

Which Presidents Belong On a Second Mount Rushmore?

When I first witnessed Mount Rushmore, I was mesmerized by its majestic images, and swept with a stirring wave of patriotism. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt are towering figures etched in granite history as symbols of great American leaders.

But what if we were to carve another Mount Rushmore? Who would be the candidates?

I am neither a historian nor do I have a background in American history. I am just a patriot who loves to pose such questions. So, I will rely on the rankings and explanations of others when I make my selections. Here are synopses of the potential candidates.

Andrew Jackson. Jackson became a national war hero for defeating the British in New Orleans in the War of 1812. Earning the nickname “Old Hickory,” the popular Jackson founded the Democratic Party, and was the first president to wield the veto pen on matters of policy. He shut down the Second Bank of the United States – a powerful bank that Jackson believed was a monopoly, and held too much influence over the economy. He favored the popular vote over the Electoral College system, and threatened to use force against South Carolina for failing to enforce federal tariffs.

James Polk. A one-term President who kept his pledge not to run for reelection. He peacefully procured the Oregon Territory from the British, and went to war with Mexico. The U.S.-Mexican War allowed America to claim much of the American Southwest and California. The country stretched from coast-to-coast for the first time. He also lowered tariffs, and developed an independent Treasury.

Woodrow Wilson. A Nobel Peace Prize winner, “progressive” Wilson also led America through the First World War. Wilson oversaw the passage of women’s right to vote, established the Federal Reserve and the Federal Trade commission, and was a champion of antitrust legislation, labor unions, and tariff reduction. He offered his famous Fourteen Points at the Versailles Treaty after the Great War (World War I). The last of his points proposed a League of Nations to ensure world peace.

Franklin Roosevelt. Our only four-time elected president, Roosevelt presided during two of our nation’s greatest challenges – the Great Depression and World War 2. He introduced the New Deal, the minimum wage, social security, and many more social programs such as the

Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC), the National Recovery Administration, and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. Roosevelt also began large construction projects like the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), and the Works Project Administration (WPA), which carried out public works projects. He was overwhelmingly elected and reelected in landslide victories – a testament to his popularity.

Harry Truman. Thrust into power after FDR's death, Truman was president when Germany surrendered in World War 2. Months later, he ended the War by dropping two atomic bombs on Japan. During Truman's presidency, the Cold War with the Soviet Union began. He instituted the Marshall Plan, initiated the Berlin airlift, and oversaw the creation of NATO. He also signed the charter establishing the United Nations. Truman's "Fair Deal" included a guarantee of equal rights under the law for all citizens. Racial discrimination was prohibited in federal government hiring practices, and the military was desegregated. In 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea, and Truman responded by sending troops.

Dwight Eisenhower. Five Star General and Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during the world's bloodiest and costliest war, Eisenhower was a popular president. He presided over nearly eight years of virtual peace and prosperity, and even some balanced budgets. He ended the Korean War through a truce. His administration oversaw the creation of the Interstate Highway System, and NASA. He signed several signature Civil Rights laws, and sent federal troops into Little Rock Arkansas to enforce school integration.

Ronald Reagan. The remaining potential president, Reagan was a popular president who is generally credited with bringing self-confidence back to America, following the Vietnam War and Watergate. Reagan was a staunch opponent of Communism, and advocated a stronger military (peace through strength), and pursued the Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars). Yet, he also signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty along with Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev. He advocated less regulation, lower taxes, and lower domestic spending. He called for the Berlin Wall to come down, and victory in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Both came to pass shortly after he left office.

In choosing the Presidents for a second Mount Rushmore, I generally ignore popular polls, because they have a tendency to emphasize the more recent presidents. I also try to weigh in favor of more bipartisan scholars. History professors polled today, would undoubtedly favor the more activist, leftist presidents. A convincing reelection victory is another advantage. If the people of that time did not enthusiastically support the president, there probably was a reason. I discount any historian who ranks John F. Kennedy highly. Not

because I do not believe he was a good President, but because he held office less than three years. I favor reality, and not some imaginary Camelot.

Considering all of the above, the leading candidate is Franklin Roosevelt. In nearly every survey, both historians and the American public choose FDR as the foremost President to place on Mount Rushmore – or in our case, a second Mount Rushmore. However, FDR's selection is not without some reservations. We often hear that "America" incarcerated 100,000 Japanese-Americans during World War 2. Actually, it was FDR that gave the Executive Order. His attempts to end the Great Depression most certainly failed. Still, when the first stone is chipped, it should be carving his image.

Andrew Jackson (whose face is on the twenty-dollar bill – at least for now) is held in high esteem by historians. He was a slave owner, however, and forced the migration of Native Americans (the Trail of Tears is attributed to Jackson). Consequently, I fail to see how he would ever be placed on another Mount Rushmore.

I am certain that historians would be inclined to add another President from the 19th Century. I suspect James Polk would be the acceptable choice. James Madison (the principle author of the Constitution) and James Monroe (and the Monroe Doctrine) fail to rank high enough in the opinion of experts. However, James Polk was a slave owner, and that would certainly count against him.

Wilson was both a success and a failure. He initially opposed women's suffrage, and then later supported it. He campaigned on the slogan, "He kept us out of war," then took the country to war almost immediately after his second inauguration. The League of Nations he helped to create, ultimately failed to bring the peace Wilson had envisioned. The list of actions that make Wilson unpopular with many today are: he shut down opposition newspapers, arrested war dissenters, initiated military interventions in Latin American countries, was unequivocally a racist and a bigot, and led America unnecessarily into the Great War. Still, he was a progressive, activist president, and that is popular among the intelligentsia today.

Both Truman and Eisenhower also rank very high. Their place in history has grown over time, and it is tempting to select both of them. However, if they were both chosen, there would be a succession of three consecutive presidents (along with FDR). If I had to choose between Truman and Eisenhower, then I would select the more popular Eisenhower. Truman was not even expected to be reelected in 1948, and his popularity suffered in the wake and shadow of FDR.

That leaves Ronald Reagan. Most Americans would probably agree with Reagan's selection. However, the opposition would be virulent. I have read enough opinion pieces by the political left to know that they believe our country's slide into descent began with Ronald Reagan's election. I was not alive to experience the Woodrow Wilson era, but I was alive to remember the decades that preceded Reagan. They were terrible years, and any attempt to portray them otherwise is a complete rewriting of history.

Franklin Roosevelt and Dwight D. Eisenhower belong on a second Mount Rushmore. Historians would probably select James Polk – despite his slaves – and I will defer to them. That leaves Wilson and Reagan. If there is ever another Mount Rushmore, Woodrow Wilson will probably be selected, but not without controversy. Truman would still have a chance depending on who was deciding. If I had a vote, I would select Ronald Reagan over both of them.

As for Madison, Monroe, Jackson, Lyndon Johnson, and perhaps even a Truman, Clinton, or Obama, they can wait for another day. And possibly a third Mount Rushmore.

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