

Obama, Jesus and Martin Luther King Top List of America's "Heroes"

ROCHESTER, N.Y. – February 19, 2009 – When [The Harris Poll®](#) asked a cross-section of adult Americans to say whom they admire enough to call their heroes, President Barack Obama was mentioned most often, followed by Jesus Christ and Martin Luther King. Others in the top ten, in descending order, were Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, Abraham Lincoln, John McCain, John F. Kennedy, Chesley Sullenberger and Mother Teresa.

These heroes were named spontaneously. Those surveyed were not shown or read a list of people to choose from. The Harris Poll was conducted online among a sample of 2,634 U.S. adults (aged 18 and over) by [Harris Interactive®](#) between January 12 and 19, 2009.

Changes Since 2001

This question was first asked in a Harris Poll in 2001. In that survey Jesus Christ was the hero mentioned most often, followed by Martin Luther King, Colin Powell, John F. Kennedy and Mother Teresa.

The biggest changes upwards on this list into the top ten since 2001, apart from Barack Obama, who was not mentioned then, are:

- George W. Bush was rated only 19th in July 2001, when he had been president for six months, and who is now number 5 on the list.
- John McCain, who was not in the top 20 in 2001, is now number 7.
- Chesley Sullenberger, the pilot who landed his jet safely in the Hudson River, who is ranked number 9.

Heroes who were in the top 10 in 2001 who have fallen sharply this year include:

- Colin Powell who was number 3 and is now number 16.
- John Wayne who was number 8 and has dropped out of the top 20.
- Michael Jordan who was number 9 and is no longer in the top 20.
- Mother Teresa who was number 5 and is now number 10.

What Makes a Hero?

The public gives multiple reasons to explain their choice of heroes. Those mentioned most often include:

- "Doing what's right regardless of personal consequences" (89%);
- "Not giving up until the goal is accomplished" (83%)
- "Doing more than what other people expect of them" (82%)
- "Overcoming adversity" (81%), and
- "Staying level-headed in a crisis" (81%).

Some Former Heroes No Longer Considered Heroes

When asked to name people who used to be their heroes but who they no longer consider as heroes, the people mentioned most often are Colin Powell, George W. Bush, John McCain, Bill Clinton and John F. Kennedy. In 2001, Bill Clinton topped this list.

So What? A Few Observations and Comments

1. The fact that President Obama is mentioned more often than Jesus Christ should not be misinterpreted. No list was used and nobody was asked to choose between them.
2. It is noteworthy that the top ten include six dead heroes (including Jesus Christ and Martin Luther King) and four live ones.
3. The top 10 list includes five presidents. The top 20 includes eight.
4. Hillary Clinton, now Secretary of State, ranks higher on the list (#12) than her husband President Bill Clinton (#16).

**TABLE 1
HEROES MENTIONED MOST OFTEN**

"Now I'd like to ask you some questions about heroes. First of all, please tell me who you admire enough to call a hero?" (UP TO THREE ANSWERS)
(Spontaneous, Unprompted Replies)
(All mentioned by 1% or more of adults)

Base: All Adults

	Rank	
	July 2001	January 2009
Barack Obama	*	1
Jesus Christ	1	2
Martin Luther King	2	3
Ronald Reagan	6	4
George W. Bush	19	5
Abraham Lincoln	7	6
John McCain	*	7
John F. Kennedy	4	8
Chesley Sullenberger	*	9
Mother Teresa	5	10
God	*	11
Hillary Clinton	29	12
Billy Graham	*	=13
Franklin Delano Roosevelt	15	=13
Mahatma Gandhi	*	15
Colin Powell	3	=16
George Washington	13	=16
Bill Clinton	10	=16
Condoleeza Rice	*	19
Oprah Winfrey	14	20
Sarah Palin	*	21
General George S. Patton	*	=22
Bill Gates	*	=22

*Less than 1% in 2001.

"=" prior to a number indicates a tie

DROPPED OFF OF LIST IN 2009

John Wayne (was 8th), Michael Jordan (was 9th), John Glenn (was 11th), Norman Schwartzkopf (was 12th), Princess Diana (was 16th), Dwight Eisenhower (was 17th), Pope John Paul (was 18th), Jimmy Carter (was 20th), Nelson Mandela (was 21st), Jess Jackson (was 22nd), Tiger Woods (was 23rd), Malcolm X (was 24th), Thomas Jefferson (was 25th), Eleanor Roosevelt (was 26th), Muhammad Ali (was 27th), Venus Williams (was 28th), Neil Armstrong (was 30th)

**TABLE 2
HEROES - SUMMARY**

"Now I'd like to ask you some questions about heroes. First of all, please tell me who you admire enough to call a hero?" (UP TO THREE ANSWERS)

Base: All adults

	July 2001	January 2009
	%	%
A public figure	57	49
Father	13	8
Mother	9	6
Other relative	8	1
Grandparent	4	2
Sibling	3	1
Friend	2	1

NOTE: Not sure/no heroes excluded.

**TABLE 3
MAJOR REASONS FOR THINKING PEOPLE AS HEROES**

"Thinking about all the people you mentioned as heroes – either family, friends or people in public life – please think about the person you most admire. Do you admire this person for (READ EACH ITEM). Is this a major reason, a minor reason or not a reason at all?"

Base: All who named a hero

	A Major Reason	
	July 2001	January 2009
	%	%
Doing what's right regardless of personal consequences	85	89
Not giving up until the goal is accomplished	86	83
Doing more than what other people expect of them	81	82
Overcoming adversity	79	81
Staying level-headed in a crisis	79	81
Willingness to risk personal safety to help others	72	74
Changing society for the better	77	74
Not expecting personal recognition	68	72
Commanding the support and respect of others	72	66

TABLE 4
FORMER PUBLIC FIGURE HEROES WHO ARE NO LONGER CONSIDERED HEROES
 "Is there any person you can think of whom you used to consider a hero but now do not?"
 (All mentioned by 1% or more of adults)

Base: All adults

	Rank	
	July 2001	January 2009
Colin Powell	*	1
George W. Bush	*	2
John McCain	*	3
Bill Clinton	1	4
John F. Kennedy	2	5
Jimmy Carter	6	6
Hillary Clinton	7	7
O.J. Simpson	3	8
Barack Obama	*	=9
Ronald Reagan	*	=9
Martin Luther King	*	=9
Jesse Jackson	4	=12
Oprah Winfrey	*	=12

*Less than 1% in year asked

"=" prior to a number indicates a tie

DROPPED OFF OF LIST IN 2009

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (was 5th), John Glenn (was 8th), Thomas Jefferson (was 9th),
 Rosie O'Donnell (was 10th)

TABLE 5
MAJOR REASONS FOR THINKING FORMER HEROES ARE NO LONGER HEROES

"Thinking about this person whom you longer consider a hero, please tell me how much each of the following is a reason why you do no longer admire this person. Do you not admire this person because they (READ EACH ITEM)? Is this a major reason, a minor reason or not a reason at all?"

Base: All who named a hero

	A Major Reason	
	July 2001	January 2009
	%	%
Do not demonstrate leadership	35	49
Became too concerned about getting personal recognition	42	48
Conduct themselves in an immoral or unethical way	71	44
Are no longer interested in helping others	28	37
Are no longer setting goals for themselves	19	27
Were replaced by someone else you now consider your hero	12	19

Methodology

This Harris Poll® was conducted online within the United States between January 12 and 19, 2009, among 2,634 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words "margin of error" as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure,

unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in the Harris Interactive panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

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Press Contact:

Corporate Communications

Harris Interactive

585-272-8400

press@harrisinteractive.net

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