Meet the 100 Most Significant Americans of All Time

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A new, special issue of *Smithsonian* magazine attempts the impossible: to list out the most significant people in United States history

How much does Thomas Paine matter? More than Harriet Beecher Stowe? Less than Elvis? On a par with Dwight Eisenhower? Would you have answered these questions differently ten years ago? Will you answer them differently ten years from now? In a culture so saturated with information and so fragmented by the search possibilities of the Internet, how do we measure historical significance?

Steven Skiena and Charles B. Ward have come up with a novel answer. Skiena is the Distinguished Teaching Professor of Computer Science at Stony Brook University and a co-founder of the social-analytics company General Sentiment. Ward is an engineer at Google, specializing in ranking methodologies. Their answer involves high-level math. They subject the historical zeitgeist to the brute rigors of quantitative analysis in a recent book, *Who's Bigger? Where Historical Figures* Really *Rank*.

Who's Bigger?: Where Historical Figures Really Rank

In this fascinating book, Steve Skiena and Charles Ward bring quantitative analysis to bear on ranking and comparing historical reputations. They evaluate each person by aggregating the traces of millions of opinions, just as Google ranks webpages.

Simply put, Skiena and Ward have developed an algorithmic method of ranking historical figures, just as Google ranks web pages. But while Google ranks web pages according to relevance to your search terms, Skiena and Ward rank people according to their historical significance, which they define as "the result of social and cultural forces acting on the mass of an individual's achievement." Their rankings account not only for what individuals have done, but also for how well others remember and value them for it.

Their method requires a massive amount of big data on historical reputation. This they found in the English-language Wikipedia, which has more than 840,000 pages devoted to individuals from all times and places, plus data extracted from the 15 million books Google has scanned. They analyzed this data to produce a single score for each person, using a formula that incorporates the number of links to each page, the number of page visits, the length of each entry and the frequency of edits to each page. Their algorithms differentiate between two kinds of historical reputation, what they call "gravitas" and "celebrity." Finally, their method requires a means of correcting for the "decay" in historical reputation that comes with the passage of time; they developed an algorithm for that, too. By their reckoning, Jesus, Napoleon, Muhammad, William Shakespeare and Abraham Lincoln rank as the top five figures in world history. Their book ranks more than 1,000 individuals from all around the world, providing a new way to look at history.

Skiena and Ward would be the first to acknowledge that their method has limitations. Their concept of significance has less to do with achievement than with an individual's strength as an Internet meme—how vividly he or she remains in our collective memory. The English-language Wikipedia favors Americans over foreigners, men over women, white people over others and English speakers over everyone else. In their rankings of Americans only, past presidents occupy 39 of the first 100 spots, suggesting an ex-officio bias.

That's where we come in. *Smithsonian* magazine has been covering American history in depth from its inaugural issue, published in 1970. Among the Smithsonian Institution museums we work closely with is the National Museum of American History. By synthesizing our expertise with the systematic rigor of Skiena and Ward's rankings, we sought to combine the best of quantitative measures and qualitative judgment.

First, we asked Skiena and Ward to separate figures significant to American history from the world population. Then, rather than simply taking their top 100, we developed categories that we believe are significant, and populated our categories with people in Skiena and Ward's order (even if they ranked below 100). This system helped mitigate the biases of Wikipedia.

We have highlighted what we decided was the most interesting choice within each category with a slightly fuller biographical sketch. And finally, we made an Editors' Choice in each category, an 11th American whose significance we're willing to argue for.

Argument, of course, has been integral to American historiography from the beginning. When Andrew Gelman, a professor of statistics and political science at Columbia University, wrote that *Who's Bigger?* "is a guaranteed argument-starter," he meant it as a compliment. We hope our list will spark a few passionate discussions as well.

Buy the 100 Significant Americans special issue

Here is our list; to read about what made each person siginficant, pick up a copy of the special issue at a newsstand near you.

Trailblazers

Christopher Columbus
Henry Hudson
Amerigo Vespucci
John Smith
Giovanni da Verrazzano
John Muir
Meriwether Lewis and William Clark
Sacagawea
Kit Carson
Neil Armstrong
John Wesley Powell

Rebels & resisters

Martin Luther King Jr.
Robert E. Lee
Thomas Paine
John Brown
Frederick Douglass
Susan B. Anthony
W.E.B. Du Bois
Tecumseh
Sitting Bull
Elizabeth Cady Stanton
Malcolm X

Presidents

Abraham Lincoln
George Washington
Thomas Jefferson
Theodore Roosevelt
Ulysses S. Grant
Ronald W. Reagan
George W. Bush
Franklin Delano Roosevelt
Woodrow Wilson
James Madison
Andrew Jackson

First Women

Pocahontas
Eleanor Roosevelt
Hillary Clinton
Sarah Palin
Martha Washington
Helen Keller
Sojourner Truth
Jane Addams
Edith Wharton
Bette Davis
Oprah Winfrey

Outlaws

Benedict Arnold
Jesse James
John Wilkes Booth
Al Capone
Billy the Kid
William M. "Boss" Tweed
Charles Manson
Wild Bill Hickok
Lee Harvey Oswald
John Dillinger
Lucky Luciano

Artists

Frank Lloyd Wright
Andy Warhol
Frederick Law Olmsted
James Abbott MacNeill Whistler
Jackson Pollock
John James Audubon
Georgia O'Keeffe
Thomas Eakins
Thomas Nast
Alfred Stieglitz
Ansel Adams

Religious figures

Joseph Smith Jr.
William Penn
Brigham Young
Roger Williams
Anne Hutchinson
Jonathan Edwards
L. Ron Hubbard
Ellen G. White
Cotton Mather
Mary Baker Eddy
Billy Graham

Pop icons

Mark Twain
Elvis Presley
Madonna
Bob Dylan
Michael Jackson
Charlie Chaplin
Jimi Hendrix
Marilyn Monroe
Frank Sinatra
Louis Armstrong
Mary Pickford

Empire-builders

Andrew Carnegie
Henry Ford
John D. Rockefeller
J.P. Morgan
Walt Disney
Thomas Alva Edison
William Randolph Hearst
Howard Hughes
Bill Gates
Cornelius Vanderbilt
Steve Jobs

Athletes

Babe Ruth
Muhammad Ali
Jackie Robinson
James Naismith
Arnold Schwarzenegger
Ty Cobb
Michael Jordan
Hulk Hogan

Jim Thorpe
Secretariat
Billie Jean King