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George W. Bush and the Ghosts of Presidents Past

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” the American philosopher George Santayana famously asserted. By the same token, a president who is well furnished with institutional memory should be less likely to commit avoidable errors and more likely to get the most out of his (and, at some point, her) time in office. The reflections that follow on what George W. Bush might learn from his predecessors were completed three weeks before his inauguration as the forty-third president of the United States. They appear in print after the Bush presidency has passed its hundred-day mark. Although they cannot take account of Bush’s initial presidential performance, they do draw on the extensive record of his life and prepresidential political career.

The presidencies that provide the most useful lessons to a contemporary chief executive are those of the final two-thirds of the twentieth century, a period during which the presidency acquired its present lineaments.

Beginning with

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s assumption of office in March 1933, the president has replaced Congress as the principal source of policy initiation in the political system; there has been a quantum increase in the amount of public policy made directly by the chief executive; and the presidency has acquired an institutional support system in the form of the White House Office, the Office of Management and Budget, and the other entities of the Executive Office of the President. Meanwhile, the president has become a ubiquitous presence in the media, virtually standing for the federal government in the minds of many of his fellow citizens. It is as if the job of a clerk typist had been upgraded to require the skills of an advanced computer specialist.

These remarks, which build on my recently published account of the leadership qualities of the eleven presidents from FDR to Bill Clinton (Greenstein

2000), fall under six headings, each of them referring to a personal quality that affects presidential leadership—effectiveness as a public communicator, organizational capacity, political skill, policy vision, cognitive style, and emotional intelligence.

Effectiveness as a Public Communicator

For an office in which public teaching and preaching are critically important, the modern presidency has been surprisingly lacking in gifted communicators. Most presidents have not addressed the public with anything approximating the professionalism of countless educators, members of the clergy, and radio and television broadcasters. The shining exceptions are FDR, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and the uneven but intermittently eloquent Bill Clinton.

George W. Bush revealed himself at his best and worst as a public communicator during the five-week vote-counting impasse that followed Election Day 2000. He was at his nadir on the occasions when he emerged from seclusion to deliver patently scripted remarks, gazing expressionlessly at a teleprompter. He was at his peak on the night of December 13, when he acknowledged his victory, but extolled the benefits of bipartisanship and devoted four paragraphs to praising Vice President Gore. Still, there still remained room for improvement.

In seeking to make the most of the rhetorical side of his presidential responsibilities, George W. Bush would be advised not to emulate his father. Rather than profiting from eight years as the understudy of Ronald Reagan, George Herbert Walker Bush minimized the role of rhetoric in his leadership style. The senior Bush instructed his speech writers to shun flights of eloquence and typically addressed the nation from the White House briefing room rather than the Oval Office. His reluctance to avail himself of the bully pulpit was not problematic during the period of economic prosperity and military success that marked his first three years in the

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White. But it was a prescription for defeat in his fourth year, when the economy went into a tailspin and his reelection was a stake.

It would be well for George W. Bush to recognize that even Roosevelt,

Reagan, and Kennedy achieved their eloquence by dint of practice and to put effort into improving his public communication skills. He might employ the obvious expedient of retaining a speech coach and the less obvious one of commissioning speeches that reflect his personal speech rhythms and manner of expression. In shaping his approach to public communication, Bush might usefully consider the example of John F.

Kennedy, who was elected by the narrowest of margins, but went on to garner the highest average public approval level in the history of presidential polling. The challenge for the plain-spoken George W. Bush is not to strive for Kennedy-like panache, but to find his own voice and employ it to win over the public and, by extension, his significant others in the policy-making community.

Organizational Capacity

A president's organizational capacity includes his ability to rally his subordinates, his approach to delegation, and his ability to create effective institutional arrangements. A number of the modern presidents excelled at team leadership, including Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, and the senior George Bush. It speaks well for George W. Bush that he has been able to surround himself with a cadre of devoted loyalists who have remained in his service for the better part of a decade. It is to a president's advantage to have a cohesive inner circle, but there is a potential danger. The members of tightly knit leadership teams run the risk of succumbing to what the social psychologist Irving Janis (1982) referred to as "groupthink:" the tendency of highly collegial deliberative bodies to arrive at premature policy closure, elevating the harmony of the group over the rigor of its decision making.

The delegation practices of presidents have ranged from Jimmy Carter's immersion in the details of his administration's policies, with minimal dependence on subordinates, to Ronald Reagan's dependence on his associates to provide the detailed contours of his programs. George W. Bush's approach to delegation was closely examined by Alan C. Miller and Judy Pasternak (1999), who obtained access to his gubernatorial appointment calendars. They found him to be strikingly Reagan-like in his insulation from details. Thus, he read neither the 261-page report on the

bonfire tragedy at Texas A&M University nor its 36-page executive summary. Instead, his aides highlighted a half-page passage of the document's conclusions for him. Even in the controversial realm of capital punishment, Bush relied heavily on aides to structure his choices, reducing the time he spent on each death sentence review from 30 to 15 minutes after the first few months of his governorship.

As the first president to have a business school degree, Bush has let it be known that he models his management practices on those of corporate executives, avoiding immersing himself in detail, but insisting on setting goals for his subordinates and on being the final arbiter of his administration's policies. The president whose methods can best enable such an approach to work is Dwight D. Eisenhower, who employed what has come to be called a "multiple advocacy" approach to policy deliberation (George 1972). "I have been forced to make decisions, many of them of a critical character, for a good many years," the former supreme commander once observed, "and I know of only one way in which you can be sure you have done your best to make a wise decision. That is to get all of the [responsible policy makers] with their different viewpoints in front of you, and listen to them debate. I do not believe in bringing them in one at a time, and therefore being more impressed by the most recent one you hear than the earlier ones. You must get courageous men of strong views, and let them debate and argue with each other. You listen, and see if there's anything been brought up, any idea, that changes your own view, or enriches your view or adds to it. Then you start studying. Sometimes the case becomes so simple that you can make a decision right then. Or you might wait if time is not of the essence. But you make it (Greenstein and Immerman 2000, 344).

Political Skill

If there ever were reason to doubt that presidents need to be able practitioners of the art of the possible, it was dispelled by Jimmy Carter, who displayed great skill in catapulting himself to the White House, but striking ineptitude once there. The Carter presidency provides a catalogue of avoidable errors, the bulk of which involved failing to build bridges to key Washington policymakers. Lyndon Johnson, by way of contrast, was unequalled in his ability to negotiate the Washington political labyrinth. Within hours after Kennedy's assassination, LBJ began to muster support for major policy departures. He displayed will, as well as skill, by keeping Congress in session until Christmas Eve in order to prevail in his administration's first legislative contest. Meanwhile, he showed perfect pitch in his use of symbolism, winning over the public by evoking the martyred Kennedy. By the end of his first two months as president, Johnson was well on the way to enact-

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ment of his landmark Great Society domestic program.

The congenitally gregarious George W. Bush resembles LBJ in his aptitude for the personal side of Washington politics. Bush conducted his Texas governorship in a whirr of interpersonal activity. Even before he won election, he began forging a personal bond with the state legislature's most influential Democrat. Upon taking office, Bush proposed a clear, but limited, legislative program, stressing issues that already had support in the Democratic legislature. He took part in over a hundred meetings with lawmakers and lobbyists during the first session of the legislature. By its end, Bush was able to claim success for his program (Minutaglio 1999, 295-303).

In his December 13 speech, Bush made it evident that he intended to apply the highly personal bipartisan methods he had used in Texas in the nation's capital. He had chosen to deliver the speech in the chamber of the Texas House of Representatives, he explained, "because it has been home to bipartisan cooperation," adding that "the spirit of cooperation we have seen in this hall is what is needed in Washington, DC" (Bush 2000). But for Bush's method to work in the far more demanding context of Washington, he needs more than charm and skill at human relations. Lacking the Washington experience and prodigious energy of a Lyndon Johnson, his most obvious model is Ronald Reagan, who was able to achieve impressive policy successes by relying on an able and experienced staff. Bush signaled his intention to draw on such lieutenants by making the highly accomplished Dick Cheney his running mate and by going on to nominate a cabinet laden with veterans of earlier administrations.

Policy Vision

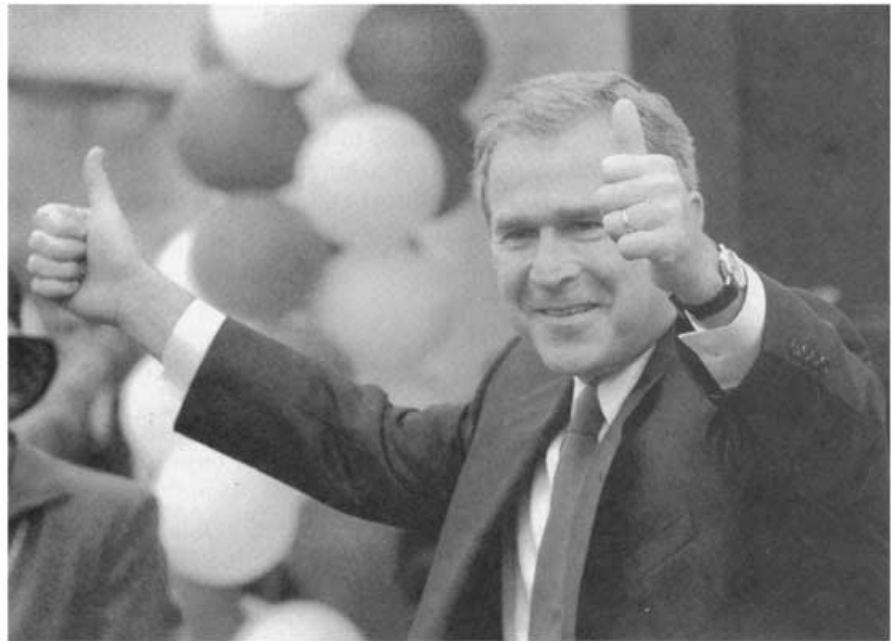
For all of Lyndon Johnson's political virtuosity, he initiated a militarily and politically disastrous ground war in Southeast Asia, never pausing to assess its probable duration and troop requirements (Burke et al. 1988). Johnson lacked a realistic vision of public policy, especially in the sphere of national security. Presidents who lack policy direction are in danger of frittering away their time in office. They also risk instituting mutually inconsistent policies and, in the worst case, of stumbling into debacles, such as Johnson's in Vietnam.

George W. Bush appears to have few deep policy commitments of his own, but he does have what, in the terminology of the authors of *The American Voter*,

might be called "policy vision by proxy" (Campbell et al. 1960, 234). Here, he already has presidential model-ironically, a negative one who happens to be his father. As George W. Bush has repeatedly noted, he believes that it was a mistake for his father not to be more forthcoming in enunciating legislative goals, especially in the wake of his administration's triumph in the Gulf War. Hence, the priority of legislative advocacy in the Bush governorship and its likely priority in the Bush presidency.

Cognitive Style

Some presidents have been masters of detail. Others find it natural to engage in abstract thinking, generaliz-



George W. Bush give the thumbs up to supporters during a campaign rally in Little Rock, Arkansas, October 2000. AP Photo/Eric Gay.

ing from specifics and identifying larger patterns and possibilities. Harry S. Truman fits squarely in the first category. As a former county administrator, Truman went so far as to brief the press on the details of his administration's budgets. A striking example of the second capacity is provided by a chief executive who will never grace Mount Rushmore: Richard Nixon. Two years before entering the White House, Nixon laid down the goals of moving the United States beyond its military involvement in Vietnam, establishing a balance of power with the Soviet Union, and opening relations with China (Nixon 1967). By the final year of his first term, he had accomplished those aims.

George W. Bush has displayed neither the command of details of a Truman nor the capacity for strategic thought of a Nixon. As his lackluster academic record indicates, he lacks intellectual curiosity and is impatient with the play of ideas. It is too late for a president to transform the cognitive habits of a lifetime, but it would be to Bush's advantage to expose himself to a

richer flow of information than was his wont in Texas. Here, the president whose example he might find instructive is Kennedy, who periodically supplemented the advice and information provided by his subordinates by consulting subject-matter specialists within the executive branch.

Emotional Intelligence

Presidents vary in what has come to be called “emotional intelligence”—the capacity to control one’s emotions and channel them to constructive purposes (Goleman 1995). The bulk of the presidents considered here were well served by their emotions, but four of them had emotional flaws that compromised their leadership. Lyndon Johnson’s tendency to bully his subordinates had a chilling effect on debate in his inner circle. Richard Nixon’s almost Shakespearian anger and suspicion led him to embark on excesses that, when discovered, doomed his presidency. The emotional flaws of Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton also diminished their presidencies. Carter’s rigidity contributed to his failure to bond with his counterparts in the Washington political community. Clinton’s lack of political and personal self-discipline deprived his presidency of

direction and played into the hands of his enemies, making him the first elected president in American history to be impeached.

George W. Bush clearly lacked emotional intelligence during the extended period of heavy drinking and drift that he refers to as his “nomadic years.” At age 40, however, he abruptly stopped drinking and turned to religion to stiffen his resolve. One might expect someone who underwent such a drastic conversion to be an emotional tinder box. But Bush went on to a career in business and politics that was unmarked by emotional excess. He also showed impressive resiliency in the course of the longest presidential campaign in American history, and he gave every sign of being at ease when he emerged from the post-Election Day stalemate.

How will George W. Bush withstand the heat in the presidential kitchen? Are there emotional lessons he can take from earlier presidents? The answer to the first is: “No one can know.” One answer to the second is that he can steep himself in the experience of his predecessors, emulating those who were endowed with emotional intelligence and shunning the example of those who were not.

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