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## **PRESIDENTS, THEIR STYLES AND THEIR LEADERSHIP**

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If one set out to design a democracy in which the personal qualities of the top leader could be expected to have an impact on political outcomes, the result might well resemble the political system of the United States. The separation of powers and the Constitutional provision for a president with autonomous powers such as the veto have enabled chief executives to place a personal stamp on the nation's policies since the founding of the Republic; but until the 1930s, Congress typically took the lead in policy making, and the activities of the federal government had little impact on the nation and world.

There then arose what has come to be called the modern presidency. Under the stimulus of the administrative imperatives of the New Deal and World War II, and the entrepreneurial leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt, there was a dramatic increase in the scope and influence of the federal government and, therefore, its chief executive. The president's capacity to make a difference was further magnified by the emergence of the United States as a world power with a growing arsenal of nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, presidents began increasingly to make policy independent of the legislature, drawing on their sweeping administrative powers, and the Executive Office of the President was created, providing chief executives with the organizational support needed to carry out their expanded obligations.

The question of who occupies the Oval Office is most critical in decisions of war and peace, a domain in which the president has the status of commander in chief. There is no more telling illustration of why the person of the president matters than the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. In that month, President John F. Kennedy and his associates learned that the Soviet Union was secretly installing in Cuba a complex of ballistic missiles capable of obliterating much of the United States. This situation, Kennedy concluded, could not be allowed to stand. His advisors were split between those who favored finding a nonviolent means of inducing the Soviets to withdraw their missiles and those who called for an immediate air strike on the missile sites, a course of action that we now know would likely have triggered a devastating nuclear exchange. The buck stopped with JFK, who decided on the more cautious option, even privately acceding to a Soviet demand that the United States withdraw its missiles from Turkey in exchange for the removal of the Soviet missiles in Cuba.

The American president, despite his (and someday, her) life-or-death power in international affairs, is far from all-powerful. Presidents are constrained by other forces in the society and political system. Of the presidents since World War II, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and George H. W. Bush were defeated at the polls, Harry S. Truman and Lyndon B. Johnson chose not to seek re-election at times when they were deeply unpopular, Richard M. Nixon resigned, and Kennedy was assassinated. Moreover, even popular chief executives are sometimes blocked or forced to modify their goals by the other powers-that-be in the political system, especially in the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, the personal qualities of the individual who happens to be president at particular points in American history can have as great an impact as the impersonal forces and structures that command the bulk of attention in the scholarly literature on American government.

## QUALITIES THAT SHAPE PRESIDENTIAL PERFORMANCE

How can the concerned citizen assess the quality of a president's job performance? There are two broad ways of doing so. First is asking whether and to what extent the president's policies comport with the citizen's own values and convictions. In this fundamentally personal realm, the specialized knowledge of the presidential scholar has little to contribute, although valuable insight can be derived from the study of ethics and political philosophy. Second is evaluating the strengths and weaknesses a president brings to his responsibilities. Here the presidential specialist *can* make a contribution.

In the following paper, I examine the president's performance in terms of six qualities that bear on the job of the chief executive.<sup>1</sup> The first relates to what might be thought of as the outer face of the presidential leadership: the president's ability as a *public communicator*. The second pertains to its inner face: the president's *organizational capacity*. The third and fourth apply to the president as a political operator: his *political skill* and the degree to which it is harnessed to a workable *policy vision*. The fifth and sixth bear on the *cognitive style* with which the president processes the torrent of communications directed to him and the president's *emotional intelligence*: the matter of whether he is the master of his emotions rather than permitting them to intrude into his conduct in office (Goleman, 1995).

### ***Effectiveness as a public communicator***

The technology of contemporary mass communication makes the president a constant presence in the nation and world, but for an office that places a premium on the bully pulpit, the presidency has been surprisingly lacking in accomplished public communicators. The most conspicuous exceptions are Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan. Other presidents who were less consistently effective in their public communications sometimes hit rhetorical home runs: for example, George W. Bush in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and Bill Clinton when he was at his most effective.

Chief executives who are daunted by the eloquence of Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Reagan should be relieved to learn that their rhetorical powers were arrived at it by dint of experience and effort—they were not inborn. When FDR was a political novice, his wife Eleanor heard him give a speech and was taken aback by his long pauses and slow delivery. “I was worried for fear that he would never go on,” she recalled (Roosevelt, 1937, 167). When the 29-year-old Kennedy entered the House of Representatives, he was a soft-spoken, halting public speaker; his rhetorical panache evolved in the course of years of collaboration with his speechwriter and alter ego, Theodore Sorensen. Despite Reagan's extensive experience as a radio announcer and movie actor, he did not perfect the polished podium manner of his political years until the 1950s, when he spent much of the decade on the public speaking circuit as a representative of the General Electric Corporation (Roosevelt, 1937; Silvestri, 2000; Cannon, 1982).

### ***Organizational capacity***

A president's proficiency as an organizer of his administration includes his ability to select well-qualified aides and mold them into an effective team. It also includes his capacity to devise organizational procedures that insure him a rich flow of advice and information while minimizing the tendency of subordinates to tell their boss what they sense he wants to hear. FDR sought to foster diversity in the recommendations that reached him by pitting his assistants against each other. Kennedy charged his brother Robert with scrutinizing the proposals of his other advisers for potential pitfalls.

### ***Political skill***

The notion that a political leader needs to be skilled might seem too obvious to remark on were it not that the American political system places exceptional political demands on its chief executive. The Constitution, which was framed in the eighteenth century with a view to making it difficult for the government to act, remains in force in an era in which the government is called upon to take on innumerable politically demanding initiatives. If there was ever a need to demonstrate the importance of a president's political skill, it was put to rest by the difficulties encountered by Jimmy Carter, who was impressively effective in pursuing the presidency but was reluctant to engage in political give-and-take once in the White House. As a result, he had limited success in winning the support of other key political actors, particularly the legislators whose backing he needed to advance his ambitious program.

Lyndon Johnson, by way of contrast, was one of the most masterful politicians in the nation's history. Within hours after Kennedy's assassination, Johnson had begun to muster support for major policy departures, including the first civil rights bill since Reconstruction to have enforcement provisions. However, Johnson embarked on an open-ended U.S. military intervention in Vietnam in 1965, without establishing its probable duration, troop requirements, and political feasibility, using his skill to downplay the magnitude of the war in order not to impede the enactment of his domestic program. By 1968, a half-million American troops were enmeshed in Southeast Asia, and the nation was wracked with anti-war protest. In the absence of a viable policy, Johnson's political prowess proved to be counterproductive.<sup>2</sup> This brings us to the matter of what ends a president's skill is directed—his policy vision.

**“The absence of a sense of direction can lead a president to drift from one policy to another, but a defective policy vision can lead him to take actions that are ineffective or have undesirable consequences.”**

#### ***Policy vision***

When we say that a president exhibits *vision*, we may be pointing to his use of rhetoric that stirs the imagination and evokes intense feeling. For present purposes, however, I employ the term to address the less lofty matter of whether and to what extent a president's actions are grounded in explicitly enunciated policies, particularly those that accomplish the president's goals. The presidents whose actions were most clearly guided by an overarching set of objectives were Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush. The absence of a sense of direction can lead a president to drift from one policy to another, but a defective policy vision can lead him to take actions that are ineffective or have undesirable consequences.

#### ***Cognitive style***

Presidents vary in their intellectual endowments. Jimmy Carter had an engineer's proclivity to reduce issues to their component parts, a mind-set that failed to provide his administration with an overall sense of direction. Such a narrow cognitive style is in contrast to a broader, more strategic intelligence that cuts to the heart of problems and identifies their policy implications. Richard Nixon provides a noteworthy illustration of strategic intelligence. Two years before becoming president, Nixon published an article in which he called for ending the American military involvement in Vietnam, establishing an amicable relationship with the People's Republic of China, stabilizing U.S. relations with the Soviet Union. In addition, he implied that the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam was out of proportion to the American stake in the situation in South East Asia (Nixon, 1967). By the final year of his first term, Nixon had presided over an opening to China, secured an accommodation with the Soviet Union, and ended the U.S. combat role in Vietnam.

#### ***Emotional intelligence***

Just as Richard Nixon is a positive model in the realm of strategic intelligence, he is a distinctly negative exemplar as far as emotional intelligence is concerned. Nixon's emotional flaws negated his impressive strengths. During the same four years in which he made his international breakthroughs, Nixon embarked on what one of his aides referred to as the “Watergate horrors”—the covert campaign of espionage and sabotage against his perceived enemies that had fatal consequences for his presidency.

No chief executive has excelled in every one of these capacities. Strength in one may compensate for weakness in another, however. Thus JFK presided over a rather disorganized White House, but his actions in the Cuban Missile Crisis were clear-headed and wise. Jimmy Carter was almost willfully resistant to political give-and-take, but he was pragmatic and deft in brokering a peace agreement between

Israel and Egypt. George H. W. Bush was deficient in what he deprecated as “the vision thing,” but he was highly effective in the diplomatic prelude to the 1991 Gulf War. There is, however, one presidential quality that should be indispensable: emotional intelligence. There can be few more profound risks in the nuclear age than an emotionally challenged commander in chief, particularly one with hostile impulses and defective impulse control.

## **GEORGE W. BUSH AND THE POLITICS OF PREEMPTION**

In order to put flesh on the bones of this formulation, I now turn to the case of the current chief executive: George W. Bush.

The American presidency is said to be an office in which some incumbents grow and others merely swell up. If ever there was a chief executive to whom the first applies it is George W. Bush. Arriving in the White House with only modest governmental experience, Bush took a minimalist approach to his responsibilities before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Rising to the challenge, he went on to preside over the nation with far greater authority and assertiveness. Bush has gone to great lengths to put his stamp on national and international policy, but in doing so has advanced policies that have been intensely controversial in the United States and abroad.

### ***Before the presidency***

George W. Bush was born on July 6, 1946, in New Haven, Connecticut, where his war veteran father, George H. W. Bush, was a Yale undergraduate. In contrast to his father, who moved to Texas as an adult but retained the outward signs of a New England transplant, the younger Bush is very much a product of the Lone Star State. Whereas the elder Bush attended a private day school in Greenwich, Connecticut, his son went to public school in Midland, Texas, where oil is the dominant economic force and the ambience is that of tract houses, little league baseball, and easy informality. After elementary school, Bush followed in his father’s path by attending the exclusive Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, and Yale, but he was more conspicuous for his social skills than his classroom performance, retaining the brash demeanor of a stereotypical Texan.

Although Bush’s pre-presidential governmental service consisted only of six years as governor of Texas, he was no political Johnny-come-lately. His paternal grandfather served in the Senate, and his father had a long and varied political career, including two campaigns for the Senate, two terms in the House, eight years as vice president, and four years as president. The younger Bush participated in his father’s many election campaigns, managed the campaigns of two GOP Senate candidates, and ran a strong race for Congress himself in his home district.

Two aspects of Bush’s pre-presidential years are significant for his presidential leadership. One relates to his personal comportment and spiritual life. For many years Bush stood out as the under-achieving son of a super-achieving father. Whereas George H.W. Bush had been a war hero, a self-made millionaire, and the holder of a succession of high-profile political positions, the young George W. Bush was a heavy drinker with a devil-may-care life style. In early middle age, however, his life came together. He married the level-headed librarian Laura Welch, became the father of twin girls, experienced a spiritual awakening, and became a regular reader of the Bible. On the morning of his fortieth birthday, he awoke with an intense hangover and swore off alcohol, anchoring his resolve in his Christian faith.

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The other is his career as a CEO and his business-oriented conservative ethos. After completing college and fulfilling his military obligation in the Texas Air National Guard, Bush attended Harvard Business School, graduating with an MBA. He then returned to Texas and founded an oil exploration company. When oil prices plunged in the 1980s, the company foundered, but the tax laws of the time enabled Bush to sell it at a substantial profit. He then became the managing partner of the Texas Rangers, a major league baseball team. In the course of traveling the state to promote the team and appearing on television during its

games, Bush became highly visible, was able to win the Texas Republican gubernatorial nomination, and go on to defeat the state’s popular Democratic governor.

Both facets of Bush’s experience were manifested in the formula he invoked to justify his gubernatorial and presidential programs: “compassionate conservatism.” By that phrase he meant to suggest that he was hard-headed, but not hard-hearted: that he favored not only such traditional conservative policies as major tax cuts, but also reforms such as a measure using achievement testing to gauge the success of schools attended by disadvantaged children, seeking to improve the effectiveness of those that are performing poorly.

Bush ran for governor on a small number of explicitly stated issues: education and welfare reform, stiffer penalties for juvenile offenders, and limitations on the right to litigate against businesses. He campaigned vigorously, stayed on message, and won with 53 percent of the vote. By the end of the first legislative session, all four measures had been enacted, and in 1998, he was reelected with a resounding 69 percent of the two-party vote.

This success and his name recognition made Bush the front-runner for the 2000 Republican presidential nomination, which he secured despite being defeated in the New Hampshire primary by Arizona Senator John McCain. By March, Bush had won enough delegate support to be sure of the nomination. In the same month, Vice President Al Gore locked in the Democratic nomination. In his presidential campaign, Bush again focused on a handful of clearly delineated issue, including tax reduction; reforms in education, health care, and Social Security; and an initiative designed to channel federal welfare funds through the church-sponsored organizations that deliver much of the charity that reaches high-poverty areas. Nothing in his campaign presaged his administration’s military involvements in Afghanistan and Iraq. Indeed, he declared his opposition to a globally expansive foreign policy.

The 2000 election could scarcely have been closer or more controversial. There was a near tie in the popular vote, with a slight edge for Gore. The all-important electoral vote outcome array on the state of Florida, where the voters were evenly divided and there was a bewildering number of controversies about the adequacy of the vote count. After a thirty-six day impasse, the United States Supreme Court issued a ruling that made Bush the winner.

### ***Bush as president***

From its very first day, the Bush presidency was off to a less than impressive start. As he took the oath of office, Bush seemed composed and unperturbed by the controversy that attended his election, but he read his inaugural address in a rote and plodding manner, pausing in mid-sentence and stumbling over words. Bush’s halting presentation set the tone for his early addresses. He was more fluent on unscripted occasions, but there was a potential problem when he spoke without a text. His lack of national experience, placed him at risk of making an error, as when he remarked to an interviewer that the United States was

committed to do “whatever it takes” to defend Taiwan from attack by the People’s Republic of China. In fact, it was a longstanding American policy to be deliberately vague about how the nation would respond to such a contingency, and Bush had not intended to signal a policy departure. Still another problem with Bush’s early public communications was their infrequency. He never addressed the nation from the Oval Office until the night of September 11, 2001. He never convened a major prime-time press conference until a month after that date. And he rarely addressed the nation in his capacity as its symbolic leader.

Despite Bush’s shortcomings as a public communicator and his imperfect command of policy specifics, his early leadership was marked by successes in two realms, those of staffing his presidency and promoting his policies. Bush made his single most important personnel choice before he won the nomination, when he selected a highly experienced running mate in the person of Dick Cheney. With Cheney as a source of advice, Bush went on to name an experienced cabinet and White House staff, not waiting for the resolution of the Florida electoral dispute to make preparations for taking office.

Bush’s appointees included many veterans of the Nixon, Ford, Reagan and first Bush presidencies, as well two of his own longtime Texas aides, communications advisor Karen Hughes and political strategist Karl Rove. Bush’s national security team was particularly well seasoned: Secretary of State Colin Powell had been chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and national security advisor, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had previously held the same position, and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice had been a member of his father’s NSC staff.

One of Bush’s early legislative successes, his educational reform measure, was very much a bipartisan effort. In his early weeks in office, Bush had put great effort into wooing the Senate’s leading liberal Democrat, Edward Kennedy, who helped draft a bill that commanded broad-based support. But bipartisanship was not the norm. Instead, the pattern was set by the way the administration won the enactment of its tax cut, relying almost exclusively on the narrow Republican Congressional majority and a handful of Democratic defectors.

As of the first week of September, even many of Bush’s supporters would have agreed with the earlier assertion of the *Washington Post’s* David Broder that the new president had not provided the American people with a “clear definition” of himself (Broder, 2001). Indeed, when the Gallup organization fielded a presidential support poll that week, it found that public approval of the new president was at its lowest level of seven months of his presidency—51 percent.

Bush was visiting a Florida elementary school to promote his education bill on the morning of September 11 when he learned that the nation was under attack. Before leaving the school, he read a statement declaring that “terrorism against our nation will not stand.” Because of concern that he would be targeted by terrorists, Bush was flown to the control center of the Strategic Air Command in Nebraska, where he presided by electronic means over a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC). At the meeting, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency reported that the attacks were almost certainly the work of al Qaeda, an Afghanistan-based terrorist organization that had been behind other acts of terrorism directed at the United States. Bush then returned to the White House, where he addressed the nation from the Oval Office, asserting that the attacks were “acts of war,” that there “would be a monumental struggle between good and evil” in which good would prevail, and that the United States would “make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.”



In the chaotic first day of the episode, Bush came across as less than completely self-assured. He then underwent a transformation. On September 14, he delivered a moving tribute to the victims of the terrorist attacks in Washington and flew to New York City, where he inspected the wreckage of the World Trade Center and addressed the rescue workers. When they shouted that they could not hear him, he replied, “I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you, and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!” In the weeks that followed, he became a compelling public presence. On September 20, he made a forceful presentation to Congress in which he gave the regime in Afghanistan an ultimatum to turn the al Qaeda leadership over to the United States and close down its terrorist camps. Three weeks later, he delivered a highly effective address to the United Nations. Most impressive was his October 11 prime-time news conference in the East Room of the White House. Responding in depth to questions, Bush radiated a sense of composure and made evident his detailed mastery of what his administration’s anti-terrorism policies.

Just as Bush’s conduct of his responsibilities improved dramatically, the public’s ratings of his performance surged to 90 percent, the record high in Gallup presidential approval ratings. Members of the political community also formed markedly more positive views of Bush’s leadership qualities. Even many of his critics concluded that he had been underestimated, a view that extended to other nations. On October 20, for example, a columnist for the influential *Frankfurter Allgemeine* commented that Bush had grown into his job “before our eyes,” comparing him to another president who rose to the demands of his times following an unpromising start, Harry S Truman (Weiland, 2001).

In early October, the Afghan regime let it be known that it would not surrender the al Qaeda leadership, and the United States and its ally Great Britain began an intensive bombing campaign. Later in the month, U.S. Special Forces entered Afghanistan and began to provide military support to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. By November 13, the Northern Alliance had occupied the Afghan capital of Kabul, and in early December, the last major Taliban stronghold surrendered. When the Gallup organization polled the public at the end of December, Bush’s approval level was 86 percent.

Bush had postponed a decision on whether to target Iraq in the War on Terror in a September NSC meeting in which Defense Secretary Rumsfeld raised that possibility, but Iraq came into his cross-hairs in his January 2002 State of the Union Address. Anticipating the doctrine of preemption that his administration would formally promulgate later in the year, Bush declared that he would not “wait on events” while “the world’s most dangerous weapons” were acquired by “the world’s most dangerous regimes.” One such regime, he specified, was Iraq, which he grouped with Iran and North Korea in what he described as an “axis of evil.”

Bush’s speech sent out shock waves. Whereas his response to September 11 had been favorably received, there was widespread criticism at home and abroad of his “axis of evil” locution. Some of it was prompted by a belief that Bush had lumped together nations that were very different in terms of whether and to what extent they posed threats; some was directed at the usage “evil,” which led critics to worry about whether the president’s intense personal commitment to evangelical Christianity was leading him to advance an inappropriately moralistic foreign policy.

Bush’s address presaged a preoccupation of the remainder of his first term that continued into his second term: his efforts to come to terms with Iraq. Bush’s reference to Iraq in his 2002 State of the Union address was the prelude to a procession of actions directed at Saddam Hussein’s regime. Diplomacy prevailed in the fall of 2002, when the administration persuaded the United Nations Security Council to enact a resolution insisting that Iraq destroy any weapons of mass destruction it might have and admit United Nations inspectors to establish that it had done so. Early the following year, the administration turned to military



action, attempting without success to persuade the Security Council to authorize the use of force on the grounds that Iraq had failed to comply with the UN demand. Then, in the face of substantial opposition at home and abroad, it launched an invasion of Iraq, proceeding with Great Britain as its principal ally.

The assault on Iraq began on March 20, American troops took control of Baghdad on April 6, and Bush announced the end of “major combat operations” on May 2; but the situation on the ground remained unsettled well into Bush’s second term. As American troop losses mounted, increasing numbers of Americans expressed doubt about whether it had been wise for the United States to intervene in Iraq, and Bush’s approval level sank dangerously low for a president seeking re-election. Seemingly unfazed, Bush fought a vigorous campaign against the 2004 Democratic nominee, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry. Despite last minute polls that projected Kerry as the winner, Bush won by 34 electoral votes. His popular vote edge over Kerry was 2.5 percent, the smallest margin for a sitting president in the nation’s history. He nevertheless declared the election to have been a mandate and went on to propose a highly ambitious program for a second term chief executive.

### **Bottom line**

Early in his presidency Bush seemed not to recognize the importance of presidential *public communication*. Following 9/11, however, he began to address the public regularly, forcefully, and often eloquently. He was not uniformly effective thereafter, but when he rehearsed he was effective in his public addresses, and he developed a punch, personable stump style that served him well in the 2004 campaign. On January 20, 2005, he delivered his second-term inaugural address with fluency and confidence. The contrast to his inaugural remarks four years earlier was conspicuous.

*Organizational capacity* is one the strengths of the nation’s first MBA president. Bush has chosen strong associates. He also excels at rallying his subordinates. Because avoiding public disagreement is a watchword of his presidency, its internal dynamics are not well documented, but clues are provided by Bob Woodward’s reconstructions of the Bush administration’s military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Woodward’s accounts suggest that in some instances Bush’s deliberative processes leave something to be desired. He reports, for example, that Secretary of State Powell and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld expressed their differences more sharply in meetings that Bush did not attend than ones in which he was present, suggesting that he may sometimes be shielded from potentially valuable debate. Woodward also describes an instance in which Powell met privately with Bush and national security advisor Rice in order to register his disagreement with the hawkish proposals of Rumsfeld and Vice President Cheney (Woodward, 2002, 177, 332-334; 2004). When subordinates make end runs around their colleagues, the advice the president gets may be more a function of their bureaucratic skill than the merit of their recommendations.

The congenitally gregarious George W. Bush resembles his fellow Texan Lyndon Johnson in his *political skill*. As he did in Texas, Bush sometimes has worked effectively on both sides of the aisle. However, there has been a hard edge to his leadership as president that was not evident in Texas. It was evident internationally as well as domestically, most notably in the lead-up to the Iraq war, when his administration failed to make a persuasive case for the urgency of immediate military action and went to war in the face of the opposition of a number of the nation’s traditional allies.

Late-night television comedy notwithstanding, Bush has ample native intelligence. He has a *cognitive style* that seems not to be marked by intellectual curiosity, however, and shows little interest in the play of ideas. Moreover, he favors a corporate leadership model in which he relies on his subordinates to structure his options. After September 11, however, there was a dramatic increase in his mastery of the con-

tent of his administration's policies. As a member of Congress who is in regular contact with Bush put it, "He's as smart as he wants to be" (Thomma, 2001).

What is critical for a president's *emotional intelligence* is that his public actions not be distorted by uncontrolled passions. He need not be a paragon of mental health in his private life. By this litmus test, the heavy-drinking, young George W. Bush was too volatile to be a promising prospect for a responsible public position. It would not be surprising if a man who abused alcohol until early middle age proved to be an emotional tinder box, but Bush's performance as a private sector executive and governor of Texas was not marred by emotional excesses. He weathered the 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns with equanimity, and whatever the merits of his administration's military ventures, there is no sign that they were the result of out-of-control emotions.

**"A president who is well suited to serve in one setting may be ill suited for another."**

The topic of *policy vision* suggests an unlikely parallel between George W. Bush and George H. W. Bush. The first President Bush was famously indifferent to "the vision thing." The second President Bush has faulted his father for failing to enunciate clear goals for his presidency and to rack up domestic accomplishments on which to campaign for re-election. George W. Bush goes out of his way to evince a policy vision.

He holds that if a president does not set his own goals, others will set them for him. However, if his vision that the regime of Saddam Hussein needed to be removed and Iraq proves to be a quagmire, Bush's second term may falter. His presidency may suffer from having a vision, just as his father's suffered for lacking one.

## **CONTEXTUAL EFFECTS ON PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP: THE TIMES AND THE PUBLIC**

As the preceding case illustrates, the capacity of the president to make a difference is a function not only of his personal attributes, but also the political environment in which they are brought to bear. A president who is well suited to serve in one setting may be ill suited for another. The most celebrated modern chief executive, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, had been a presence on the national political scene for two decades before entering the White House. He had established himself as a talented politician and eloquent orator, but was viewed as something of a lightweight because he lacked a well-developed policy vision. If FDR had served in an uneventful period, he might have left little in the way of a historical legacy. As it happened, the circumstances of the Great Depression and World War II placed a premium on Roosevelt's inspirational and political gifts. In the absence of those contexts, it is possible that his presidency would be of modest historical interest.

One contextual determinant of the president's ability to make a difference is the extent of his public backing. Congress was deferential to Roosevelt in the early months of his presidency in large part because its members were convinced that he had overwhelming public support. In Roosevelt's time, politicians relied on personal impressions to assess the president's public standing. During the Truman years, a more reliable means of gauging presidential approval came into use: public opinion polls in which statistically representative cross-sections of the public are asked to evaluate the president's handling of his duties. Presidential approval polls have become a force in their own right. High levels of approval can be much to the president's advantage, and low public approval can be a prescription for failure.

The elected term of President Harry Truman provides an example of how a president can be hamstrung by lack of public support. In 1948, Truman won election in his own right in a campaign in which he pro-

posed an ambitious domestic program, including a landmark civil rights proposal and universal health insurance. Before the first year of his second term was over, however, his administration was the recipient of a pair of body blows. In September 1949, the Soviet Union was revealed to have developed nuclear weapons. The next month, mainland China came under Communist control, fueling a venomous public debate over whether the administration had “lost China” and was “soft on Communism.”

On June 25, 1950, there was still another politically costly development. American-supported South Korea was invaded by Communist North Korea, and Truman and his associates concluded that it would be necessary to employ American troops to prevent a Communist takeover. The war evolved into a politically costly stalemate, in which the United States and its allies were arrayed against not only North Korea, but also the almost limitless man power of Communist China. For the final two years of Truman’s presidency, his approval level was in the 20 to 30 percent range, among the lowest in the modern presidency. Not surprisingly, Congress showed no interest in enacting his program.

Public response to the president is conditioned by an important background consideration. In most democracies, executive leadership is divided between a political leader, such as a prime minister, and a head of state, such as a constitutional monarch or politically neutral president. In the United States, the two roles are combined. As head of state, the president is expected to represent all Americans, but in his political capacity he must engage in the divisive process of advancing his administration’s policies. Being more than a mere political leader can enhance the president’s effectiveness by enabling him to tap the intense loyalty Americans have for their nation.

The feelings bound up in the presidency are prominently displayed on the occasion of the death of a sitting president. There were spontaneous displays of public grief and mourning following the assassination of Kennedy, the death by natural causes of FDR, and even the death of the lackluster Warren Harding. A less grim manifestation of the public bond to the chief executive is the upsurge in presidential approval that commonly follows the outbreak of national crisis, an example being the spike in public evaluations of George W. Bush after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The depth of emotion invested in the chief executive helps account for the continuing interest in the matter to which I now turn, presidential greatness.

## **A CODA ON PRESIDENTIAL GREATNESS**

The faces of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt were not chiseled into Mount Rushmore because these men were thought to have been merely competent. They were deemed to have been truly great. But how is greatness to be determined, and can it be ascertained with any degree of objectivity?

The changing assessments of Thomas Jefferson illustrate the uncertainty of such judgments. For much of the 19th century, Jefferson was dismissed an impractical idealist whose vision of a nation of small farmers was irrelevant to an age of urban growth and industrialization. In the Progressive Era and the period of the New Deal, however, he acquired the status of a democratic icon. The Jefferson Memorial was erected in the nation’s capital, and a five-cent coin bearing his portrait was issued. But by the final decade of the twentieth century, Jefferson had gone into eclipse as attention shifted to his status as a slave owner and the probable father of several slave children.<sup>3</sup>

Should we conclude from such fluctuations that presidential greatness is merely in the eye of the beholder? There clearly is more to the story. Consider a pair of presidents whose reputations have remained towering despite changes in political climate: George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. At first glance the two men seem poles apart. Washington was a Virginia aristocrat who comported himself with studied dignity. Lincoln was born into rural poverty and his manner was droll and homespun. Yet they had two things in common. They held office in periods of national peril and are widely viewed as having risen to the challenge of their times. Washington's challenge was to legitimize the new nation and set it on a firm footing; Lincoln's was to win the war that erupted just after he took office and restore the Union. Washington brought his good sense and monumental prestige to bear in his efforts, and Lincoln presided over the Civil War with shrewdness and tenacity, going on to seek reconciliation with the South. In both cases their accomplishments were monumental.

There has been a continuing interest in rating and ranking American presidents. A recent volume entitled *The Uses and Abuses of Presidential Ratings* lists the results of ten such efforts in the period from 1948 to 2000 (Bose & Landis, 2003). These typically are polls of historians and others who are deemed to be authoritative, and most of them sort the chief executives from Washington into five categories, *great, near great, above average, average, below average* and *failure*. The basis of the ratings is ordinarily left up to the raters, leaving it up to them to decide whether to assess the way a president did his job or the merits of his policies. Because the ratings are overall judgments, they fail to identify the mixed performance of a president such as Richard Nixon, who had major foreign policy accomplishments but was forced to resign over Watergate. Indeed, Nixon was judged to be a failure in six of the seven surveys in which authorities on the presidency were asked to rate him and below average in the seventh.

In spite of the imperfect methodology of such studies, there is striking similarity in their findings. Every study placed Washington and Lincoln in the *great* category. FDR was also consistently ranked as great, even in a survey commissioned by the *Wall Street Journal* in 2000, which was designed to remedy the alleged liberal bias in earlier studies. Other presidents who were deemed to be great or near great include Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman, and Ronald Reagan. Eisenhower registered the greatest change over the years, rising from average in 1962 to above average or near great beginning in the 1980s, when scholarship based on the declassified record of his presidency began to appear in print. (There is a standard list of failures, which, in addition to Nixon, includes James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Ulysses S. Grant, and Warren G. Harding.) If there is a common denominator in presidential assessments it is a bias toward activism, unless the activism is viewed as misplaced, as in the instances of Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam and Nixon and Watergate.

There are pros and cons to the concern with presidential greatness. The presidents who have been viewed as great provide the nation with unifying symbols, in much the manner of the flag and national anthem. They also serve as role models and sources of lessons. The negative of such ratings is that they divert attention from the full range of presidential experience. The reasons why presidents fail can be as instructive as the reason why they succeed. The performance of most presidents being mixed, it therefore provides both positive lessons and warnings.

Whatever the merits of the quest for presidential greatness, one thing is certain: The occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue deserves the closest of scrutiny. In the words of the old spiritual, "He has the whole world in his hands."

## Note

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 The most influential works on the impact of individual presidents are Neustadt (1960) and Barber (1972), both of which have gone through later editions without a change in theme. The first emphasizes political skill and the second emotional fitness. My own formulation, which combines and expands on those of Neustadt and Barber, is set forth in Greenstein (2004).
- 2 On the American military intervention in Vietnam, see Burke & Greenstein (1989), 118-254.
- 3 For reviews rankings of presidents, see Blessing & Murray (1994) and Bose & Landis (2003). For a reasoned effort to identify a handful of great presidents, see Landy & Milkis (2000). Jefferson's shifting reputation is discussed by Bernstein (2003).

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