded power decisively and left behind a transformed country."

—Mark Updegrove, Chairman & CEO, LBJ Foundation, and author of Incomparable Grace: JFK in the Presidency

"A welcome step in an ongoing effort to evaluate the nation's presidents on a comparative scale and according to defined criteria. People may differ with Lichtman on this president or that, but they will know how and why he came out where he did."

—Alvin S. Felzenberg, Ph.D., author of The Leaders We Deserved and a Few We Didn't

"Rich political insights that make it essential fodder for American history classrooms and book club debates. Librarians will find it a powerful jumping-off point for discussions on the evolving nature of American leadership."

—Midwest Book Review

"A sweeping, morally urgent portrait of the presidency, written with elegance, clarity, and conviction."

—Michael Rosario-Muriel, Loyola University Maryland

About Bancroft Press

Founded in 1992 and now based in Los Angeles, Bancroft Press has been a top-ten independent publisher for more than three decades and has been profiled by Publishers Weekly. It publishes four to six books a year across memoir, mystery, young adult fiction, history, and biography.

- Publisher of four Pulitzer Prize winners: Alice Steinbach, Stephen Hunter, Elizabeth McGowan, and Mark S. Johnson
- The Missing Kennedy, a New York Times ebook bestseller, was on the cover of People on publication in 2015
- Bancroft titles have earned numerous starred reviews and awards; frontlist and backlist books are frequently optioned or purchased by Hollywood producers

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