

Great Presidents

(48 lectures, 30 minutes/lecture)

Course No. 8100

Taught by [Allan J. Lichtman](#)

American University

Ph.D., Harvard University

It was one of the most audacious decisions in American history.

The founders of the American Republic created a new kind of leadership office. It would be a strong and independent president who commanded the armed forces and led the executive branch of government.

Through this act of genius, the founders put in place the rock of the Republic.

Now you can see how well this worked by examining the lives, the achievements, and the legacies of those generally considered our 12 greatest presidents:

- Washington
- Jefferson
- Jackson
- Polk
- Lincoln
- Theodore Roosevelt
- Wilson
- Franklin Roosevelt
- Truman
- Kennedy
- Johnson
- Reagan.

Your teacher is Professor Allan J. Lichtman. He is a widely published and cited authority on American politics and an award-winning teacher. In these lectures you will see why.

Drawing on a wealth of revealing anecdotes and "inside stories," he sheds new light on how the individual character and historic decisions of each president made a major contribution to shaping our developing nation.

Collectively, they played critical roles in:

- our founding years
- our expansion to the west
- our transformation from a nation of farms into an industrial society
- our struggle over slavery and our Civil War

- our entry into "the war to end all wars" in 1919
- the Great Depression
- World War II
- the revolution in civil and women's rights
- the perils of an atomic age
- the beginning—and the end of the Cold War.

These 12 leaders can be seen as giants of the most powerful elective office in the world. But through Professor Lichtman's eyes we see them as they really were, contradictions and paradoxes included.

- How did early presidents reconcile their slaveholding with their support for democracy and liberty?
- How did Thomas Jefferson, the champion of limited government, magnify presidential powers?
- Why did Abraham Lincoln believe that he could not be reelected in 1864?
- How did Harry Truman, a onetime Missouri dirt farmer who became "accidental president," transform the modern world?
- How did master politician Lyndon Johnson blunder into the Vietnam War?
- Why did Ronald Reagan abandon the Christian conservatives who fought for his election as president?

A New Type of Leader for a New World

When the Framers created it in 1787, the presidency was a radical novelty.

The new president (everybody knew it would be Washington) would be the first head of state in the world whose authority would rest explicitly on the consent of the governed rather than the prerogatives of birth or conquest.

The Framers built well. The presidency and its occupants, Professor Lichtman argues, deserve much of the credit for the governmental stability that we have enjoyed for more than 200 years.

We may take for granted the peaceful transfer of power that has been such a hallmark of life in the United States. But it is something that much of the world still tragically lacks, and we did not gain it by accident.

"Inside Stories" from Our Highest Office

Professor Lichtman shares insights based on his own close study of these 12 leaders, asking:

- Is there a single formula for presidential achievement?
- What made George Washington so uniquely important to the founding of the American Republic?
- How did Andrew Jackson become the first president to be censured by the U.S. Senate?

- James K. Polk was the first president who was not a military hero or an experienced elder statesman. Why was he the right man in the right place at the right time?
- Why did Teddy Roosevelt split his own party to run for president as a third-party candidate?
- How did Woodrow Wilson go from obscure academic to U.S. president in just a few brief years?
- How did FDR's New Deal change the landscape of American politics?
- How much of his promise had John F. Kennedy fulfilled when an assassin cut him down in November 1963?
- How did Ronald Reagan set the stage for the end of the Cold War?

Varying Faces of Leadership, One Thing in Common

Professor Lichtman's lectures reveal 12 leaders of widely differing backgrounds.

They had varying styles, personalities, and beliefs; came from disparate roots; and embraced different approaches to governing.

Each had a powerful vision of America and the American promise.

Some, such as Kennedy and the two Roosevelts, were born to great wealth and privilege. Others, such as Lincoln, Truman, and Johnson, came from middling or even humble circumstances.

These leaders took many roads to reach the presidency. Some were career politicians; some followed very different paths.

Woodrow Wilson was a college professor and administrator.

Besides farming, Truman sold menswear (unsuccessfully).

Ronald Reagan was an actor.

Some, including Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson, would be major historical figures even if they had never become president. Others really had not made their mark on the country until they became president—and then left a significant legacy indeed.

"But," states Professor Lichtman, "they each possessed the qualities that all great presidents seem to share: they had an unsinkable ambition, deep affinity with the American people, and a strong inner core of guiding values and principles."

An Evolving Institution

The formal constitutional authority of the president has changed only modestly since 1787.

But presidential practice, congressional legislation, and judicial interpretations have altered the powers and role of the presidency enormously.

However, it is also important to understand, Professor Lichtman stresses, that there have been new restrictions and new limitations on the exercise of presidential power. Thus the presidency is still changing even while remaining one of the pillars of the American Republic.

Perhaps as a school child you had the misfortune to have our presidents presented as boring, godlike figures in a dry textbook. Now you can see at last the human beings who deserve their mantles of greatness, through narratives as compelling as an historical novel.

Course Lecture Titles

Part 1

1. The American Presidency
2. George Washington—The Rise of a Patriot
3. George Washington—American Liberator
4. George Washington—The First President
5. George Washington—American Icon
6. Thomas Jefferson—The Pen of Freedom
7. Thomas Jefferson—Party Leader
8. Thomas Jefferson—Expansionist President
9. Thomas Jefferson—The Agonies of a Second Term
10. Andrew Jackson—Hero of the New Republic
11. Andrew Jackson—The Conqueror Returns
12. Andrew Jackson—The Warrior President

Part 2

13. Andrew Jackson—A President Defiant
14. James K. Polk—Party Loyalist
15. James K. Polk—The First Dark Horse
16. James K. Polk—Apostle of Manifest Destiny
17. Abraham Lincoln—Frontier Politician
18. Abraham Lincoln—The First Republican President
19. Abraham Lincoln—Wartime Leader
20. Abraham Lincoln—The Martyred President
21. Theodore Roosevelt—Patrician Reformer
22. Theodore Roosevelt—The Cowboy as President
23. Theodore Roosevelt—Progressive Dynamo
24. Theodore Roosevelt—Third—Party Crusader

Part 3

25. Woodrow Wilson—American Visionary
26. Woodrow Wilson—The Professor as Politician
27. Woodrow Wilson—The World Stage
28. Woodrow Wilson—The Fight for Postwar Peace
29. Franklin D. Roosevelt—Provocative Politician
30. Franklin D. Roosevelt—New Dealer
31. Franklin D. Roosevelt—Into the Storm
32. Franklin D. Roosevelt—President in a World at War
33. Harry S Truman—A Struggle for Success
34. Harry S Truman—Needing America's Prayers
35. Harry S Truman—Winning the Peace
36. Harry S Truman—No Accidental President

Part 4

37. John F. Kennedy—The Construction of a Politician
38. John F. Kennedy—The Emergence of a President
39. John F. Kennedy—A President in Crisis
40. John F. Kennedy—His Final Challenges
41. Lyndon Johnson—Politician in the Rough
42. Lyndon Johnson—Professional Politician
43. Lyndon Johnson—Building the Great Society
44. Lyndon Johnson—Acrimony at Home and Abroad
45. Ronald Reagan—"The Gipper"
46. Ronald Reagan—A Conservative in the White House
47. Ronald Reagan—The Acting President
48. Ronald Reagan—The Teflon President