

3-21-2003

White House Inheritors and Climbers: Presidential Kin, Class, and Performance, 1789–2002

Garrison Nelson
University of Vermont

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp>



Part of the [President/Executive Department Commons](#), and the [Social Influence and Political Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nelson, Garrison (2003) "White House Inheritors and Climbers: Presidential Kin, Class, and Performance, 1789–2002," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 18: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol18/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New England Journal of Public Policy* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact scholarworks@umb.edu.



White House Inheritors and Climbers

Presidential Kin, Class, and Performance, 1789–2002

Garrison Nelson

The 2000 presidential election that pitted Republican Texas Governor George W. Bush, the son of a former president against Democratic Vice President Albert Gore, Jr., the son of a former U.S. senator was a dramatic reminder that presidential politics in the United States is not an equal opportunity employer.

In this article retrospective assessments of presidential performance are related to social class and kinship connections for the forty-two presidents from George Washington to George W. Bush. Three separate evaluations of presidential performance were used: the 1989 Murray-Blessing Survey; the widely cited 1996 New York Times poll prepared by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.; and the 200 Federalist Society one prepared by conservative scholars for the Wall Street Journal. The public's assessment was based on polling data from various national polling firms, such as the Gallup, Harris, and Zogby organizations.

The performance data was related to presidential kinship data from the New England Historic Genealogical Society in 1989 and 1996 and research on the social class origins of presidents prepared by Professor Edward Pessen.

The findings indicate that presidents of upper social class origins scored consistently higher on the performance measures than did presidents of lesser origins. However, the number of presidential kinship connections appears to be unrelated to social class and to presidential performance. For both the historians and the American public, class trumps kin in assessing the quality of presidential performance.

“The nature of a society is largely determined by the direction in which talent and ambition flow — by the tilt of the social landscape.”

— Eric Hoffer, 1967

Inheritors and Climbers: Two Paths to Power

To attain the highest rungs along the public ladder in a democratic society requires a fortuitous combination of talent, intelligence, and luck. Many seek those highest rungs; few attain them. Because democracy pays homage, often cynically, to the

Garrison Nelson is professor of political science at the University of Vermont and a past Senior Fellow at the McCormack Institute. This article won the John C. Donovan Award from the New England Political Science Association.

“will of the people,” there is a stated belief that the attainment of high public office is open to all of the nation’s citizens, regardless of race, gender, religion, or social class. But even a passing glance at the portraits of the forty-two American presidents quickly disabuses one of the notion that American politics is truly an equal opportunity employer. The unbroken array of white male faces indicates that race and gender qualifications remain strongly in place.

That the election of Roman Catholic John F. Kennedy to the presidency in 1960 ended the religious barrier to the White House has been substantially refuted by the total Protestant domination of the eight subsequent presidencies. Since Kennedy’s election, fifteen Protestants have been chosen president or vice president including: four Baptists (Nelson Rockefeller, Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Al Gore, Jr.); four Episcopalians (Spiro Agnew, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush); three Methodists (Walter Mondale, George W. Bush, and Richard Cheney); one Disciple of Christ (Lyndon Johnson); one Quaker (Richard Nixon); one Congregationalist (Hubert Humphrey) and one Interdenominational Fundamentalist (J. Danforth Quayle).¹ Protestant America may have been thwarted once but only once. Since Kennedy’s victory over forty years ago, seven non-Protestant nominees — five Roman Catholics (William Miller, Edmund Muskie, Thomas Eagleton, R. Sargent Shriver, and Geraldine Ferraro), one Greek Orthodox (Michael Dukakis) and one Jewish nominee (Joe Lieberman) — have been named by the major parties for either president or vice president. None has been elected. The religious barrier to the White House remains.

But what of social class?

Here we examine the connection between social background and political advancement. The key distinction will be that of social class and the two archetypes will be that of the *inheritor* and the *climber*. Inheritors are born into well-connected families and they are educated at the elite prep schools and private colleges. They marry within their social class and are expected to extend the values of the upper class in which they were born and raised. They seldom need external mentoring because they most often have fathers and other family members who have sufficient knowledge or connections to the rich and powerful to ease them into the rough and tumble of the political world. Moreover, in a cynical age, the sons of the rich are deemed less likely to loot the public treasury. And the presence of high safety nets to catch their falls gives the inheritors an air of grace and confidence that climbers seldom possess. Certainly the stylistic contrast of the 1960s contest between inheritor John Kennedy and climber Richard Nixon makes that point. In summary, linked as they are to previous generations of power and privilege, the inheritors are presumed to be the agents of continuity and security.

Climbers are the politicians of American myth with none more convincing than the rise of Abraham Lincoln. Climbers come from non-connected families. They receive public schooling and most often are graduates of their state’s public colleges and universities. These are the “poor boys who made good.” In ancient Rome, the climbers would be the plebeians who extracted power from the Roman Republic’s aristocratic patricians. These were the “new men.”² Lacking the family connections of the inheritors, climbers have to engage in a lifelong pursuit of external mentors who will teach them to advance themselves within the relatively inhospitable world of American politics. To gain mentors, the young and ambitious climber will seek out those men whose social circumstances were once similar to his own. A mentor whose life matches his own is one who will be deeply familiar with his origins and strivings. He will know the perils and pitfalls of what lies

ahead and, being the good mentor, he will guide the young climber onto the next level. After all, it was the original fatherless Mentor, the wise and loyal guide for Odysseus's son Telemachus who helped the fatherless boy in his prolonged quest to discover his father and to reunite the family. Mentors are the guides, but since they are not family members, they may be (and often are) discarded as one moves further up the political ladder than the mentor can go. William Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar* recounts its cruelty:

'Tis a common proof,
That lowliness is young ambition's ladder,
Whereto the climber-upward turns his face;
But when he once attains the upmost round,
He then unto the ladder turns his back,
Looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees
By which he did ascend.

(2.1.21-27)

Separated as they are from previous generations of power and privilege and often distancing themselves from the succession of mentors who made their ascents possible, the climbers are presumed to be the agents of change. While not truly self-made men, it is the belief that they are that leads climbers to believe that they are the sole architects of their own fate and that often deafens them to the reasonable arguments of those who would advise them upon their arrivals at their destinations. And often it is that deafness that leads the climber to engage in risky behavior that leads to a fall. Unlike the inheritors, no high safety nets rest below the climbers to cushion them safely from the collapse of a career or reputation.

Preserving the Inheritor Tradition

In the remarkable presidential election of 2000, much was made of the fact that Republican nominee George Walker Bush was the first son of a former president to be nominated in his own right since John Quincy Adams in 1828. That Charles Francis Adams, Robert Lincoln, and Robert A. Taft, the respective sons of Presidents John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, and William Howard Taft all failed to be nominated merely enriched the backdrop for the ongoing ambivalent saga of an American dynasty.³

But this was not to be a social class clash between the inheritors and the climbers. The Democratic nominee, Albert Gore, Jr. was also the scion of a prominent political family. Albert Gore, Sr. (D.-Tenn.), served in the Congress for thirty-two years, fourteen in the U.S. House, 1939-1953 and eighteen in the U.S. Senate, 1953-1971. Both Senator Al Gore, Sr. and U.S. Senator Prescott Bush (R.-Conn.), the grandfather of George W. Bush, served for four years on the Senate Public Works Committee (1953-1957).⁴ Both nominees Bush and Gore were American princes. These men are both **inheritors**, albeit Bush would appear to be both an economic and a political inheritor while Gore was only a political one.

Political inheritance is not a new tradition in American public life, even among the presumably more egalitarian Democratic Party. The Democrats succeeded in 1932 through 1944 with the four presidential elections of the inheritor cousin of Republican President Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Democrats tried to continue the inheritor tradition in the post-World War II era by twice nominating in 1952 and 1956 Illinois Governor Adlai E. Stevenson, the grandson and namesake of Adlai E. Stevenson, Grover Cleveland's second vice president (1893-1897) and

William Jennings Bryan's 1900 vice presidential running-mate. Four years later in 1960, the Democrats nominated U.S. Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy of Massachusetts, the son of a former Ambassador to Great Britain, Joseph P. Kennedy, and the grandson and namesake of a U.S. Congressman and Mayor of Boston, John F. Fitzgerald. While Stevenson may have failed and Kennedy succeeded, what was less well known was that both were graduates of the Choate School in Wallingford, Connecticut, and both had begun their collegiate careers at Princeton University. Stevenson graduated from Princeton, while Kennedy took ill and transferred to Harvard, his father's (and grandfather's) alma mater.

Harvard was also the alma mater of both the Presidents Adams and both the Presidents Roosevelt. As it was the alma mater of two failed inheritor aspirants, Charles Francis Adams whose name surfaced throughout the 1872 Republican convention and Robert Todd Lincoln who was named Secretary of War by President Garfield in 1881. The most frequently failed inheritor aspirant was U.S. Senator Robert A. Taft (R.-Ohio), who fell short of the Republican presidential nominations in 1940, 1948, and 1952. Senator Taft, like his father, was an alumnus of Yale. But Yale has done better than either of its two legacy rivals — Harvard and Princeton — in dominating the recent ranks of presidential and vice presidential nominees. Since 1972 when Yale Law-educated R. Sargent Shriver of Maryland replaced Harvard Law-educated U.S. Senator Thomas Eagleton (D.-Mo.) as George McGovern's running mate, every one of the last eight presidential elections has had at least one Yale alumnus on a major party ticket. Four tickets featured Yale Law graduates — Gerald R. Ford, Jr. in 1976, Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996 and Joe Lieberman in 2000. Thanks to the five nominations of the Bush family in 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992 and 2000, Yale undergraduates completed the roster. Harvard may have laid claim to undergraduate Al Gore, Jr. and Business School graduate George Walker Bush, but Yale's undergraduate program admitted both of 2000's vice presidential candidates Joe Lieberman and Dick Cheney.

The Confirmation of the Inheritors: The Kinship Connection

When George Walker Bush was sworn in as the nation's forty-third president in January of 2001, he fulfilled a remarkable destiny. Bush was connected genealogically to no less than sixteen other presidents. The new president shared ancestors with George Washington, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James Garfield, Grover Cleveland, Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and his father George Herbert Walker Bush.⁵ No other president has entered the White House as well connected as George W. Bush. All three of the highest rated presidents in American history, Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Washington, are connected to George W. Bush. It is a very impressive lineage.

During the 1988 presidential campaign, efforts were made to discredit and ridicule President Bush's father through his patrician ancestry and his well-born life style. Ann Richards, then-the Texas State Treasurer, regaled the Democratic convention with jibes about George Bush being born with a "silver foot in his mouth."⁶ The Bush campaign countered with tales of the candidate's fondness for country music, pitching horseshoes, and eating pork rinds, but apparently no damage was done to the presidential candidacy by these assertions of Bush's privileged background.

The episode also helped Ann Richards attain public prominence and to vault her into the Texas Governor's office in 1990. But Ann Richards had offended the Bush family, and in 1994 the Bush family exacted revenge from Governor Richards when George W. defeated her re-election bid.

Six years later, the Bushes took aim at Vice President Al Gore, Jr., the surviving member of the Clinton-Gore team that had so unceremoniously removed George H.W. Bush from the White House in 1992. The Bushes received their revenge yet again. Regardless of lingering doubts concerning the 2000 Florida results in a state presided over by presidential brother and fellow inheritor, Governor Jeb Bush, George W. Bush was sworn in as the nation's forty-third president on January 20, 2001.

And so once again, this nation that publicly extols the "log cabin myth" and tales of "poor boys making good" had placed a son of a former president in the White House. Not only did George W. become the first president's son to win election since the House of Representatives chose John Quincy Adams in 1825, he also was tied for second with the most presidential ancestors in the nation's history — sixteen of forty-one (39.0%).

While the number of Bush's kinship links to presidential predecessors was high, it was not so unusual. Examining the genealogical backgrounds of other presidents, it is clear that they do come from a rather distinctive and narrow pool. Listed below in Table 1 are the presidential kinsmen of each president as determined by Gary Boyd Roberts of the New England Historic Genealogical Society.⁷

One of the more noteworthy features of Table 1 is the fact that six of the last eleven post World War II presidents to serve (54.5%) and six of the ten to be elected (60.0%) were "new men" in that none of the six — Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Reagan, and Clinton — had presidential kinsmen. This is in marked contrast to the pre-1945 era, when only nine of the thirty-one presidents to serve (29.0%) and only seven of the twenty-seven presidents who were elected (25.9%) had no kinship connections. The inclusive quality of modern-day political recruitment has extended the net to other sources of white males. The social barriers of race, religion, and gender may remain constant but presidential family origins appear to have changed dramatically.

There is also a striking difference between the presidential nominations made by the political parties and the family "connectedness" of their nominees. This may be seen in data presented in Table 2.

The post-1854 Republican Party clearly tops the list of the American political parties in the proportion of its successful nominees who are connected to the ancient WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) lineage of the nation's early forebears. In fact, Presidents Hayes, Taft, Coolidge, Hoover, Nixon, Ford, G.H.W. Bush and George W. Bush are all interconnected. The recruitment of WASP presidents appears strongest in those parties that found their successful candidates in the northern states. Surprisingly, the Democratic-Republican Virginia Dynasty of Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe had virtually no impact as a source of presidential descendants.

On this level, the Democratic Party recruits from a different pool of presidential eligibles than does the Republican Party. Removing the seventeen presidential connections of Franklin D. Roosevelt from the Democratic totals drops that party's average to 1.83 (22/12) — well below that of the Republican presidents. Five of the seven Democratic presidents elected in the 20th century had no genealogical ties to other presidents: Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Bill Clinton. The only Republicans elected in the twentieth century who were unconnected were Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan. Neither was born into the Republican party. Ike, a life-long military man was presumed to be an independent and Ronald Reagan spent most of his early adulthood as a pro-Roosevelt Democrat. In this regard, the Democratic party's assertion of its populist heritage in the recruitment of "new men" into the political process receives some validation.

Table 1

Summary of Presidential Kinships, 1789–2003

Number	Kinsmen
17 F.D. Roosevelt	Washington, J.Q. Adams, Van Buren, Taylor, Fillmore, Pierce, Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Cleveland, T. Roosevelt, Taft, Coolidge, Nixon, Ford, G.H.W. Bush, G.W. Bush
16 G.H.W. Bush	Washington, Fillmore, Pierce, Lincoln, Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Cleveland, T. Roosevelt, Taft, Coolidge, Hoover, F.D. Roosevelt, Nixon, Ford, G.W. Bush
16 G.W. Bush	Washington, Fillmore, Pierce, Lincoln, Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Cleveland, T. Roosevelt, Taft, Coolidge, Hoover, F.D. Roosevelt, Nixon, Ford, G.H.W. Bush
15 William H. Taft	J. Adams, J.Q. Adams, Fillmore, Hayes, Garfield, B. Harrison, Cleveland, Harding, Coolidge, Hoover, F.D. Roosevelt, Nixon, Ford, G.H.W. Bush, G.W. Bush
15 Calvin Coolidge	Washington, J. Adams, J.Q. Adams, Fillmore, Pierce, Grant, Cleveland, B. Harrison, Taft, Hoover, F.D. Roosevelt, Nixon, Ford, G.H.W. Bush, G.W. Bush
15 Gerald Ford, Jr.	Fillmore, Lincoln, Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Cleveland, B. Harrison, Taft, Harding, Coolidge, Hoover, F.D. Roosevelt, Nixon, G.H.W. Bush, G.W. Bush
12 Millard Fillmore	J. Adams, J.Q. Adams, Grant, Cleveland, Taft, Coolidge, Hoover, F.D. Roosevelt, Nixon, Ford, G.H.W. Bush, G.W. Bush
11 Richard Nixon	Fillmore, Hayes, Taft, Harding, Coolidge, Hoover, F.D. Roosevelt, Ford, Carter, G.H.W. Bush, G.W. Bush
10 Herbert Hoover	Fillmore, Pierce, Garfield, Cleveland, Taft, Coolidge, Nixon, Ford, G.H.W. Bush, G.W. Bush
10 Grover Cleveland	Fillmore, Grant, Hayes, Taft, Coolidge, Hoover, F.D. Roosevelt, G.H.W. Bush, G.W. Bush
8 Rutherford Hayes	Pierce, Cleveland, Taft, F.D. Roosevelt, Nixon, Ford, G.H.W. Bush, G.W. Bush
8 Benj. Harrison	J.Q. Adams, W.H. Harrison, Tyler, Taft, Harding, Coolidge, Ford, Carter
7 J.Q. Adams	J. Adams, W.H. Harrison, B. Harrison, Fillmore, Taft, Coolidge, F.D. Roosevelt
7 Ulysses Grant	Fillmore, Cleveland, Coolidge, D.D. Roosevelt, Ford, G.H.W. Bush, G.W. Bush
6 Franklin Pierce	Hayes, Coolidge, Hoover, F.D. Roosevelt, G.H.W. Bush, G.W. Bush
6 James Garfield	Taft, Hoover, F.D. Roosevelt, Ford, G.H.W. Bush, G.W. Bush
5 Warren Harding	B. Harrison, Taft, Nixon, Ford, Carter
5 Theo. Roosevelt	Madison, Van Buren, F.D. Roosevelt, G.H.W. Bush, G.W. Bush
4 Geo. Washington	Coolidge, F.D. Roosevelt, G.H.W. Bush, G.W. Bush
4 John Adams	J.Q. Adams, Fillmore, Taft, Coolidge

Table 1 Continued

Number		Kinsmen
4	Wm. H. Harrison	J.Q. Adams, Tyler, B. Harrison, Carter
4	Jimmy Carter	W.H. Harrison, B. Harrison, Harding, Nixon
3	Abraham Lincoln	Ford, G.H.W. Bush, G.W. Bush
2	James Madison	Taylor, T. Roosevelt
2	Martin Van Buren	T. Roosevelt, F.D. Roosevelt
2	John Tyler	W.H. Harrison, B. Harrison
2	Zachary Taylor	Madison, F.D. Roosevelt
0	Thomas Jefferson	none
0	James Monroe	none
0	Andrew Jackson	none
0	James K. Polk	none
0	James Buchanan	none
0	Andrew Johnson	none
0	Chester Arthur	none
0	William McKinley	none
0	Woodrow Wilson	none
0	Harry Truman	none
0	Dwight Eisenhower	none
0	John F. Kennedy	none
0	Lyndon Johnson	none
0	Ronald Reagan	none
0	William Clinton	none

Table 2

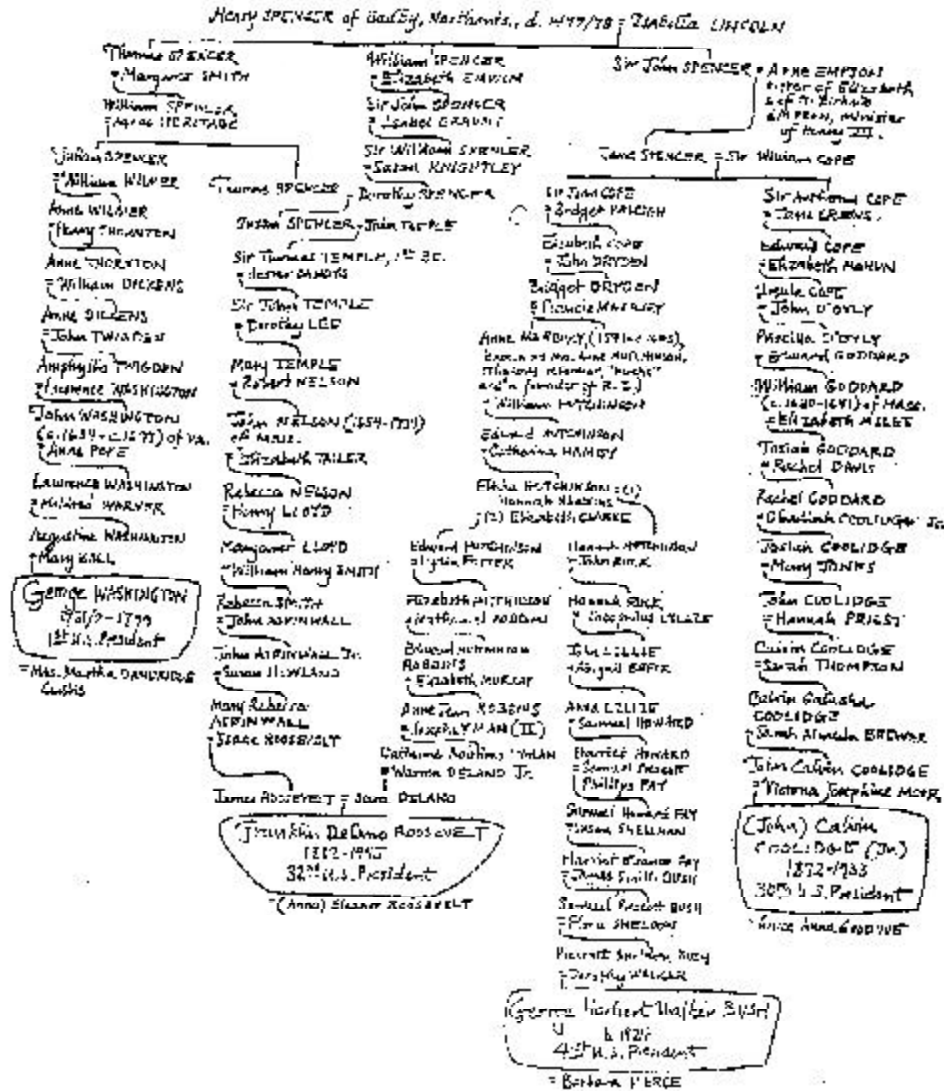
Presidential Kinships by Political Party Affiliation, 1789–2003

Political Party	None	1 to 3	4 to 7	8-plus		Average
Federalist	-	-	2	-	8/2	4.00
Dem.-Rep.	2	1	-	-	2/3	.67
NatRp./Whig	-	2	2	1	27/5	5.40
Democratic	8	1	2	2	39/13	3.00
Republican	5	1	5	8	140/19	7.37
Totals	15	5	11	11	216/42	5.14

Source: Adapted from Roberts, *Ancestors*, 327–328.

In the chart on the following page, President George H.W. Bush’s links to Presidents George Washington, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Calvin Coolidge are illustrated.

Kinship Among American Presidents



Source: Gary Boyd Roberts, comp., *Ancestors of American Presidents*, (Santa Clarita, CA: Carl Boyer, 3rd, Publishing, 1995), p. 239.

Social Stratification: The Social Origins of Presidents

Few subjects engender more interest in American life than social mobility — especially entrancing is the upward movement from one social class to another. Theodore H. White, the author of the *Making of the President* books, entitled an excerpt from his autobiography, “Growing Up in the Land of Promise.”⁸ On the cover of *The Atlantic* in which the excerpt appeared was a drawing of a determined, clear-eyed, and hard-working newsboy accompanied by the title, “Pluck and Luck: Growing Up Poor and Ambitious.”

The title and theme were borrowed from one of the many books of Horatio Alger, Jr., a nineteenth century novelist, who shaped an era. More than one hundred books, bearing such titles as *Jed, the Poorhouse Boy*, *Ragged Dick*, and *Tom, the Bootblack*, extolled the adventures of poor, decent young boys whose determination to succeed overcame their lack of social status and material advantages.⁹ Alger's "poor boy makes good" motif had become such a firmly ingrained theme of American social belief that Karl Marx's associate, Frederick Engels, lamented that it had led to the defusing of the collective consciousness of workingmen in the United States.¹⁰ In Engels's assessment, the "false consciousness" of Alger's books had retarded the growth of Marxism in this country.

Social background analysts have often challenged the "rags to riches" theme and they have marshaled impressive evidence to suggest that the theme is more myth than reality.¹¹ Robert Putnam's *The Comparative Study of Political Elites* summarizes the findings as they pertain to the American political elite:

... at the national level, unexpectedly little evidence exists about elite transformation in America. Still more surprisingly, this evidence strongly suggests that two centuries of economic, social, demographic, and geographic expansion have produced remarkably little change in the aggregate socio-economic characteristics of the American elite.¹²

In political life, the theme is the "log cabin myth" that states that every young man, regardless of his social origins, can rise to the top of the political ladder by dint of hard work, native intelligence, and unassailable integrity. It has a more rural cast than the predominant urban character of Alger's young boys, but the thrust is similar.

The myth has been debunked so often by biographers that one wonders if the belief still exists. Apparently it does, because most of the discourses on the subject continue to open with the demythologizing paragraphs. If the need for refutation remains, then the myth must be receiving periodic refueling. Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and Clinton were all presumed to be born in social circumstances not very different from the rags-to-riches heroes of nineteenth-century American literature. The myth survives because it provides an important link between a public, predominantly working and middle class, and our most important elected officials.

An ambitious debunking appears in Edward Pessen's *The Log Cabin Myth*.¹³ The most fascinating aspect of the Pessen data is that the Republican Party is far more likely to recruit its presidential candidates from lesser social origins than the Democrats. So the party that seems most supportive of upper class social policies is more likely to select those of lesser status, while the Democrats, the party that has been more concerned with the welfare of society's underclass, selects its winning candidates from the upper ranks of society.

A class-based explanation for these apparent contradictions would be that the Republican party's selection system buys political quiescence from the lesser classes by emphasizing that opportunity for advancement is genuine, provided that one accepts the dominant values of the capitalist business culture that the Republican party espouses. Similarly, the Democratic Party's selection system is obviously operating from "noblesse oblige" — the belief that members of the upper class are obliged to take care of the material needs of the lesser elements of society. Or as one observer put it in the 1960 presidential contest, "I would rather vote for a poor man's rich man like Kennedy than for a rich man's poor man like Nixon."

Table 3

Presidents and the Public: Social Origins

Social Class	Fed/Whig/Rep Presidents	Dem-Rep/Dem Presidents	Population
Upper Upper	Washington (F) J.Q. Adams (NR) W.H. Harrison (W) Tyler (W) Taylor (W) B. Harrison (R) T. Roosevelt (R) Taft (R) GHW Bush (R) GW Bush (R)	Jefferson (DR) Madison (DR) F. Roosevelt (D)	1%
Upper Upper Straddle		Polk (D) Kennedy (D)	
Lower Upper	J. Adams (F) Hayes (R)	Monroe (DR) Pierce (D) Wilson (D)	2%
Upper Middle Plateau	Harding (R) Coolidge (R)	Cleveland (D) Truman (D)	
Upper Middle	Grant (R) Arthur (R) McKinley (R) Hoover (R) Ford (R)	Jackson (D) Van Buren (D) Buchanan (D) L.B. Johnson (D) Carter (D)	10%
"True" Middle	Lincoln (R) Eisenhower (R) Reagan (R)		
Lower Middle	Fillmore (W) Garfield (R) Nixon (R)	Clinton (D)	32%
Upper Lower	A. Johnson (R)		34%
Lower Lower	none		21%
TOTALS			100%

Party code: Democrats (D), Democratic-Republicans (DR); Federalists (F), National Republicans (NR), Whigs (W), Republicans (R).

Source: Adapted from Edward Pessen, *The Log Cabin Myth: The Social Backgrounds of the Presidents* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), 63, 68. The two Bush and the Clinton presidencies have been added.

On a more somber note, the hidden “classism” of American life may have revealed itself in the fact that the only three presidents to have been impeached or forced to leave office — Andrew Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Bill Clinton — occupied the lower rungs of the social class hierarchy.

Presidential Status Differentials and the Party Factor

Comparing the presidential kinship findings with the social class locations provided by Edward Pessen reveals that there is initially no clear link between the two sets of findings. If one hopes to find that over time the wealthier presidents were genealogically connected to a host of presidential predecessors and ancestors in some sort of American familial aristocracy, one will be disappointed. Taking all of the presidents and dividing them along class lines (upper vs. middle and lower) and kinship connections (four or more vs. three or less) reveals a very marginal correlation of +.37. It is a positive finding but not very meaningful.

Controlling for political party enhances the relationship between the number of presidential kin and one’s social status. For the Democrats and their predecessors, the Democratic-Republicans, the correlation between kinships and social class was +.43. For the Republicans and their predecessors, the Federalists and the Whigs, the correlation was +.38. Taking out the predecessor parties, the correlations increase to +.71 for the thirteen Democratic presidents and to +1.00 for the nineteen Republican presidents. For all thirty-two of the presidents affiliated with the contemporary parties, the overall correlation is +.64. With only these contemporary parties in the mix, then, it is possible to find the semblance of an American presidential aristocracy of birth and social class.

Table 4

Presidential Status Differentials and the Party Factor

Presidential Kinship Connections	Political Party Affiliation			
	Democratic-Republicans		Federalists/Whigs	
	Democrats		Republicans	
	Social Status		Social Status	
	Upper	Mid-Lower	Upper	Mid-Lower
Four or More	Pierce Cleveland F. Roosevelt	Carter	Washington J. Adams J.Q. Adams W. Harrison Hayes B. Harrison T. Roosevelt Taft GHW Bush GW Bush	Fillmore Grant Garfield Harding Coolidge Hoover Nixon Ford
Three or Less	Jefferson Madison Monroe Polk Wilson Kennedy	Jackson Van Buren Buchanan Truman L. Johnson Clinton	Tyler Taylor	Lincoln A. Johnson Arthur McKinley Eisenhower Reagan

Presidential Status Differentials and Historical “Greatness”

Historical Assessments of Presidents: The Schlesinger Polls

The most famous qualitative assessments of an American political institution and its occupants are the “presidential greatness” ratings put together by Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. in 1948.¹⁴ It was based upon letter grades given to all the presidents from George Washington through Franklin Roosevelt (excepting the short-term presidencies of William Henry Harrison and James Garfield) by a panel of fifty-five American historians. The letter grades were converted into a five-point scale with A counting as “great;” B as “near-great;” C as “average;” D as “below average;” and F as “failure.”

Although some historians challenged its techniques and assumptions, it was a great popular success and was republished in popular magazines and spawned a number of imitators. Schlesinger updated the original study in 1962 with more respondents and the inclusion of Presidents Truman and Eisenhower.¹⁵ Abraham Lincoln topped both polls and was followed by Presidents Washington and Franklin Roosevelt. Woodrow Wilson, the only president to receive a Ph.D. and to teach at a university finished fourth and Thomas Jefferson finished fifth. These five were assessed as “great” on both lists. Andrew Jackson, the subject of an adoring biography, *The Age of Jackson*, by Professor Schlesinger’s son, took sixth place in both surveys.¹⁶ But by 1962 the sixth slot was no longer adjudged to be “great.” (Andrew Jackson may be on the rebound. In a very valuable assessment of presidential greatness that focused on the innovative party-building strategies of five presidents, Jackson was returned to the top five.)¹⁷

President Harry Truman was rated as a “near great” president, the beneficiary of a difficult post-war era in which he made a number of important and far-ranging decisions. Although his Gallup Poll popularity rating had once hit a low of only 23%, the lowest recorded for the first forty years of the Gallup Poll; the panel of historians honored him in the 1962 poll. Truman was surprised. As reported by Bailey, Harry Truman recalled telling a reporter who had inquired about his high ranking in the 1962 poll that:

I didn’t think the poll meant a thing insofar as recent history is concerned; the historians didn’t know any more than the pollsters did when they said I wouldn’t win in 1948. Nobody will be able to assess my Administration until about 30 years after I’m dead. . . .¹⁸

For Eisenhower, the reverse was true in the 1962 poll. Ike left office relatively popular and was greatly admired by the American public, but the historians lodged him in 21st place in a tie with Chester Arthur, the last incumbent President to be denied renomination by his own party, and just above Andrew Johnson who narrowly escaped impeachment. In terms of a grade, the Eisenhower presidency was awarded a C-. It was a harsh judgment.

At the bottom — the “failures” — in both years were two of the most popular presidents to ever serve in the White House — Ulysses S. Grant and Warren G. Harding. Until the revised Schlesinger, Jr. poll of 1996 added five new retrospective “failures” Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Herbert Hoover and Richard Nixon,¹⁹ Grant and Harding were the only presidents to qualify for this dubious distinction.

Table 5

The Schlesinger Presidential Greatness Polls

	1948 Survey		1962 Survey		1996 Survey	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Great	6	21%	5	16%	3	8%
Near Great	3	14	6	19	6	15
High Average					7	18
Average	11	38	12	39	-	-
Low Average					12	31
Below Average	6	21	6	19	4	10
Failure	2	7	2	6	7	18
Totals	29	101%	31	99%	39	100%

The Schlesinger assessments were extremely influential, but not all historians saw them as inscribed on marble tablets. Thomas Bailey's *Presidential Greatness* provided the most full-fledged critique.²⁰ To the highly opinionated Professor Bailey, the "hysterical historians" had let their biases intrude. Bailey contended that the historians' "expert ignorance" had led them to compare the non-comparable and to measure the immeasurable. Presidents could not be assessed outside of their times and any effort to do so was folly. Furthermore, the New England origins and schooling of many of the participants had led them to exhibit bias against southern slaveholding presidents (e.g., Madison, Jackson, and Tyler) and their northern defenders (e.g., Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan). "We must reluctantly conclude," said a dismayed Bailey, "that historical judgments are sometimes as much visceral as cerebral."²¹

Broadening the Base of Presidential Assessment

In answering some of the Bailey criticisms, other researchers chose to expand and diversify the pool of respondents and to add more dimensions to the analysis. Gary Maranell and the Penn State team of Robert Murray and Tim Blessing prepared the two most systematic of these efforts.

The Maranell Survey In 1970, sociologist Gary Maranell published the first results of a mail questionnaire that he had sent out to a sample of 1095 American historians.²² The response rate was impressive. More than half of the sample (571) had returned usable responses. Maranell asked the historians to rank the presidents on their levels of activeness, strength of action, their accomplishments in office, their idealism, flexibility, and general prestige. He also asked them to indicate how much they felt they knew, generally speaking, about each of these presidents. Maranell's study was the first to weigh Kennedy and Johnson presidencies. It was also the first to assess the multidimensionality of presidential performance.

Maranell's respondents linked four presidential variables — general prestige, accomplishment of administration, strength of action, and activeness. These factors were so highly intercorrelated (mean = +.95), it was clear that his panel saw each of these factors as a manifestation of the same dimension.

Two of the dimensions did not correlate with the others and were related negatively to one another. These were the dimensions of flexibility-rigidity and idealism-practicality. Each has its down side. The down side of flexibility is to be perceived

as indecisive at best or “wishy-washy” at worst and not very committed to any particular ideology or set of values. The down side of idealism is that individuals who score high on this dimension are likely to be perceived as rigid and impractical.

The Murray-Blessing Survey Professors Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing of Pennsylvania State University developed the most extensive entry in the ratings sweepstakes. In this survey 953 historians completed a seventeen-page questionnaire containing 155 questions. This poll was completed in 1982 and it included evaluations of Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter.²³

In the Murray-Blessing assessments, Eisenhower now ranks eleventh, close to the presidential near-greats. Clearly, this is a major upward revision from the tie for twenty-first place that was his location in the second Schlesinger survey and his twentieth place in the Maranell poll. The decade of the 1950s over which Eisenhower presided was often dismissed as “a boring time of peace and prosperity.” After a decade like the 1960s with no peace and one like the 1970s with no prosperity made the 1950s look like the “good old days.” And as that sentiment became more widespread, Eisenhower’s reputation ascended. Another contribution to the Eisenhower reassessment was the publication of Fred Greenstein’s book, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency*, that gave Eisenhower more credit for the positive aspects of his administration than had ever been acknowledged.²⁴ The Greenstein book directly and apparently successfully challenged James David Barber’s characterization of the Eisenhower presidency as a “passive-negative” one.²⁵

The other president whose ranking was adversely affected by reassessments was Andrew Johnson who dropped from nineteenth place in the original 1948 survey to twenty-first in the 1970 Maranell poll to thirty-second in the Murray-Blessing study. The growth of racial awareness in the wake of the 1960s civil rights demonstrations has led to an upgrading of the “radical Republicans” who wished to impeach Andrew Johnson and a consequent downgrading of his place in history.²⁶ Also, the impeachment proceedings against Richard Nixon in 1974 legitimized the process and made Andrew Johnson’s agonies seem less unique and more appropriate.

Apart from Eisenhower’s dramatic rise and Andrew Johnson’s precipitate drop, the Murray-Blessing poll correlates very closely with the “Presidential Accomplishment Dimension” of the Maranell poll.²⁷ There are two reasons for this. One is that these ratings may be true reflections of the impact of these presidents on the outcome of public policy. The other reason is more likely. Presidential ratings tend to be stable over time because historians are aware of previous ratings and presidential reinterpretations are unlikely to raise or lower a president more than one or two notches from survey to survey. Only the most recent presidents experience any volatility in their assessments, as may be seen among the recent presidents ranked in the thirty-six president Murray-Blessing poll score as follows:²⁸

Franklin D. Roosevelt	2nd	2nd
Harry S Truman	8th	8th
Dwight D. Eisenhower	11th	10th
John F. Kennedy	13th	12th
Lyndon B. Johnson	10th	13th
Richard M. Nixon	34th	34th
Gerald R. Ford	24th	28th
Jimmy Carter	25th	26th
Ronald Reagan	20th	—

The Conservatives Counter Obviously frustrated by the low rankings assigned to many of their presidential heroes, the Federalist Society in cooperation with the *Wall Street Journal* assembled its own panel of 78 historians, political scientists and law school professors to create a dissimilar view of presidential achievement in 2000.²⁹ With an administration as ideologically polarizing as that of Ronald Reagan, there should be little wonder that conservative organizations provided much higher scores for the Reagan administration. He was the poll's greatest beneficiary.

The 1996 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. poll gave Reagan a "low average" rating similar to that assigned to all five of the post-Watergate presidencies of Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, George Herbert Walker Bush, and Bill Clinton.³⁰ But in the Federalist Society survey, Ronald Reagan finished in 8th place, solidly among the "Near-greats" with Harry Truman just above him and Dwight Eisenhower just below him. Modern-day Democrats Bill Clinton, Lyndon Johnson and Jack Kennedy came in at the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth places respectively at the low end of the "Average presidents." And to no one's real surprise, Republican presidents topped the list of "underrated presidents" with Ronald Reagan garnering 16 votes; followed closely by Calvin Coolidge with fourteen, Dwight Eisenhower and Herbert Hoover with twelve each; and Richard Nixon and James K. Polk, Democrat, with eleven each.³¹

Table 6

President	1996 Schlesinger Poll			2000 Federalist Poll			Rank Diffs
	Mean	Rating	Rank	Mean	Rating	Rank	
George Washington	4.97	Great	3rd	4.92	Great	1st	+ 2
John Adams	3.32	High Avg	11th	3.36	Above Avg.	13th	-2
Thomas Jefferson	4.38	Near Great	4th	4.25	Near Great	4th	unch
James Madison	2.90	Low Average	17th	3.29	Above Avg.	15th	+ 2
James Monroe	3.04	High Avg.	16th	3.27	Above Avg.	16th	unch
John Quincy Adams	2.74	Low Average	18th	2.93	Average	20th	-2
Andrew Jackson	4.34	Near Great	6th	3.99	Near Great	6th	unch
Martin Van Buren	2.63	Low Average	22nd	2.77	Average	23rd	-1
William H. Harrison		unrated			unrated		
John Tyler	2.04	Below Avg.	31st	2.03	Below Avg.	34th	-3
James K. Polk	3.71	Near Great	9th	3.70	Near Great	10th	-1
Zachary Taylor	2.12	Below Avg.	29th	2.40	Below Avg.	31st	-2
Millard Fillmore	2.00	Below Avg.	32nd	1.91	Below Avg.	35th	-3
Franklin Pierce	1.56	Failure	35th	1.58	Failure	37th	-2
James Buchanan	1.21	Failure	38th	1.33	Failure	39th	-1
Abraham Lincoln	5.00	Great	1st	4.87	Great	2nd	-1
Andrew Johnson	1.42	Failure	36th	1.65	Failure	36th	unch
Ulysses Grant	1.33	Failure	37th	2.28	Below Avg.	32nd	+ 5
Rutherford Hayes	2.56	Low Average	24th	2.79	Average	22nd	+ 2
James A. Garfield		unrated			unrated		
Chester Arthur	2.48	Low Average	27th	2.71	Average	26th	+ 1
Grover Cleveland	3.24	High Avg.	15th	3.36	Above Avg.	12th	+ 3
Benjamin Harrison	2.67	Low Average	21st	2.62	Below Avg.	27th	-6
William McKinley	3.11	High Avg.	15th	3.33	Above Avg.	14th	+ 1

Table 6 Continued

President	1996 Schlesinger Poll			2000 Federalist Poll			Rank Diffs
	Mean	Rating	Rank	Mean	Rating	Rank	
Theodore Roosevelt	4.31	Near Great	7th	4.22	Near Great	5th	+ 2
William H. Taft	2.59	Low Average	23rd	3.00	Average	19th	+ 4
Woodrow Wilson	4.34	Near Great	5th	3.68	Near Great	11th	-6
Warren G. Harding	1.07	Failure	39th	1.58	Failure	38th	+ 1
Calvin Coolidge	2.11	Below Avg.	30th	2.71	Average	25th	+ 5
Herbert Hoover	2.03	Failure	33rd	2.53	Below Avg.	29th	+ 4
Franklin Roosevelt	4.97	Great	2nd	4.67	Great	3rd	-1
Harry Truman	4.10	Near Great	8th	3.95	Near Great	7th	+ 1
Dwight Eisenhower	3.34	High Avg.	10th	3.71	Near Great	9th	+ 1
John F. Kennedy	3.26	High Avg.	12th	3.17	Above Avg.	18th	-6
Lyndon B. Johnson	3.25	High Avg.	13th	3.21	Above Avg.	17th	-4
Richard Nixon	1.61	Failure	34th	2.22	Below Avg.	33rd	+ 1
Gerald R. Ford	2.14	Low Avg	28th	2.59	Below Avg.	28th	unch
Jimmy Carter	2.50	Low Avg	26th	2.47	Below Avg.	30th	-4
Ronald Reagan	2.68	Low Avg	20th	3.81	Near Great	8th	+ 12
George H.W. Bush	2.52	Low Avg	25th	2.92	Average	21st	+ 4
William J. Clinton	2.73	Low Avg	19th	2.77	Average	24th	-5

Gainers

- + 12 Ronald Reagan, Republican
- + 5 Ulysses Grant, Republican
- + 5 Calvin Coolidge, Republican
- + 4 William H. Taft, Republican
- + 4 George H.W. Bush, Republican
- + 4 Herbert Hoover, Republican
- + 2 George Washington, Federalist
- + 2 James Madison, Jefferson Rep.
- + 2 Rutherford Hayes, Republican
- + 2 Grover Cleveland, Democrat
- + 2 Teddy Roosevelt, Republican
- + 1 Chester Arthur, Republican
- + 1 William McKinley, Republican
- + 1 Warren Harding, Republican
- + 1 Harry Truman, Democrat
- + 1 Dwight Eisenhower, Republican
- + 1 Richard Nixon, Republican

13 Republican Gainers
 2 Democratic Gainers
 2 Other Gainers

Losers

- 6 Benjamin Harrison, Republican
- 6 Woodrow Wilson, Democrat
- 6 John Kennedy, Democrat
- 5 Bill Clinton, Democrat
- 4 Lyndon Johnson, Democrat
- 4 Jimmy Carter, Democrat
- 3 John Tyler, Whig
- 3 Millard Fillmore, Whig
- 2 John Adams, Federalist
- 2 John Q. Adams, Natl. Republican
- 2 Zachary Taylor, Whig
- 2 Franklin Pierce, Democrat
- 1 Martin Van Buren, Democrat
- 1 James K. Polk, Democrat
- 1 James Buchanan, Democrat
- 1 Abraham Lincoln, Republican
- 1 Franklin Roosevelt, Democrat

3 Republican Losers
 10 Democratic Losers
 4 Other Losers

Source: Adapted and recomputed from Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Ultimate Approval Rating," New York Times Sunday Magazine (December 15, 1996), 46-51. The October 2000 Federalist Society ratings are on the Wall Street Journal webpage, www.wsj.com.

The rank-order correlation between the two sets of rankings was very high (Spearman’s rho = +.956) and five rankings were identical — Jefferson, Monroe, Jackson, Andrew Johnson and Ford. But there was an important partisan difference among the twelve presidents whose rankings shifted four or more places. All six of the major gainers were Republicans while five of the six major losers were Democrats with each of the last four Democratic presidents — Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Carter, and Clinton — losing an average of 4.75 ranks. While Ronald Reagan may have been the major (and intended) beneficiary of the Federalist Society rankings, the five Republican presidents listed as “Failures” in the 1996 Schlesinger poll were reduced to two — Andrew Johnson and Warren Harding — as the Federalist Society elevated Presidents Hoover, Nixon, and even Ulysses S. Grant out of the basement. And with one last bow to party, the Federalist Society replaced Republican Warren Harding with Democrat James Buchanan at the absolute bottom of the rankings.

Social Class and Presidential Assessment

Among the many talented students of Columbia University sociologist and political activist C. Wright Mills was a young man with impeccable credentials from Philadelphia’s Main Line aristocratic families. His name was E. Digby Baltzell and he is credited with coining the widely used acronym to describe himself and his fellow Main Liners — WASP for White Anglo-Saxon Protestants.³² Unsurprisingly, Baltzell was fascinated with the role that social class played in the political life of the nation and how it impacted the national leadership selection process. In his book, *Yankee Boston and Quaker Philadelphia*, he explored the subtle differences between two traditional Protestant urban aristocracies to uncover why it was that Boston’s WASP inheritor elite had played such a major role in the nation’s public life while Philadelphia’s inheritor elite had contented themselves accumulating fortunes in the private sector.³³

Baltzell and a junior colleague, Howard Schneiderman, combined the findings of both the Pessen study on presidential social origins and the Murray-Blessing assessment of presidential greatness to see if there was a meaningful link between social class and presidential greatness.

Baltzell and Schneiderman succeeded in establishing the link between the two variables. The data are presented below in Table 7.

Table 7

Murray-Blessing's Ranking of Presidential Performance Related to Pessen's Ranking of Social-Class Origins

	Upper Class	Upper Middle Class	Middle and Lower Class
Great			
01. Lincoln			Middle
02. F.D. Roosevelt	Upper	Upper	
03. Washington	Upper	Upper	
04. Jefferson	Upper	Upper	
Near Great			
05. T. Roosevelt	Upper	Upper	
06. Wilson	Lower	Upper	
07. Jackson		Upper Middle	
08. Truman		Low Upper/ Upper Middle	

Table 7 Continued

	Upper Class	Upper Middle Class	Middle and Lower Class
Above Average			
09. J. Adams	Lower Upper		
10. L. Johnson		Upper Middle	
11. Eisenhower			Middle
12. Polk	Middle Upper		
13. Kennedy	Middle Upper		
14. Madison	Upper Upper		
15. Monroe	Lower Upper		
16. J.Q. Adams	Upper Upper		
17. Cleveland		Low Upper/ Upper Middle	
Average			
18. McKinley		Upper Middle	
19. Taft	Upper Upper		
20. Van Buren		Upper Middle	
21. Hoover		Upper Middle	
22. Hayes		Low Upper/ Upper Middle	
23. Arthur		Upper Middle	
24. Ford		Upper Middle	
25. Carter		Upper Middle	
26. B. Harrison	Upper Upper		
Below Average			
27. Taylor	Upper Upper		
28. Tyler	Upper Upper		
29. Fillmore			Lower Middle
30. Coolidge		Low Upper/ Upper Middle	
31. Pierce		Low Upper/ Upper Middle	
Failure			
32. A. Johnson			Upper Lower
33. Buchanan		Upper Middle	
34. Nixon			Lower Middle
35. Grant		Upper Middle	
36. Harding		Low Upper/ Upper Middle	

Source: E. Digby Baltzell and Howard G. Schneiderman, "Social Class in the Oval Office," *Society*, 25 (September/October, 1988), 46.

The conclusion for Baltzell and Schneiderman was clear:

“Our findings suggest that the antielitist, conventional wisdom of our day may run counter to the traditional wisdom of our ancestors who repeatedly, although not unerringly, sought out the best men for the president, regardless of their social origins.”³⁴

A visual examination of Table 7 indicates a rough congruence between elite social backgrounds and high levels of presidential performance. A further analysis done by Baltzell and Schneiderman dichotomized the two sets of data with presidential performance broken into two categories — Above Average and Average and Below — and social class origins into two categories as well — Upper Class and Below Upper Class. The measure may be a crude one but it does support their point about the positive linkage between social origins and presidential performance.

Using all three of the presidential performance measures — the Murray-Blessing survey, the 1996 Schlesinger, Jr. ratings, and the 2000 ratings done by the Federalist Society, the hypothesis gets a fuller exploration. As may be seen in Table 8, the presidential inheritors have performed better in the White House than the presidential climbers, but it is the climbers who have gained the presidency more often than the inheritors in the post-World War II era.

Table 8

Social Class Origins and Three Measures of Presidential Performance

Presidents Washington through Carter

Murray-Blessing Accomplishments in Office	Social Class-Origins		
	Upper Class	Below Upper Class	
Above Average	11 (73%)	6 (29%)	17
Average and Below	4 (27%)	15 (71%)	19
	15	21	36
Baltzell and Schneiderman, p. 47.		gamma = + .746	

Presidents Washington through Clinton

Schlesinger, 1996 Accomplishments in Office	Social Class-Origins		
	Upper Class	Below Upper Class	
Above Average	9 (56%)	7 (44%)	16
Average and Below	7 (30%)	16 (70%)	23
	16	23	39
		gamma = + .492	

Federalist Society, 2000 Accomplishments in Office	Social Class-Origins		
	Upper Class	Below Upper Class	
Above Average	10 (56%)	8 (44%)	18
Average and Below	6 (29%)	15 (71%)	21
	16	23	39
		gamma = + .515	

All three measures of presidential performance and social status were positive, but there was some variation in the strength of their correlations. When the 1996 Schlesinger, Jr. assessors removed upper classmen James Madison and John Quincy Adams from the above average presidential achievers and elevated the presidential performance of the upper middle class William McKinley, the correlation between these two variables was reduced from +.746 to +.492. And when the 2000 Federalist Society panelists restored upper class Madison to an above average performance rating and moved lower middle class Reagan up twelve notches to Near Great, the correlation between the two variables of high social status and high presidential performance remained steady even though the partisan affiliation of the raters differed.

The other social class dimension of presidential kinsmen and presidential performance is less clear. This may be seen in Table 9 when the Murray-Blessing ratings on presidential performance are arrayed alongside the average number of each president's White House kinsmen.

Table 9

**Presidential Kinsmen and the Murray-Blessing
Presidential Performance Ratings**

President	Number of Presidential Kinsmen	Averages
Great		
01. Lincoln	3	
02. F.D. Roosevelt	17	
03. Washington	4	
04. Jefferson	0	24/4 = 6.00
Near Great		
05. T. Roosevelt	5	
06. Wilson	0	
07. Jackson	0	
08. Truman	0	5/4 = 1.25
Above Average		
09. J. Adams	4	
10. L. Johnson	0	
11. Eisenhower	0	
12. Polk	0	
13. Kennedy	0	
14. Madison	2	
15. Monroe	0	
16. J.Q. Adams	7	
17. Cleveland	10	23/9 = 2.56
Average		
18. McKinley	0	
19. Taft	15	
20. Van Buren	2	
21. Hoover	10	

Table 9 Continued

President	Number of Presidential Kinsmen	Averages
22. Hayes	8	
23. Arthur	0	
24. Ford	15	
25. Carter	4	
26. B. Harrison	8	62/9 = 6.89
Below Average		
27. Taylor	2	
28. Tyler	2	
29. Fillmore	12	
30. Coolidge	15	
31. Pierce	6	37/5 = 7.40
Failure		
32. A. Johnson	0	
33. Buchanan	0	
34. Nixon	11	
35. Grant	7	
36. Harding	5	23/5 = 4.60

Not Rated: W.H. Harrison 4 and Garfield 6; Reagan 0; G.H.W. Bush 16, Clinton 0; G.W. Bush 16

And as Table 10 reveals, regardless of which presidential performance measure is used, political inheritance seems far less predictive of presidential greatness than economic inheritance. In the Murray-Blessing survey, the top eight rated presidents — the greats and near-greats — had 27 presidential kinsmen — an average of 3.38 (27/8) with Franklin D. Roosevelt's sixteen kinsmen accounting for almost 60% of the total. The bottom ten rated presidents — the below averages and failures — had an average of 5.70 (57/10) presidential kinsmen. The top nine presidents in the Schlesinger poll averaged only 3.00 kinsmen (27/9) while the bottom eleven averaged 6.09 (67/11). And in the Federalist Society poll, the results were consistent with their top eleven presidents averaging 2.45 kinsmen (27/11) while their bottom thirteen averaged 6.00 (78/13).

The two middle categories of above average and average presidents were also consistent between the three measures of presidential performance. In each case, presidents ranked in the higher average category had mean presidential kinsmen numbers consistently below their counterparts with lower average presidential performances. Their combined means regularly fall between the two upper and lower categories of presidential performances. Four of the eight highest rated presidents in the Murray-Blessing ratings — Jefferson, Jackson, Wilson, and Truman — had no presidential kinsmen. Similarly, five of the nine highest rated presidents in the Schlesinger, Jr. poll and seven of the eleven in the Federalist Society Poll had no presidential kinsmen. By contrast, eight of the ten lowest ranked presidents in the Murray Blessing Poll; nine of the bottom eleven in the Schlesinger Poll; and eleven

Table 10

Mean of Presidential Kinsmen and Three Measures of Presidential Performance

1989 Murray-Blessing Poll

Great	Near Great	Above Average	Average	Below Average	Failure
24/4	4/4	21/9	60/9	35/5	22/5
6.00	1.00	2.33	6.67	7.00	4.40

1996 Schlesinger, Jr. Poll

Great	Near-Great	High Average	Low Average	Below Average	Failure
24/3	5/6	14/7	77/12	31/4	39/7
8.00	.83	2.00	6.42	7.75	5.57

2000 Federalist Society Poll

Great	Near - Great	Above Average	Average	Below Average	Failure
24/3	5/8	16/7	63/8	71/9	11/4
8.00	.62	2.29	7.88	7.89	2.75

of the thirteen low rankers in the Federalist Society Poll had presidential kinsmen with Presidents Fillmore, Coolidge, Hoover, Nixon and Ford recording double-digit presidential kin. Clearly, two centuries of drawing at this particular WASP well has thinned the presidential bloodlines of much of its presumed competence.

The fifteen “new men” of the American presidency, those without presidential kinsmen, scored consistently higher on each of the three measures of presidential performance relative to those with White House kin. On the Murray-Blessing ratings, the thirteen presidential “new men” had an average 14.77 ranking compared to an average 20.61 ranking for the twenty-three presidents with kinfolk in the White House. The gap was even higher for the “new men” in both the Schlesinger Poll (15.87 to 22.58) and in the Federalist Society Poll (16.33 to 22.29). Thus, it would seem if Americans are better served when “new men” assume the reins of government. But is this what the American public wants?

The People Speak on Inheritors and Climbers

In January, 1993, four days after inheritor President George Herbert Walker Bush relinquished control of the White House to climber President Bill Clinton, a quintessential “new man,” *New York Times* reporter Adam Clymer published an article indicating that there was often a serious disconnect between the popular approval ratings, both contemporaneous and retrospective, of the American public approval and the post-mortem assessments of America’s historians. They are not always on the same page.

The two highest presidential scorers with both the public during their terms and after their terms (and lives) concluded were the two preppy Harvard-educated in-

Table 11

Public Popularity and Historical Rankings, 1993

President	In-Term Average	End of Term	Public Retrospective	Historians
F. Roosevelt	68%	66%	75 (1990) (2)	2nd 1
Truman	41	31	68 (1990) (3)	8th 2
Eisenhower	65	59	70 (1990) (4)	11th 4
Kennedy	71	58	84 (1990) (1)	13th 5
L. Johnson	56	49	40 (1990) (8)	10th 3
Nixon	48	24	32 (1990) (9)	34th 8
Ford	47	53	55 (1990) (5)	24th 6
Carter	47	34	50 (1992) (6)	25th 7
Reagan	52	63	48 (1992) (7)	
Bush	61	56		

Source: Adam Clymer, "Vision and Revision: Presidents Ask a Place in Posterity; Posterity Keeps Rearranging Them," *New York Sunday Times* (January 24, 1993): 3. Historians' ratings are from the Murray-Blessing survey.

heritors Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy. Whether it was FDR's Groton or Kennedy's Choate was immaterial, they were certifiable members of the American elite. Both men had political liabilities. FDR was an aristocrat in an egalitarian party and had been James Cox's 1920 running mate in one of the Democratic Party's worst election defeats. Kennedy was a Roman Catholic, only the second to be nominated by a major party, and was burdened by a congressional career long on promise and short on accomplishment. Both FDR and JFK suffered from diminished health — FDR's polio and Kennedy's Addison's disease. But both were "to the manor born" and exuded a casual charm and self-confident grace that comes with good breeding and good schooling.

In the week following Jack Kennedy's assassination, his widow Jacqueline observed to presidential chronicler Theodore White, "Jack's life had more to do with myth, magic, legend, saga, and story than with political theory or political science."³⁵ And as the days, weeks, months, and years passed since November 22, 1963, the Kennedy legend grew and the American public's commitment to him has remained constant.

At the close of the Carter administration in January, 1981 when semi-inheritor Jimmy Carter was to be succeeded by semi-climber Ronald Reagan, the pollster Lou Harris conducted a poll assessing Carter's place among the previous eight presidencies.

Lou Harris had once worked for Kennedy. But it was not his bias that resulted in the inheritor presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Jack Kennedy leading the poll.³⁶ There was a surprisingly strong showing among the public for climber President Richard Nixon in the area of foreign policy. In this poll, Nixon topped the charts as the "best on foreign policy" and ranked third behind Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy on domestic policy. This was a short-lived flicker of hope for Nixon who was not about to receive any positive consideration from this generation of historians. The public was apparently less harsh than the historians.

Two other striking features of the Harris' 1981 poll were Kennedy's popularity and Jimmy Carter's lack of it. John Kennedy's hold on the affection of the average

Table 12

Public Presidential Performance Assessment, 1981

	Best on Domestic Policy	Best on Foreign Policy	Least Able to Get Things Done
F. Roosevelt	24 %	11%	1%
Truman	10	11	1
Eisenhower	9	10	5
Kennedy	23	20	4
L. Johnson	10	2	9
Nixon	15	30	12
Ford	5	3	13
Carter	2	5	44

Source: Adapted from Louis Harris and Associates, "Closing the Carter Book: Not the Best," Public Opinion, IV (February/March, 1981), p. 38.

American persists. In spite of every revelation imaginable on his extra-marital affairs, the "Camelot" legend of Kennedy continues. Kennedy's average in-office popularity of 70% remains the highest ever recorded by the Gallup Poll in the sixty-plus years of its existence and he tops most public lists on recent presidential greatness. However, historians have not been quite so convinced of Kennedy's virtues. In the Murray-Blessing poll, Kennedy is ranked in thirteenth place, behind both Eisenhower, his predecessor, and Lyndon Johnson, his successor. The 1996 Schlesinger Jr. Poll, conducted by yet another Kennedy political employee (and biographer) placed him in the twelfth slot — among the upper third of American presidents. In 2000, the Federalist Society dropped Kennedy six spots to eighteenth place and declared him easily the nation's "most overrated" president.

But the American public seems to adore inheritor presidents. More confirmation of this point may be found in the January 2002 results from the Zogby International fifth annual Presidential Greatness Poll.³⁷

Three of the four Inheritor presidents — John Kennedy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and George W. Bush — topped Zogby's 2002 list. Events following the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have elevated young President Bush among the immortals. He has been tapped for greatness after only twelve months in office. And in five of the bottom ranks were four of the Climbers — Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, Lyndon Johnson and Bill Clinton. That many of the collegiate elite historians were sympathetic to the inheritors was not surprising, but the fact that the American public is also inclined this way portends a successful Bush II presidency and is a further reminder of the thinly veiled yearnings of Americans for a royal family. Now that only one Kennedy brother is alive and with many of the Kennedy nephews and nieces stumbling politically, the nation's preeminent political dynasty has lost its momentum. It appears to be the turn of the Bush clan. Party and ideology are irrelevant. It is the true triumph of style over substance.

The infatuation of Americans with class and the comfortable grace that accompany it is once again flourishing. Poor boys need not apply.

However, as long as American mythology continues to retell the tales of "poor boys who made good," the climbers will receive refueling for their dreams and aspirations. Climbers by their very nature are not easily deterred and it is their tenacity that raises them up the ladder rung-by-rung or "wrong by wrong" as was contended

Table 13

Zogby International Presidential Greatness Poll, 2002

President	Combined Great and Near-Great		Average	Combined Below-Average and Failure
F. Roosevelt	70%	2nd	15%	1%
Truman	58	4th	25	2
Eisenhower	46	6th	38	5
Kennedy	71	1st	22	3
L. Johnson	25	10th	46	20
Nixon	20	11th	39	38
Ford	18	12th	61	16
Carter	33	9th	46	18
Reagan	56	5th	38	12
GHW Bush	44	7th	41	12
Clinton	36	8th	27	36
G.W. Bush	63	3rd	28	7

in the case of climber Richard Nixon. While the myth of the self-made man may continue to be retold in American legends, it is the psychic and ethical costs of their ascent that leads Americans to devalue the rise of the climbers and to mistrust them once in office.

Conclusion

“Ambition, in a private man a vice
Is, in a prince, the virtue.”

— Philip Massinger, 1636

Philip Massinger wrote this statement during the time when the autocratic King Charles I ruled England and much of the Puritan elite of East Anglia sailed across the Atlantic to New England. The implication of this remark is that ambition is a virtue for the well-born princes — the inheritors — but an obvious vice for the base-born private men — the climbers.

More than two centuries have passed in American political life yet much has remained the same in terms of presidential kinship and social class. In January 1800 at the start of the 19th century, Massachusetts-born and Harvard-educated John Adams, the father of a future president, began his last full year in the White House as the nation’s second president. Two hundred years later in December 2000, at the opening of the twenty-first century, Connecticut-born and Yale-educated George W. Bush, the son of a former president had been assured by the U.S. Supreme Court that he would open the next year inaugurated as the nation’s forty-third president. Two centuries of American enchantment with egalitarian impulses and democratic rhetoric have fallen before the reality of the return to a princely reign in Washington. ❁

Notes

1. Denominational data on presidents and vice presidents from www.adherent.com based on source materials in the second edition of the two-volume compilation by David B. Barrett, George Thomas Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
2. Emma Dench, *Barbarians to New Men: Greek, Roman and Modern Perceptions of Peoples from the Central Apennines* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).
3. The first (and only) book on the subject is J.J. Perling, *Presidents' Sons: The Prestige of Name in a Democracy* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1947).
4. For the Senate committee assignments of Prescott Bush and Al Gore, Sr., see Garrison Nelson, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1947-1992: Committee Histories and Member Assignments* (Washington, D.C.: *Congressional Quarterly*, 1994), II: 130 and II: 342 respectively.
5. Gary Boyd Roberts, *Ancestors of American Presidents* (Santa Clarita, Calif. Carl Boyer 3rd Publishers, 1995), 327-328. An effort to use presidential kinship as a way to test pluralist and elite theories of leadership may be found in: Michael P. Merlie and Edward T. Silva. "The First Family: Presidential Kinship and Its Theoretical Implications," in William G. Domhoff, ed. "New Directions in Power Structure Research," in a special edition of *The Insurgent Sociologist*, V (Spring, 1975), 149-170.
6. "Keynote Speech Skewers Bush, Stirs Democrats," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, XLVI (July 23, 1988): 2062.
7. Roberts, *Ancestors*, Calif.: 248-249.
8. Theodore H. White, "Growing Up in the Land of Promise," *The Atlantic Monthly*, CCXLII (August, 1978):33-58.
9. An analysis of Horatio Alger's impact may be found in Richard Weiss, *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), esp. Chapter 2, "Horatio Alger, Jr., and the Gilded Age," 48-63. See also "The American World of Horatio Alger," in Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), 203-255; and Richard Wohl, "The 'Rags to Riches' Story: An Episode of Secular Idealism," in Reinhard Bendix and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Class, Status, and Power* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1953), 388-395.
10. Engels's frustrations with American workingmen are revealed in a letter to Reinhold Sorge on December 31, 1892, as quoted in Hans Kohn, *American Nationalism: An Interpretative Essay* (New York: Collier Books, 1961) 29-30.
11. A typical debunking of the myth may be found in Richard B. Morris, "Where Success Begins: Rags to Riches — Myth and Reality," *The Saturday Review*, 35 (November 21, 1953): 15-16, 65-71. For a political science audience, see Kenneth W. Prewitt, "Social Bias in Leadership Selection, Political Recruitment and Electoral Context," *Journal of Politics*, 33 (May 1971):293-315.
12. Robert D. Putnam, *The Comparative Study of Political Elites* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 185.
13. Edward Pessen, *The Log Cabin Myth: The Social Backgrounds of the Presidents* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).
14. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., "Historians Rate the Presidents," *Life* (November 1, 1948): 65-66 ff.
15. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., "Our Presidents: A Rating by 75 Historians," *New York Times Magazine* (July 29, 1962): 12ff.
16. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1945). In this book, Schlesinger, Jr., argued that Jackson had won the support of eastern urban laborers and was a unifier of common men throughout the nation. The interpretation was seen as a "New Deal" perspective on Jackson.
17. See Marc Landy and Sidney M. Milkis, *Presidential Greatness* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), Chapter 4.
18. Bailey, *Presidential Greatness*, 41.

19. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Ultimate Approval Rating," *New York Times Sunday Magazine* (December 15, 1996): 46-51. The data appear on pp. 48-49. William H. Harrison and James A. Garfield were in office less than a year and are not rated.
20. Thomas A. Bailey, *Presidential Greatness: The Image and the Man from George Washington to the Present*, (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966), esp. Chapter 4, "Measuring the Unmeasurable" and Chapter 5, "The Barriers of Bias." See also C.A. Amlund, "President-Ranking: A Criticism," *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 8 (1964): 309-315.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
22. Gary M. Maranell, "The Evaluation of Presidents: An Extension of the Schlesinger Polls," *Journal of American History*, 59 (June 1970):104-113. See also Gary M. Maranell and Richard A. Dodder, "Political Orientation and the Evaluation of Presidential Prestige: A Study of American Historians," *Social Science Quarterly*, 51 (September 1970): 415-421.
23. The first report issued was Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing, "The Presidential Performance Study: A Progress Report," *Journal of American History*, 70 (December, 1983):. 535-555. See also the Final Report of the Presidential Performance Study, Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing, *Greatness in the White House: Rating the Presidents, Washington through Carter* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988).
24. Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).
25. See "Eisenhower in the White House" in James David Barber's Chapter 5, "The Passive-Negative Presidents," in *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977),156-173.
26. An example of how times have changed, see the differences in the response to David Donald's important but critical, biography of the radical Republican leader U.S. Senator Charles Sumner (R-Mass.). Donald's first volume, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 1960) was highly praised and won the Pulitzer Prize, whereas the second volume, *Charles Sumner and the Rights of Man* (New York: Knopf, 1970) was criticized for not being sensitive to Sumner's efforts to reconstruct the post-Civil War South.
27. The rank-order correlation of the thirty-three presidents ranked in both polls was + .95. Ten presidents, including the top five, were identically ranked. Seven were off by only one place; eleven others by only two places. Three presidents (Cleveland, Hoover, and Pierce) differed by three places. Eisenhower and Andrew Johnson differed by nine places. Of the total variance between the two rankings, the Johnson and Eisenhower discrepancies accounted for 81%. An assessment of six different presidential polls may be found in Arthur B. Murphy, "Evaluating the Presidents of the United States," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 14 (Winter, 1984: 117-126.
28. Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing, *Greatness in the White House*, 14-16.
29. Federalist Society, "Hail to the Chief: Scholars Rank the Presidents," *Wall Street Journal* (October, 2000) www.wsj.com. The article appeared on November 16, 2000.
30. See Schlesinger, Jr., "The Ultimate Approval Rating,".
31. Federalist Society, "Hail to the Chief: Scholars Rank the Presidents," *Wall Street Journal* (October, 2000) www.wsj.com.
32. E. Digby Baltzell, *The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy and Caste in America* (New York: Random House, 1964).
33. E. Digby Baltzell, *Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia: Two Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Class Authority and Leadership*, rev. ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Press, 1996), first published in 1979 by the Free Press. See also his earlier work on the Philadelphia elite, *Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class*, rev. ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1989), first published in 1958 by the Free Press.
34. E. Digby Baltzell and Howard G. Schneiderman, "Social Class in the Oval Office," *Society*, 25 (Sept/Oct, 1998), 48.
35. Quoted by Theodore White in C. David Heymann, *A Woman Named Jackie* (New York: New American Library, 1990), 430; and cited in John Hellman, *The Kennedy*



- Obsession: The American Myth of JFK* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), ix.
36. Louis Harris and Associates, "Closing the Carter Book: Not the Best," *Public Opinion*, 4 (February/March, 1981): 38.
 37. The poll may be found at "Zogby Presidential Greatness Poll," Zogby International at www.zogby.com.



