

HAIL TO THE BEEF

When the fate of America rests on a president’s shoulders, it helps if those delts have some size. With that in mind, here are the top 10 fittest presidents of the United States **BY JON FINKEL**
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ISMAEL ROLDAN

President Martin Van Buren had many nicknames, but Martin Van Biceps wasn’t one of them. That’s because when it comes to U.S. presidents, there are strengths (Van Buren blocked Texas’ first attempt to join the United States because it would have added slave territory) and then there’s strength (standing at 5’6” and having a “trim” physique, the one-term Van Buren had a hard enough time picking up votes, let alone dumbbells). 🏋️ Throughout the long history of the highest office in the land, a few presidents have had both — George Washington led our country to independence and is rumored to have thrown a stone on top of Virginia’s Natural Bridge, more than 215 feet in the air; and some have had neither — Franklin Pierce was called “dough face” by his enemies and also managed to add several slave states, helping to set the stage for the Civil War. 🏋️ But between the first George and the current George, several commanders in chief have stood as tall in the athletic arena as in the political one. Eschewing partisanship for pecs and agendas for abs, this is a look at the top 10 fittest presidents of the United States.

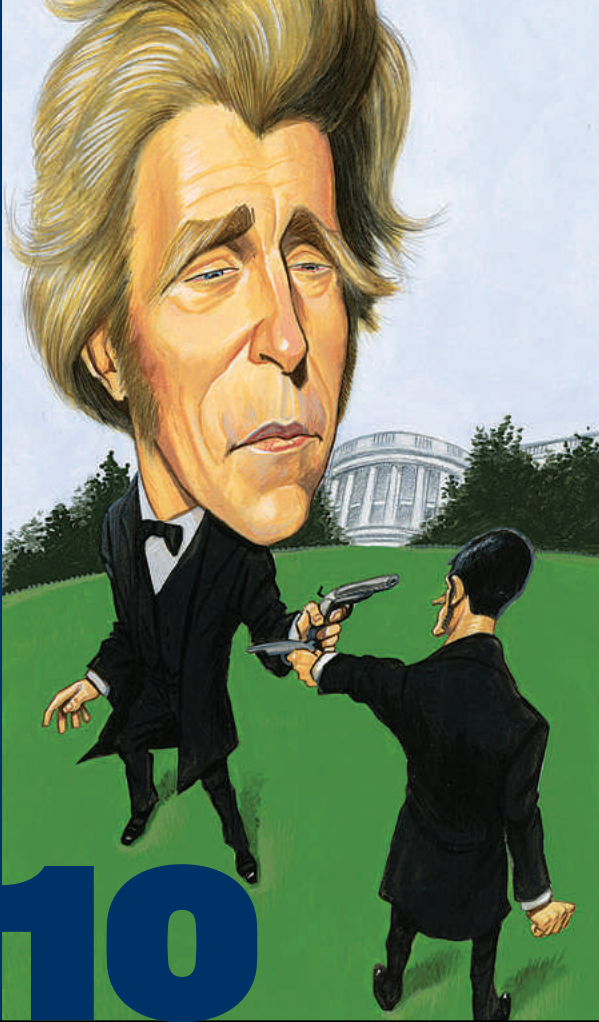
ANDREW JACKSON 7th President (1829–1837)

>> **HEIGHT:** 6'1" | **WEIGHT:** 200 pounds (estimated)

Being a fit sportsman in the Age of Jackson meant excelling at three things: horse-riding, dueling and fighting. As evidenced by the fact that our seventh president has an entire age named after him, Old Hickory wins the commander in chief bad-ass triple crown.

Historians conservatively estimate that he fought and won at least 14 duels, but the number may be well above 50. Whatever the actual stat, Jackson always managed to survive, though he lived much of his life with two bullets lodged in his body.

When a gun wasn’t available, Jackson beat up people with his bare hands or, most famously, with his cane. This incident occurred when a man named Richard Lawrence tried to assassinate him, jumping out of a crowd with two pistols aimed at the president. When the guns didn’t fire immediately, Jackson bull-rushed him and beat him to the ground — stopping only when none other than Davy Crockett pulled Lawrence away. Like a 19th-century Chuck Norris, Andrew Jackson never got scared half to death — death got scared half to Andrew Jackson.



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ABRAHAM LINCOLN 16th President (1861–1865)

>> **HEIGHT:** 6'4" | **WEIGHT:** 190 pounds

During a scene in the movie *Fight Club*, Brad Pitt says that if he could fight anybody in history, he’d fight Abraham Lincoln because he was a big guy with a big reach. “Skinny guys fight till they’re burger,” he says. That may be true, but Tyler Durden, Pitt’s character, needs to brush up on his history, because in the Illinois Rail Splitter’s younger days, he could’ve been known as the Illinois Jaw Splitter.

Lincoln’s most famous battle occurred in 1831 when he took down local legendary fighter Jack Armstrong in New Salem, Illinois. Armstrong was the Kimbo Slice of his day — a raw brawler who was strong as an ox. The most reliable account of the fight says it ended when Abe grabbed Armstrong by the neck, held him at arm’s length and “shook him like a little boy.” Ever the politician, Lincoln soon made Armstrong one of his best friends.

When he wasn’t embarrassing tough guys or ending slavery, Lincoln was an avid handball player. In fact, the Smithsonian still has his lucky ball — though he obviously forgot it when he went to Ford’s Theatre in 1865.



GEORGE W. BUSH

43rd President (2001–present)

>> **HEIGHT:** 5'11" | **WEIGHT:** 195 pounds

If presidents literally ran for office, George W. Bush would win by a landslide against any of his predecessors. He has appeared on the cover of *Runner's World*, completed the 1993 Houston Marathon in 3 hours and 44 minutes (as a 46-year-old) and even had a treadmill installed on Air Force One so he can get his runner's high at 35,000 feet. And when he attended the Olympics in Beijing, he got his workout in by mountain biking the official Olympic course.

When he's not traveling, Bush runs several times a week, and he's also a bit of a gym rat, hitting the White House weight room almost daily (he can bench 185 pounds for five reps). When it comes to where W ranks on the all-time presidential athlete list, he's by far the best at that most important of responsibilities: throwing out the first pitch at baseball games. William Howard Taft started this tradition in 1910, and although Bush throws more strikes, Taft could eat more Fenway Franks.



JOHN F. KENNEDY

35th President (1961–1963)

>> **HEIGHT:** 6' | **WEIGHT:** 175 pounds

JFK would probably rank much higher on this list if he hadn't suffered from chronic back pain, but like Gale Sayers and Bo Jackson after him, we'll never know exactly where his football career would've gone had he not been injured. What we do know is that he played football in high school and at Harvard before his back gave out.

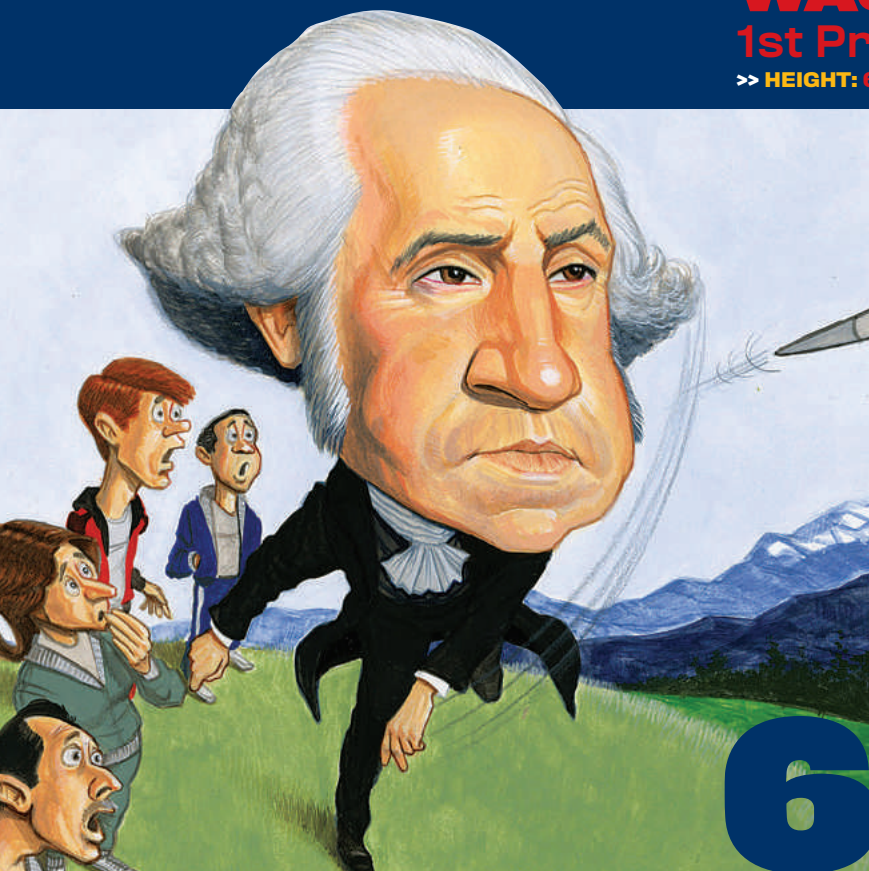
He also played golf, tennis and basketball, but the sport he excelled at was swimming. In the pool, Kennedy was one of the fastest swimmers for the Crimson swim team, but his aquatic ability really came into play during World War II. When his patrol torpedo boat crashed, the future president dragged shipmate Patrick McMahon more than 3.5 miles through the ocean to safety using a makeshift rope held in his teeth.

If that weren't enough, while the rest of his crew was marooned on an island, Kennedy swam the shipping lanes every day, hoping to flag down a boat to rescue them (which he eventually did). If only *Lost*'s Jack Shephard were as courageous as Jack Kennedy.

GEORGE WASHINGTON

1st President (1789–1797)

>> **HEIGHT:** 6'2" | **WEIGHT:** 220 pounds (estimated)



The average height for men in the late 1700s was 5'8". At 6'2", Gen. Washington towered over his men and was the picture of intimidation when on a horse. Widely regarded as the best rider in America, Washington's athletic talent wasn't limited to equine excellence.

In fact, Washington was virtually the Bruce Jenner of his day, dominating his peers in a variety of events. He once threw a piece of slate shaped like a silver dollar clear across the Rappahannock River at Fredericksburg; while many have tried to duplicate this feat, all have failed.

Another legend holds that while watching a bunch of men compete in pitching the iron bar (a heavy javelin) for distance at Mount Vernon, Washington, without taking off his coat, hurled the bar well beyond any of the other marked throws and replied, "When you beat my pitch, young gentlemen, I'll try again." This makes him not only the first commander in chief but also the first commander in trash talk.

RONALD REAGAN

40th President (1981–1989)

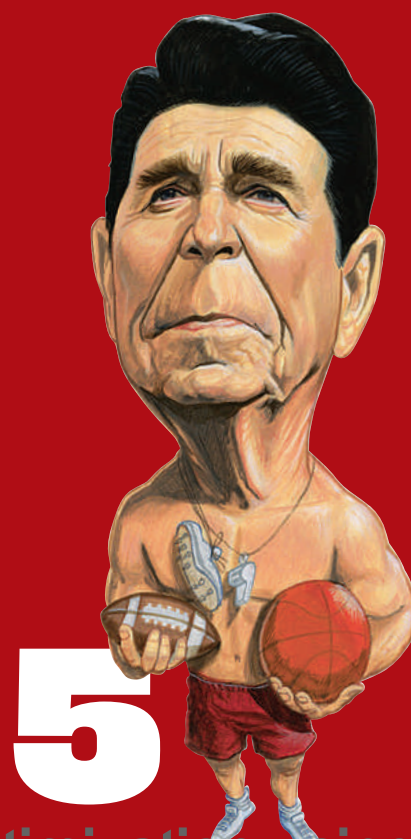
>> **HEIGHT:** 6'1" | **WEIGHT:** 185 pounds

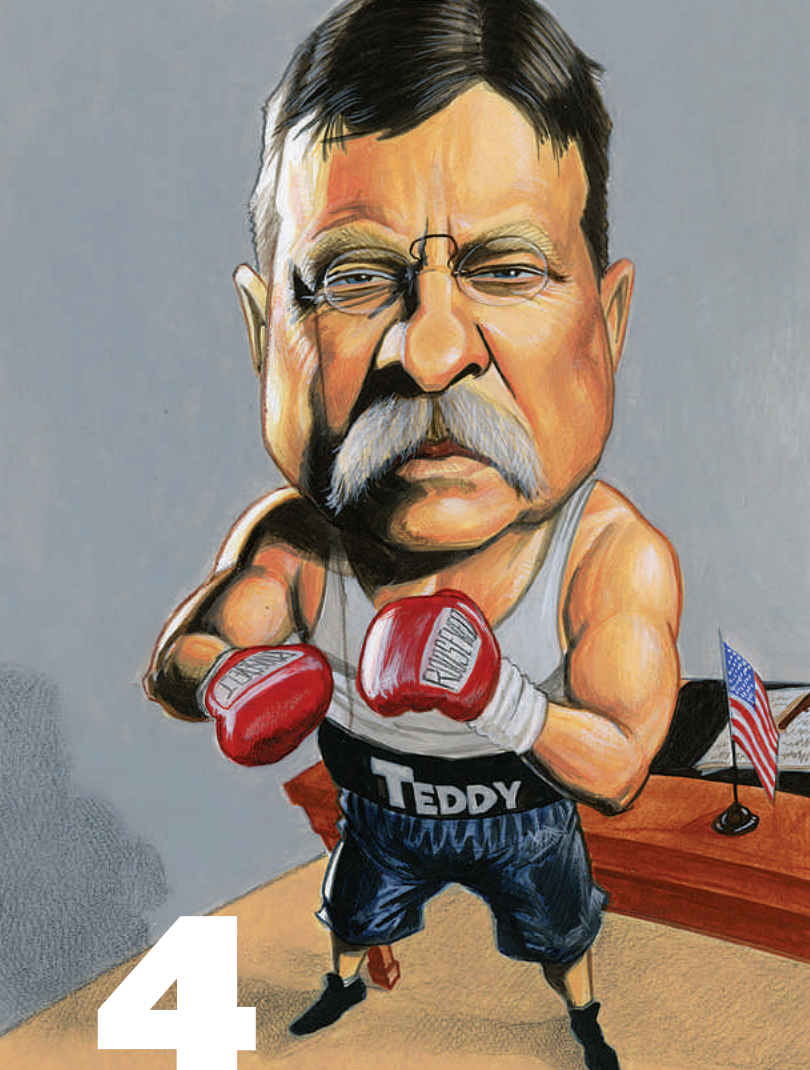
Seventy-seven. That's the number of lives Reagan saved in seven summers as a lifeguard, earning him the nickname Reaganhoff. Okay, *Baywatch* wasn't on television yet, but it takes a strong swimmer to save 77 people.

When he wasn't pulling drowning victims out of the rapids in Rock River, Reagan played football and basketball and ran track at Dixon High School in Illinois. He was a decent enough football player to earn an athletic scholarship to Eureka College, where he was also captain of the swim team, becoming the second president to play football and swim in college.*

While Reagan's actual athletic exploits were cause for recognition, it's perhaps his fictional portrayal of George "The Gipper" Gipp in the film *Knute Rockne: All American* that he's best known for, athletically speaking. He did go on to become president.

*Writer's note: In the spirit of full disclosure, I played football and swam in high school, so this stat is provided solely to refute a claim I once made on a high school talk show that I was the only person able to do both. I apologize. Me, JFK and Reagan — that's it.





THEODORE ROOSEVELT

26th President (1901–1909)

>> **HEIGHT:** 5'10" | **WEIGHT:** 180–200 pounds

In a letter to his sons, Roosevelt once wrote that he believed in "rough, manly sports." To that end, if elections were decided in the boxing ring rather than the ballot box, Theodore Rex might have been president forever. He was the Muhammad Ali of the Oval Office.

Having begun his boxing career as a teenager, Teddy was such a gifted pugilist that he boxed at Harvard, taking second place in its boxing championship as an upperclassman. As president, Roosevelt continued his love for "manly sports" by taking up judo. While preparing for the 1904 election, he practiced three afternoons a week using a ground-floor office in the White House.

In addition to his love of fighting, Teddy kept himself in shape by wrestling, rowing, playing tennis and horse-riding, though we're not sure where tennis fits in as a "rough, manly sport."

GEORGE H.W. BUSH

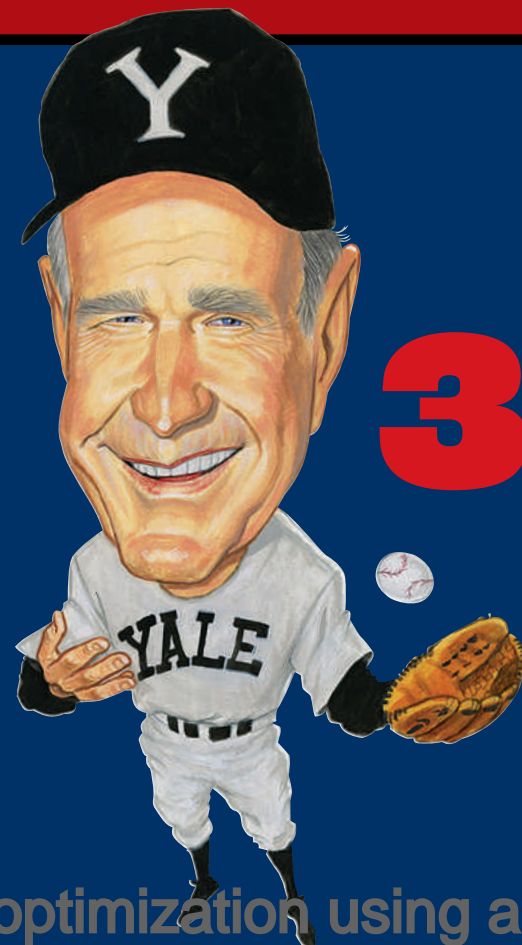
41st President (1989–1993)

>> **HEIGHT:** 6'2" | **WEIGHT:** 190 pounds

He has played golf with Tiger Woods. He has played tennis with Anna Kournikova. He has skydived. He also recently caught a 135-pound tarpon off the coast of the Florida Keys. He's 84 years old.

That's right, George H.W. Bush did all of the above as an octogenarian, making him undoubtedly the fittest ex-president we've ever had. His most impressive athletic feats, however, took place well before his presidency, when he was in college at Yale.

Poppy, as Bush was known back then, was a lefty first baseman for the Bulldogs and captain of the 1948 squad. As captain, he led Yale to back-to-back appearances in the first two College World Series ever played. Although they lost both times — first to Cal, then to USC — Bush never strayed too far from the game he loved, keeping his Yale first baseman's mitt in his Oval Office desk.



DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER

34th President (1953–1961)

>> **HEIGHT:** 5'10½" | **WEIGHT:** 180 pounds

Before he was known as Ike, Eisenhower had an excellent sports nickname: the Kansas Cyclone. A sportswriter gave him this moniker after covering one of his football games at West Point, where Eisenhower was an impressive fullback and a punishing linebacker.

As a star of the Army football team, Eisenhower was involved in some big moments, but none were bigger than his co-tackle of Jim Thorpe during the classic Army vs. Carlisle matchup in 1912. Later in the game, Thorpe got his revenge by avoiding a second tackle, which caused the future president to smash into a teammate. Carlisle won the game 27–6, snapping Army's winning streak.

The loss was one of few Eisenhower sustained as an athlete, harkening back to his days as a center fielder for Abilene High School in Kansas, where he was a member of its undefeated baseball team in 1909. His knack for winning would continue after college, of course, as Ike oversaw the surrender of Germany's high command. Guess we're lucky Thorpe wasn't German or things might've turned out differently.



GERALD FORD

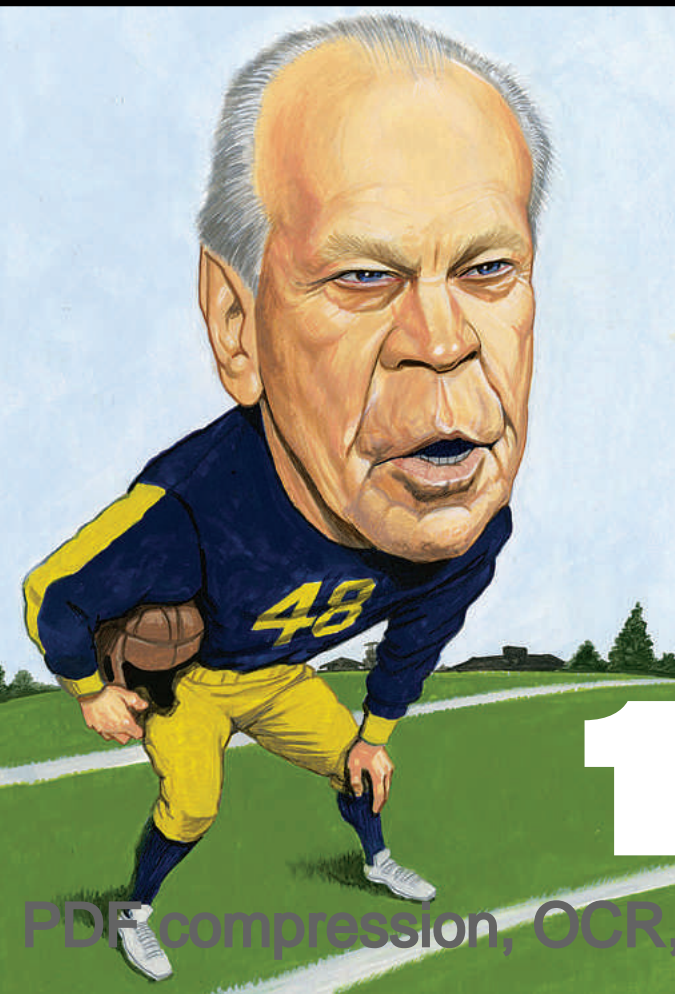
38th President (1974–1977)

>> **HEIGHT:** 6' | **WEIGHT:** 200 pounds

Despite Chevy Chase's famous impression of Ford as a bumbling klutz on *Saturday Night Live*, the 38th president was perhaps the most athletically gifted of all our commanders in chief.

As the starting center for the University of Michigan's football team in 1932 and '33, Ford helped the Wolverines to two undefeated seasons and back-to-back national championships. He also made the 1935 Collegiate All-Star football team and played in an exhibition game against the Chicago Bears at Soldier Field.

After graduation, Ford was good enough to be offered contracts by the Detroit Lions and the Green Bay Packers. Rather than play pro ball, Ford set his sights on attending Yale Law School, so he accepted positions as the Yale boxing coach and assistant varsity football coach. You could say turning down an offer to play for the Packers was a dumb move, but then again, Ford eventually became the leader of the free world, so he had that going for him.



THE 5 MOST UNFIT FOR OFFICE

WHILE NO PRESIDENT ENJOYS IMPEACHMENT, SOME OF THEM CERTAINLY ENJOY A GOOD PEACH COBBLER. BELOW ARE FIVE PRESIDENTS WHO WERE JUST AS LIKELY TO STUFF THEIR FACES AS THEY WERE THE BALLOT BOX.

5 RICHARD NIXON

37th President (1969–1974)

>> **HEIGHT:** 5'11½" | **WEIGHT:** n/a

Tricky Dick wasn't known for being especially heavy, but his nickname from college, Iron Butt, wasn't very flattering. Then there was the time he sweated like Patrick Ewing in his debate against JFK. Still, sweating while standing still can't be considered a sign of being in top shape.

4 JOHN ADAMS

2nd President (1797–1801)

>> **HEIGHT:** 5'7" | **WEIGHT:** 200 pounds (estimated)

As the recent *John Adams* miniseries on HBO can attest, our second president was the definition of portly. As a testament to his stoutness, he earned the nickname His Rotundity from some members of Congress.

3 BILL CLINTON

42nd President (1993–2001)

>> **HEIGHT:** 6'2½" | **WEIGHT:** 225 pounds

Being 6'2½" and 225 pounds means you have a great build if you're a physical NFL wide receiver. But if you're a middle-aged man who has a penchant for McDonald's, you're a bit on the heavy side. Then again, how many flankers are nicknamed Bubba?

2 GROVER CLEVELAND

22nd and 24th President (1885–89, 1893–97)

>> **HEIGHT:** 5'11" | **WEIGHT:** 280 pounds

Cleveland's weight ballooned so much while on the campaign trail that reporters began referring to him by such colorful monikers as The Stuffed Prophet and The Elephantine Economist. Of course, if you thought the previous two names were a bit wordy, you could always use this standby: Uncle Jumbo.

1 WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT

27th President (1909–1913)

>> **HEIGHT:** 6' | **WEIGHT:** 320-plus pounds

Big Bill, the heaviest U.S. president, allegedly had a 54-inch waistline. While he struggled with obesity all his life, the pivotal moment must have come when he got stuck in the White House bathtub. The new one they installed was big enough for four men — or one Taft. **M&F**