Since everybody else is rating presidents, we thought we’d give it a shot too, since we’ve covered many of them, especially those who served in the last century.

The root of the word president, eminent historian Steve Hayward reminds us, is preside. Thus, we looked at the economies and foreign policies that these leaders presided over as well as their Supreme Court picks. Our greatest concern, taking those considerations down in order, were whether the presidents meddled in the economy, could distinguish friends and foes abroad, and chose justices and judges guided by the U. S. Constitution.

The top five were fairly easy to choose, especially the first. After that, we looked for saving graces, so the numbers merely indicate their order of appearance.

1. Ronald Reagan—Taxes down, inflation down, unemployment down, new businesses started up, Berlin Wall down. Also, under President Reagan, the growth in federal regulations was at a relative standstill, even if existing onerous rules remained in place. Maybe this was because he put his vice-president, George H. W. Bush, in charge of his deregulation task force. His Supreme Court picks were more of a mixed bag, for a variety of reasons, partially because he could not get the best of these—Robert Bork—through a highly partisan, some would say viciously so, Senate.

2. Ronald Reagan’s favorite president, Calvin Coolidge, who cut taxes and government spending and refused to
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Dear Reader,

Although it might seem to be the height of hubris to do so, after covering so many academic rankings of presidents, we decided to offer our own. How you rate the presidents, of course, depends on what you rate them on.

We reveal our own criteria quite clearly—freedom at home and abroad. They rarely do. Yet and still, when you read their top 10 lists, the expansion of government programs and the introduction of new ones is clearly their gold standard. Thus, although they may dress up their rosters of all-time greats by including Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln, their faves are usually both Roosevelts and Woodrow Wilson.

We strive for clarity in all that we do. The same cannot be said of those we cover. Nevertheless, we consider it our mission to unravel their opacity. Why do we do it? For you.

All the best,

Mal Kline,
Executive Director
grant diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union.

3. Coolidge’s seemingly hapless predecessor, Warren G. Harding. Although generations of schoolchildren have only heard of him in connection with the Teapot Dome scandal involving some of his cronies, he did have a few accomplishments: He too cut taxes and government spending in response to the recession that followed World War I and also refused to recognize the Soviet Union. The ensuing growth in the number of new businesses and jobs that go with them help explain why we still refer to the period from 1920-1930 as the Roaring 20s rather than the Harding Depression.

4. President Dwight D. Eisenhower may not have been a supply-sider but he did hold the line on government spending while businesses and employment grew. Also, if he didn’t try to roll back the Soviet bloc, he at least faced down communist expansion: Two words—South Korea. As for judicial appointments, Ike famously admitted that the two biggest mistakes he made as president were both sitting on the Supreme Court. Apart from all of the above, Eisenhower always deserves honorable mention for desegregating the civil service and the District of Columbia.

5. Ronald Reagan liked to bring up John F. Kennedy’s tax cuts when promoting his own. Yet and still, when JFK did cut taxes, he proved once again that when the government takes less out of the economy, the latter grows. Abroad, if his failures in the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam outweigh his success in the Cuban Missile Crisis, all of the above demonstrate an underlying opposition to communism. Finally, he put Whizzer White on the Supreme Court.

6. Teddy Roosevelt was, to put it mildly, a helicopter parent when it came to the economy. His foreign policy could be described as questionable if not bellicose: He didn’t seem to know or care if he needed congressional approval to build the Panama Canal. His heart was in the right place.

7. William Howard Taft largely continued his predecessor’s policies but, unlike him, had more respect for the Constitution and was reluctant to change it.

8. Woodrow Wilson gave us the Federal Reserve, the federal income tax, draft boards, censorship boards and the segregation of both the Civil Service and the District of Columbia for the first time since the Civil War but he wouldn’t recognize the Soviet Union and sent aid to the Mensheviks fighting the Leninist Bolsheviks in
Russia. Maybe when he heard that the former were known as the White Army, he thought it was a racial thing.

9. A man of impeccable character with a record of literally groundbreaking achievement as an engineer, Herbert Hoover failed miserably when he tried to engineer the U.S. economy, but he too would not recognize the Soviet Union.

10. Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s recognition of the Soviet Union was only the beginning of his accommodation of Josef Stalin, the dictator who killed millions of his people as he tried to control every aspect of their lives. FDR’s appeasement of Stalin was in no way impeded by the number of Soviet agents working in the White House and federal agencies. As the late author M. Stanton Evans has noted, “there was sort of an affirmative action program for communists” in the Roosevelt Administration. At home, his myriad of government programs did nothing to alleviate the Depression. We’re still looking for FDR’s saving graces.

11. Harry Truman also turned a blind eye towards Soviet activities in his own administration and applied frequently ham-handed efforts to guide the American economy. For example, he lifted the wage controls in place during World War II when the conflict ended but not the price controls. Nevertheless, HST was the first president to recognize the state of Israel.

12. Lyndon Johnson tried to micromanage the Vietnam War and the Great Society programs he pushed through Congress, leading to a bloody stalemate in the former and riots in America. Nonetheless, he also gave us the Civil Rights Act that effectively ended all federal segregation and only morphed into quotas under

13. Richard Nixon also gave us wage and price controls, the EPA, and runaway entitlement spending. Yet, as journalist Allan Ryskind points out, not one country went communist under
Nixon. His appointments to the Supreme Court were mostly abysmal with one shining exception — William Rehnquist.

14. Gerald Ford fought inflation with Whip Inflation Now (WIN) buttons. Emblematic of his foreign policy, he refused to meet with Soviet dissident Alexandr Solzhenitsyn for fear of offending Soviet leaders. Ford's saving grace was his vetoes.


16. George H. W. Bush raised taxes and government spending. In fact, raising taxes in the middle of a recession helped to exacerbate an already dismal economy. Bush did preside over the break-up of the Soviet Union, although he did his level best to prop it up. His saving grace is still sitting on the Supreme Court — Clarence Thomas.

17. If Bill Clinton didn't give Communist China the keys to the city, it's because he didn't have a set to spare. He gave them just about everything else, including the Panama Canal. His Supreme Court justices take a dim view of the freedom to choose just about everything except an abortion. Clinton's saving grace was his ability to read and understand election returns: After Republicans took control of Congress, he refrained from meddling in the economy, for the most part.

Deaths by Communism in the 20th Century

U.S.S.R: 20 million deaths
China: 65 million deaths
Vietnam: 1 million deaths
North Korea: 2 million deaths
Cambodia: 2 million deaths
Eastern Europe: 1 million deaths
Latin America, Africa, and Afghanistan: 3.4 million deaths
Total: nearly 100 million deaths

Source: Black Book of Communism

Source: Tax Foundation
On March 30, 1981, at 2:25 p.m., President Ronald Reagan was leaving the Washington Hilton through a side door after speaking to a union group. Outside was a gaggle of staff, secret service, reporters, and bystanders, including one determined to end Ronald Reagan’s life at that moment.

As the president headed toward the car, a reporter barked out a question. With a smile, Reagan raised his left arm to deflect it. But he could not deflect what was about to fly in his direction. A few feet from the safety of the backseat of his presidential limo, Reagan heard what sounded like firecrackers. It was gunshots.

Secret Service agent Jerry Parr thrust Reagan into the car, landing on top of him. “Jerry, get off,” cried Reagan, “I think you’ve broken one of my ribs.” Noticing the frothy blood bubbles emerging through Reagan’s lips, Parr commanded the driver to get to a hospital fast. They reached George Washington University Hospital in minutes.

Only once Reagan was on the table did the doctors determine the terrible extent of the 40th president’s injury. John Hinckley had employed .22 Devastator bullets designed to explode on impact. One of the bullets had ricocheted off the armored car, flattened, and sliced into Reagan’s body through his left armpit—so tiny that surgeons only discovered it after finding a hole in the president’s jacket. The projectile traveled downward, bounced off a rib, punctured a lung, and finally halted in Reagan’s chest, less than an inch from his 70-year-old heart. The president lost a huge amount of blood and proceeded to survive a perilously close call.

Of course, nearly all of this has been reported before. Never reported, however, was the unique reaction of Nancy Reagan. It was shared with me in February 2006 by Louis Evans, the longtime pastor of the National Presbyterian Church, who kept it to himself for 25 years. Knowing my work on Reagan’s religious faith, the aging Evans decided to share the story with me.

The Reagans attended the National Presbyterian Church during their first weeks in Washington. Evans was their new pastor. The day after the assassination attempt, a distraught Nancy was in need of spiritual counseling. She asked Evans to track down Donn Moomaw, who for two decades had been the Reagans’ pastor at the Bel Air Presbyterian Church in California.

Evans picked up Moomaw at the airport and brought him to the White House, where they were greeted by Mrs. Reagan in a room that included a small group of close friends: Frank Sinatra and his wife, the Rev. Billy Graham, and a Los Angeles businessman, the name of whom escaped Evans.

Nancy began by uttering words that shocked her friends. “I’m really struggling with a feeling of failed responsibility,” she confided. “I usually stand at Ronnie’s left side. And that’s where he took the bullet.”

Yes, Nancy had deep regrets: If only she had been next to Ronald Reagan as he strolled to that limousine, positioned between him and Hinckley’s pistol, she could have taken that bullet for him.

Imagine that. It was a bracing thought to Evans then, and should be to us today.

When Evans informed me of this, I quickly shared it with the late Bill Clark. I was Clark’s biographer at the time. Clark worked literally side-by-side with both Reagans, beginning way back when he was Governor Reagan’s chief of staff in Sacramento. He knew both very well. He was not at all surprised by Evans’ account. In fact, Clark waxed Biblical,
telling me without hesitation: “I agree with the Scripture that she would have laid her life down for her friend—for her best friend. She would have done that for him.”

It was always understood that Nancy was Ronald Reagan’s supreme protector, the one who played bad cop and watched his back as he trusted everyone, regardless of their loyalty. Their son Ron once said that his dad trusted everyone and his mom trusted no one. Reagan left the White House with the highest approval ratings of any president since Eisenhower; she would never win a popularity contest. Nancy received a lot of bad press, not all of it undeserved. Yet, what Evans told me adds a heightened appreciation for Nancy’s commitment to her spouse.

“Ronnie is my hero,” Nancy once glowed. “My life began when I got married. My life began with Ronnie.” She was willing to give that life for him.

Nancy Reagan’s reaction to her husband’s shooting should be seared into our memories of this First Couple, regardless of political differences. It is an inspiring image of one woman’s undying devotion to her life partner—a woman who now at last is reunited with her Ronnie.

Dr. Paul Kengor, a professor of political science and executive director of the Center for Vision & Values at Grove City College, is the author of 11 Principles of a Reagan Conservative - This article originally appeared on the CVV website.
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