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George takes a back seat to Abe

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WASHINGTON - When Americans rate their greatest president, they do not agree on who tops the list but seem to rank a half-dozen chief executives ahead of the nation's first.

George Washington tied for sixth place in one recent poll and rated seventh in another.

"Let's face it - 'First in war, first in peace, and seventh in the hearts of his countrymen,' doesn't sound very impressive," said Ted Widmer, a history professor at Washington College in Chestertown, Md.

Washington has been considered the "Father of His Country" by schoolchildren for generations. Shortly after his death in 1799, Congress adopted the description Henry Lee used in his eulogy of his fellow Virginian: "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

But in a poll commissioned by Washington College for Presidents Day, Americans rated Abraham Lincoln as the greatest president. A CNN-USA Today-Gallup poll put Ronald Reagan on top.

Many young adults have only sketchy information about Washington, according to the college's poll. Asked who was the greatest president, 20 percent of those polled chose Lincoln. Reagan was picked by 15 percent, Franklin D. Roosevelt by 12 percent, John F. Kennedy by 11 percent, Bill Clinton by 10 percent and George W. Bush by 8 percent. Washington was picked by 6 percent.

In the CNN-USA Today-Gallup poll, Reagan had 20 percent, followed by Clinton and Lincoln in the midteens and then FDR and JFK at 12 percent.

The poll done for the college looked at how much the public knows about Washington and found that 46 percent knew that Washington led the Continental Army during the American Revolution.

Two-thirds knew his wife's name, Martha, and that he lived at Mount Vernon, his estate on the banks of the Potomac River in Virginia. Not quite half of young adults knew the name of Washington's wife or where he lived.

"You learn about George Washington in elementary school," said Charles Quigley, executive director of the Center for Civic Education. "The push toward accountability and testing in math and reading has tended to diminish greatly the amount of time spent on social studies."

Widmer said the college hopes to focus more attention on the first president with a \$50,000 book award for the year's best book on Washington, the American Revolution or the early days of the republic. The school is helping to sponsor the book prize with the organization that runs Mount Vernon and the Gilder Lehrman Institute for American History.

The college's poll of 800 adults, conducted by Schulman, Ronca and Bucuvalas, and the CNN-USA Today-Gallup poll of 1,008 adults were taken Feb. 7-10. The college's poll had a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 4 percentage points, compared with 3 percentage points for the Gallup Poll.

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