

In the Spotlight: On Presidents Day, list your top five

By John F. Gilligan, Ph.D.

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Who would you rank as the top five presidents of the United States of America, and why?

Polls by history scholars and the American people dating back to the 1940s always include those you see carved into Mount Rushmore: Washington, Jefferson, Teddy Roosevelt and Lincoln. They were selected because of their roles in preserving the Republic. Franklin D. Roosevelt is now numbered among the big five.

Lincoln and Washington run nip and tuck for first place, with FDR placing second or third depending upon the poll. But one may wonder: “Who cares anyway?”

The reason we care is that the person we elect as president tells us much about ourselves as Americans. Choices betray the depths of our beliefs, attitudes, values, desires and understanding of the times. The presidents embody something about our identity as Americans. It’s the reason why some are loved, others hated.

Lincoln is my favorite. What strikes me most was his sympathy for the human condition, as well as his courage to make hard decisions, life and death ones, and stay the course. And it was his awareness of how discord can destroy a nation, how union requires the ability to forgive and set animosities aside.

Lincoln represents the ideal character for our nation, the way each of us would like to be and see presidents be. Yes, he saved the union, for which the nation is forever thankful. But without George Washington, there would have been no union to save.

Washington was everyone’s choice in 1789. Most households had a picture of Washington in their home as the father of our nation. In the dome of the U.S. Capitol, he is painted rising into the heavens. No president since has received such adulation from the American people. Why?

Action over words. Washington risked his life and fortune fighting on the line with his soldiers to secure the rights of his fellow Americans to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

A simple nod to his troops and he could have been America’s first king.

But with his citizen duty completed, he retired to Mount Vernon. Anything less would have been dishonorable.

All turned to Washington for a trusted person to chair the Constitutional Convention.

And when initiating the great experiment of a “government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” Washington was the unanimous choice for our first president.

The pursuit of the common good, duty, trustworthiness, honor and courage — words rarely spoken today — make Washington the exemplar for presidential leadership.

He reminds us of what it took to make America, and what it takes to be an American.

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