

"The Anatomy of a Great Leader"

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By Warren Bennis and Thomas Z. Freedman

Amid the horse-race-like coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign and its focus on topics such as electability and likability, it's worth considering which candidate would make the best leader and president. At the end of the day, voters won't be having a beer with the next president, but we will depend on him or her to be a great leader and deal with the daunting challenges of globalization and terrorism. American history offers some clues about qualities that tend to show up in our great leaders. Here's a scorecard of what to look for:

The Crucible

Great American leaders share an almost universal characteristic of having undergone a life-changing crucible, an often traumatic experience that tested and transformed him or her into a leader.

Harry Truman had not been notably successful as a businessman, or as anything else, before serving as a young officer in the U.S. Cavalry during World War I. But he found his destiny on a French battlefield when his horse was shot out from under him. Nearly crushed, Truman was pulled from underneath the broken animal with a new sense of himself.

Like Truman, our next successful leader likely will have experienced something unusual that led him or her to acknowledge the strength to lead others.

Willingness to Experiment

Our next great leader is likely to be an experimenter who draws on the ideas of many different people. As a result of Franklin D. Roosevelt's adaptability (the same quality that allowed him to reinvent himself after contracting polio), he was able to launch dozens of innovative social programs and initiatives, discarding those that failed and proposing better ones in their place.

Perhaps because they have the confidence of someone who has already been tested, great leaders generally like to collaborate. Talent, not loyalty, is the ultimate requirement for working alongside such leaders. Abraham Lincoln was an inspired practitioner of this tough-skinned type of leadership. As Doris Kearns Goodwin points out in her book "Team of Rivals," Lincoln filled his Cabinet not with loyalists, but with his most gifted political opponents, convinced that only they could help him save a nation torn apart by civil war.

Optimism

Great leaders tend to be optimists and purveyors of hope. America's banking system collapsed only hours before FDR delivered his first inaugural address. Instead of using that catastrophe to underscore the worsening plight of the nation, Roosevelt offered a rebuke to fear. Ronald Reagan brought a similar contagious optimism to his second presidential race, with its theme of "Morning in America." Our major social movements have also been energized by positive leaders; Martin Luther King Jr. chose to emphasize not vengeance or separatism but a shared dream of social justice.

Timeliness

Is it coincidence that great leaders have generally materialized in our toughest times, just when we needed them? During the Revolutionary War, a tiny America of 4 million produced at least six future stars. The present is arguably a time of such necessity. We are threatened by those who would kill us and a global economy that is changing faster -- with more opportunity and insecurity -- than ever before. In the last decade, fissures have appeared in every major institution in American life: government, churches, the military, nonprofits and business. More than two-thirds of citizens think our country is headed in the wrong direction. This is surely a call for a great leader.

Political Savvy

The last essential characteristic is political adeptness. Practical politics and necessity have guided every one of our highly regarded presidents. Idealism is not enough. Washington, Lincoln and FDR were great politicians. The final, most important, question is one that only our new POTUS will be able to answer: Can he or she use experience, skill, willingness to experiment and optimism to exceed electability and actually lead?

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