The Top 100

The most influential figures in American history.

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Also, weigh in—who should have been on this list that wasn't? Who shouldn't have been on this list that was? Give us your feedback here.

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1 Abraham Lincoln
He saved the Union, freed the slaves, and presided over America’s second founding.

2 George Washington
He made the United States possible—not only by defeating a king, but by declining to become one himself.

3 Thomas Jefferson
The author of the five most important words in American history: “All men are created equal.”

4 Franklin Delano Roosevelt
He said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” and then he proved it.

5 Alexander Hamilton
Soldier, banker, and political scientist, he set in motion an agrarian nation’s transformation into an industrial power.

6 Benjamin Franklin
The Founder-of-all-trades—scientist, printer, writer, diplomat, inventor, and more; like his country, he contained multitudes.

7 John Marshall
The defining chief justice, he established the Supreme Court as the equal of the other two federal branches.

8 Martin Luther King Jr.
His dream of racial equality is still elusive, but no one did more to make it real.
9 Thomas Edison
It wasn’t just the lightbulb; the Wizard of Menlo Park was the most prolific inventor in American history.

10 Woodrow Wilson
He made the world safe for U.S. interventionism, if not for democracy.

11 John D. Rockefeller
The man behind Standard Oil set the mold for our tycoons—first by making money, then by giving it away.

12 Ulysses S. Grant
He was a poor president, but he was the general Lincoln needed; he also wrote the greatest political memoir in American history.

13 James Madison
He fathered the Constitution and wrote the Bill of Rights.

14 Henry Ford
He gave us the assembly line and the Model T, and sparked America’s love affair with the automobile.

15 Theodore Roosevelt
Whether busting trusts or building canals, he embodied the “strenuous life” and blazed a trail for twentieth-century America.

16 Mark Twain
Author of our national epic, he was the most unsentimental observer of our national life.

17 Ronald Reagan
The amiable architect of both the conservative realignment and the Cold War’s end.

18 Andrew Jackson
The first great populist: he found America a republic and left it a democracy.

19 Thomas Paine
The voice of the American Revolution, and our first great radical.

20 Andrew Carnegie
The original self-made man forged America’s industrial might and became one of the nation’s greatest philanthropists.

21 Harry Truman
An accidental president, this machine politician ushered in the Atomic Age and then the Cold War.

22 Walt Whitman
He sang of America and shaped the country’s conception of itself.

23 Wright Brothers
They got us all off the ground.

24 Alexander Graham Bell
By inventing the telephone, he opened the age of telecommunications and shrunk the
25 John Adams
His leadership made the American Revolution possible; his devotion to republicanism made it succeed.

26 Walt Disney
The quintessential entertainer-entrepreneur, he wielded unmatched influence over our childhood.

27 Eli Whitney
His gin made cotton king and sustained an empire for slavery.

28 Dwight Eisenhower
He won a war and two elections, and made everybody like Ike.

29 Earl Warren
His Supreme Court transformed American society and bequeathed to us the culture wars.

30 Elizabeth Cady Stanton
One of the first great American feminists, she fought for social reform and women’s right to vote.

31 Henry Clay
One of America’s greatest legislators and orators, he forged compromises that held off civil war for decades.

32 Albert Einstein
His greatest scientific work was done in Europe, but his humanity earned him undying fame in America.

33 Ralph Waldo Emerson
The bard of individualism, he relied on himself—and told us all to do the same.

34 Jonas Salk
His vaccine for polio eradicated one of the world’s worst plagues.

35 Jackie Robinson
He broke baseball’s color barrier and embodied integration’s promise.

36 William Jennings Bryan
“The Great Commoner” lost three presidential elections, but his populism transformed the country.

37 J. P. Morgan
The great financier and banker was the prototype for all the Wall Street barons who followed.

38 Susan B. Anthony
She was the country’s most eloquent voice for women’s equality under the law.

39 Rachel Carson
The author of *Silent Spring* was godmother to the environmental movement.

40 John Dewey
He sought to make the public school a training ground for democratic life.
41 Harriet Beecher Stowe
Her *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* inspired a generation of abolitionists and set the stage for civil war.

42 Eleanor Roosevelt
She used the first lady’s office and the mass media to become “first lady of the world.”

43 W. E. B. DuBois
One of America’s great intellectuals, he made the “problem of the color line” his life’s work.

44 Lyndon Baines Johnson
His brilliance gave us civil-rights laws; his stubbornness gave us Vietnam.

45 Samuel F. B. Morse
Before the Internet, there was Morse code.

46 William Lloyd Garrison
Through his newspaper, *The Liberator*, he became the voice of abolition.

47 Frederick Douglass
After escaping from slavery, he pricked the nation’s conscience with an eloquent accounting of its crimes.

48 Robert Oppenheimer
The father of the atomic bomb and the regretful midwife of the nuclear era.

49 Frederick Law Olmsted
The genius behind New York’s Central Park, he inspired the greening of America’s cities.

50 James K. Polk
This one-term president’s Mexican War landgrab gave us California, Texas, and the Southwest.

51 Margaret Sanger
The ardent champion of birth control—and of the sexual freedom that came with it.

52 Joseph Smith
The founder of Mormonism, America’s most famous homegrown faith.

53 Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.
Known as “The Great Dissenter,” he wrote Supreme Court opinions that continue to shape American jurisprudence.

54 Bill Gates
The Rockefeller of the Information Age, in business and philanthropy alike.

55 John Quincy Adams
The Monroe Doctrine’s real author, he set nineteenth-century America’s diplomatic course.

56 Horace Mann
His tireless advocacy of universal public schooling earned him the title “The Father of
57 Robert E. Lee
He was a good general but a better symbol, embodying conciliation in defeat.

58 John C. Calhoun
The voice of the antebellum South, he was slavery’s most ardent defender.

59 Louis Sullivan
The father of architectural modernism, he shaped the defining American building: the skyscraper.

60 William Faulkner
The most gifted chronicler of America’s tormented and fascinating South.

61 Samuel Gompers
The country’s greatest labor organizer, he made the golden age of unions possible.

62 William James
The mind behind Pragmatism, America’s most important philosophical school.

63 George Marshall
As a general, he organized the American effort in World War II; as a statesman, he rebuilt Western Europe.

64 Jane Addams
The founder of Hull House, she became the secular saint of social work.

65 Henry David Thoreau
The original American dropout, he has inspired seekers of authenticity for 150 years.

66 Elvis Presley
The king of rock and roll. Enough said.

67 P. T. Barnum
The circus impresario’s taste for spectacle paved the way for blockbuster movies and reality TV.

68 James D. Watson
He codiscovered DNA’s double helix, revealing the code of life to scientists and entrepreneurs alike.

69 James Gordon Bennett
As the founding publisher of The New York Herald, he invented the modern American newspaper.

70 Lewis and Clark
They went west to explore, and millions followed in their wake.

71 Noah Webster
He didn’t create American English, but his dictionary defined it.

72 Sam Walton
He promised us “Every Day Low Prices,” and we took him up on the offer.
73 **Cyrus McCormick**  
His mechanical reaper spelled the end of traditional farming, and the beginning of industrial agriculture.

74 **Brigham Young**  
What Joseph Smith founded, Young preserved, leading the Mormons to their promised land.

75 **George Herman “Babe” Ruth**  
He saved the national pastime in the wake of the Black Sox scandal—and permanently linked sports and celebrity.

76 **Frank Lloyd Wright**  
America’s most significant architect, he was the archetype of the visionary artist at odds with capitalism.

77 **Betty Friedan**  
She spoke to the discontent of housewives everywhere—and inspired a revolution in gender roles.

78 **John Brown**  
Whether a hero, a fanatic, or both, he provided the spark for the Civil War.

79 **Louis Armstrong**  
His talent and charisma took jazz from the cathouses of Storyville to Broadway, television, and beyond.

80 **William Randolph Hearst**  
The press baron who perfected yellow journalism and helped start the Spanish-American War.

81 **Margaret Mead**  
With *Coming of Age in Samoa*, she made anthropology relevant—and controversial.

82 **George Gallup**  
He asked Americans what they thought, and the politicians listened.

83 **James Fenimore Cooper**  
The novels are unreadable, but he was the first great mythologizer of the frontier.

84 **Thurgood Marshall**  
As a lawyer and a Supreme Court justice, he was the legal architect of the civil-rights revolution.

85 **Ernest Hemingway**  
His spare style defined American modernism, and his life made machismo a cliché.

86 **Mary Baker Eddy**  
She got off her sickbed and founded Christian Science, which promised spiritual healing to all.

87 **Benjamin Spock**  
With a single book—and a singular approach—he changed American parenting.
88 Enrico Fermi
A giant of physics, he helped develop quantum theory and was instrumental in building the atomic bomb.

89 Walter Lippmann
The last man who could swing an election with a newspaper column.

90 Jonathan Edwards
Forget the fire and brimstone: his subtle eloquence made him the country’s most influential theologian.

91 Lyman Beecher
Harriet Beecher Stowe’s clergyman father earned fame as an abolitionist and an evangelist.

92 John Steinbeck
As the creator of Tom Joad, he chronicled Depression-era misery.

93 Nat Turner
He was the most successful rebel slave; his specter would stalk the white South for a century.

94 George Eastman
The founder of Kodak democratized photography with his handy rolls of film.

95 Sam Goldwyn
A producer for forty years, he was the first great Hollywood mogul.

96 Ralph Nader
He made the cars we drive safer; thirty years later, he made George W. Bush the president.

97 Stephen Foster
America’s first great songwriter, he brought us “O! Susanna” and “My Old Kentucky Home.”

98 Booker T. Washington
As an educator and a champion of self-help, he tried to lead black America up from slavery.

99 Richard Nixon
He broke the New Deal majority, and then broke his presidency on a scandal that still haunts America.

100 Herman Melville
*Moby Dick* was a flop at the time, but Melville is remembered as the American Shakespeare.

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