Rating the Presidents: Washington to Clinton by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. has been writing about the American presidency for decades. His most recent book is War and the American Presidency (2004). Here, in an assessment of the qualities necessary for success in the White House, he draws on a 1996 ranking of presidents that was done by leading historians and other close observers of presidential leadership (the ranking and list of participants appears at the end of this article). Each president was rated in one of five categories: "Great," "Near Great," "Average," "Below Average," or "Failure." Schlesinger is the author of books on the presidential administrations of Jackson, FDR, Kennedy and Nixon and he served as special assistant to President Kennedy.

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…Nine men, we have seen, have led the list from the first Schlesinger poll of historians nearly half a century ago. What do Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Polk, Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Truman have in common? What do they, and Eisenhower too, who arrived too late for the 1948 poll, tell us about the qualities necessary for success in the White House?

Well, half were over six feet tall. The exceptions were Polk (5' 8"), Theodore Roosevelt (5' 10"), Wilson (5' 11"), Truman (5' 9") and Eisenhower (5' 10 1/2"). On the other hand, James Monroe, John Tyler, Buchanan, Chester A. Arthur, Taft, Harding, Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Gerald Ford, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton were also six feet or more; so height by itself is no guarantee of greatness in the White House. Nor is education. Nearly half the prize group -- Washington, Jackson, Lincoln, and Truman -- never attended college. As for age, the average age of the nine at inauguration or succession was 54 years; so youth is a comparative advantage.

Height and age are minor considerations. Intelligence helps, though Reagan -- with his seven Near Greats -- shows that an influential president need not have much. Maturity? The British ambassador called Theodore Roosevelt an arrested 11-year-old. Unflinching honesty? Deviousness is a presidential characteristic not confined to Eisenhower. Loyalty? This can be a presidential defect: remember Grant and Harding. Private virtues do not guarantee public effectiveness.

More to the point is the test proposed 125 years ago by our most brilliant historian, Henry Adams. The American president, he wrote, "resembles the commander of a ship at sea. He must have a helm to grasp, a course to steer, a port to seek."1 The Constitution offers every president a helm, but the course and the port constitute the first requirement for presidential greatness. Great presidents possess, or are possessed by, a vision of an ideal America. Their passion is to make sure the ship of state sails on the right course. If that course is indeed right, it is because they have an instinct for the dynamics of history. "A statesman may be determined and tenacious," de Gaulle once observed, ". . . but, if he does not understand the character of his time, he will fail."2 Great Presidents have a deep connection with the needs, anxieties, dreams of the people. "I do not believe," said Wilson, "that any man can lead who does not act . . . under the impulse of a profound sympathy with those whom he leads -- a sympathy which is insight -- an insight which is of the heart rather than of the intellect."3

"All our great presidents," said Franklin D. Roosevelt, "were leaders of thought at times when certain ideas in the life of the nation had to be clarified." So Washington embodied the idea of federal union, Jefferson and Jackson the idea of democracy, Lincoln union and freedom, Cleveland rugged honesty. Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson, said FDR, were both "moral leaders, each in his own way and his own time, who used the presidency as a pulpit."4

To succeed, presidents must have a port to seek and must convince Congress and the electorate of the rightness of their course. Politics in a democracy is ultimately an educational process, an adventure in persuasion and consent. Every president stands in Theodore Roosevelt's bully pulpit. National crisis widens his range of options but does not automatically make a man great. The crisis of rebellion did not spur Buchanan to leadership, nor did the crisis of depression turn Hoover into a bold and imaginative president. Their inadequacies in the face of crisis allowed Lincoln and the second Roosevelt to show the difference that individuals can make to history.

Of national crises, war is the most fateful, and all the top ten save Jefferson were involved in war either before or during their presidencies. As Robert Higgs has noted, five (Polk, Lincoln, Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Truman) were commanders-in-chief when the republic was at war, and four more (Washington, Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Eisenhower) made pre-presidential reputations on the battlefield. Military metaphors even accompanied nonmilitary crises. In summoning the nation to battle against the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt called on Americans to "move as a trained and loyal army" and asked Congress for "broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe."5

Crisis helps those who can rise to it, and the association of war with presidential greatness has its ominous aspect. Still, two of the immortals, it should be noted, made their mark without benefit of first-order crisis. Jackson and Theodore Roosevelt forced the nation through sheer power of personality to recognize incipient problems -- Jackson in vindicating the national authority against the state of South Carolina and against the Second Bank of the United States; the first Roosevelt in vindicating the national authority against the great corporations and against raids on the people's natural resources. As the historian Elting Morison admirably described this quality of noncrisis leadership:

"Theodore Roosevelt could get the attention of his fellow citizens and make them think. He knew how to put the hard questions a little before they became obvious to others; how to make the search for sensible answers exciting; how to startle the country into informing debate; and how to move people into their thinking beyond short-run self-interest toward some longer view of the general welfare."6

We hear much these days about the virtues of the middle of the road. But not one of the top nine can be described as a middle-roader. Middle-roading may be fine for campaigning, but it is a sure road to mediocrity in governing. The succession of middle-roaders after the Civil War inspired James Bryce to write the notorious chapter in The American Commonwealth entitled "Why Great Men Are Not Chosen President."7 The middle of the road is not the vital center: it is the dead center.

The Greats and Near Greats all recognized, in the aphorism of Pierre Mendes-France, that "to govern is to choose." They all took risks in pursuit of their ideals. They all provoked intense controversy. They all, except Washington, divided the nation before reuniting it on a new level of national understanding.

Every president would like to be loved by everyone in the country, but presidents who sacrifice convictions to a quest for popular affection are not likely to make it to the top. Harding was an immensely popular president. His death provoked an outpouring of national grief that observers thought unmatched since the death of Lincoln. Scholars are unanimous in pronouncing him a Failure.

Presidents who seek to change the nation's direction know that they are bound to alienate those who profit from the status quo. Great presidents go ahead anyway. "Judge me," FDR said, "by the enemies I have made." Truman's approval rating at the end of his presidency was down to 31 percent. Look where he ranks now.

After his reelection, William Jefferson Clinton faces his rendezvous with history. Debarred by the 22nd Amendment from pursuing a third term, he must make his mark between now and 19 January 2001. This may not be easy. The 22nd Amendment, by turning reelected presidents into lame ducks, reduces their political potency. Second terms tend to be times of trouble: ask FDR, Eisenhower, Johnson, Nixon, Reagan. On the other hand, lame-duckery, by liberating presidents from the demands of reelection, does allow them to run political risks for national benefits.

Clinton brings to the bar of history a rare combination of talents and infirmities. He is a man of penetrating intelligence. He has impressive technical mastery of complicated issues. He has genuine intellectual curiosity and listens as well as talks. He is a skilled and resilient politician. When the spirit moves him, he is capable of real eloquence, and the spirit moves him most of all when he confronts the supreme American problem -- race. Racial justice appears to be his most authentic concern.

On the other hand, he lacks self-discipline. His judgment of people is erratic. His political resilience strikes many as flagrant opportunism. His reactions are instinctively placatory, perhaps from growing up in a household where the wrong words might provoke an alcoholic stepfather to violence. He rushes to propitiate the audience before him, often at his own long-term expense. His scandals and cover-ups are ripe for exploitation by a vindictive opposition. Who can tell how this combination of talents and infirmities will play out?

To make a mark on history, Clinton must liberate himself from polls and focus groups. Let him put his first-rate intelligence to work on the hard problems. Playing it safe, taking it easy, sticking to the middle of the road may make for a more comfortable second term. But following this course would put Clinton alongside William Howard Taft and Rutherford B. Hayes on the ratings list. Far better to anticipate the problems of the twenty-first century, to startle the country into informing debate, to move people into thinking beyond short-run self-interest toward some longer view of the general welfare-and to propose remedies sufficient to the needs of the day. Only boldness and creativity, even if at times foiled and frustrated, will earn him a place among the immortals.