

today in a culture with a multiplicity of voices, all espousing their own truths. Clinton's strength, say the postmodernists, is that he is willing to listen and to distill from them policies that are more enlightened than if he were the captive of one ideology. In effect, Clinton is our first postmodern president and should be celebrated as such. That is the argument. We are likely to see these debates play out vigorously in the years ahead.

What is certainly true is that Clinton's policies have advanced the causes of those whose voices have usually been drowned out—from women to blacks to gays and others. As modest as the steps have been at times, those groups now face a brighter future and, for that, he deserves credit.

Indeed, Clinton's greatest contribution may not be what he accomplished in the 1990s but how well he prepared the country for the decades that follow. That "bridge to the twenty-first century" may turn out to be pretty sturdy after all. Economic fundamentals are strong today, social conditions are improving, the world is at relative peace, and the country is poised on the edge of new scientific and technological revolutions. Who would have thought a decade ago the country would be in superb shape? While Bill Clinton will never escape opprobrium for his own past, perhaps one day he will receive generous credit for improving our future.

## Conclusion

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### Seven Lessons of Leadership

SOON AFTER A NEW PRESIDENT takes office, someone usually has a quiet word in his ear: "Did you know that there is still room up there on Mount Rushmore for one more face? At least a small profile." There isn't, in fact; the sixty-foot slabs are taken. But every president tries mightily to win a place equal to the four men remembered there.

In the eyes of historians, none of our recent occupants has come close. Following a tradition started by his father, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., surveyed thirty-two fellow historians in December 1996, asking them to rate the presidents. Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt once again swept the boards. Jefferson, Jackson, Polk, Teddy Roosevelt, Wilson, and Truman were considered "near great." What was striking was the decline since Truman. His three successors—Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson—barely made it into the top half of the class, scoring "above average." All six presidents thereafter were in the bottom half. Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton were marked "below average," and Nixon was deemed a "failure."

If that's the case, why should we bother to look for lessons of leadership among recent presidents? For starters, that may not be the case—or at least not for long. As Schlesinger himself has written, presidential reputations wax and wane. Truman and Eisenhower have risen significantly in esteem since leaving office. The same will almost surely happen with Reagan (especially if more conservatives begin writing history), and signs of nostalgia are already popping

up around Ford and Bush. Even Clinton may rise in historical estimation.

The larger point is that we need to face reality: it's a lot tougher for anyone to lead the country today than it was in the first half of the twentieth century. Expectations of what a president can accomplish have escalated dramatically, while his capacity for action has diminished even more. A White House today must keep its eye on half a dozen trouble spots around the world and help to steer an international economy, all the while taking responsibility for violence in schools and monitoring research into the human genome. Something is bound to go wrong somewhere, and when it does, a hungry press corps will give relentless chase and partisans in Congress will march cabinet secretaries to Capitol Hill. "It must be realized," Machiavelli wrote, "that there is nothing more difficult to plan, more uncertain of success, or more dangerous to manage than the establishment of a new order of government." And that was long before lobbyists could spend millions on grassroots campaigns to block a president. Not since 1986 has Congress passed bipartisan, blockbuster legislation—the reform of the tax code. No wonder the queue is short for Mount Rushmore.

But that's all the more reason to study the experiences of our recent presidents—to see what worked, what failed, and what can be learned by their successors. Understanding the past is essential to mastering the future. The next twenty years or so will be crucial in shaping the twenty-first century. As the forces of democratic capitalism sweep the world and as technology and science hold out new promise, we may be on the threshold of a new golden age. What could make the difference is the quality of our leadership, starting in the presidency. We need men and women in that job and in the White House who know what it takes to mobilize the energies of the country and can apply themselves with wisdom. There are no off-the-shelf manuals for presidents, but there are rich lessons to be gleaned from past experience.

I do not pretend here to have the final word on any of the four presidents I have served. Their private papers will not be fully opened for some years, and even then will not give us a complete picture. President Kennedy was once sent an inquiry asking him to join a group of historians in assessing past presidents. He exploded in irritation. "How the hell can they know?" he said. "They've never had to sit here, reading all the cables, listening to people all day about these problems." He had a point. The most any of us can offer is our best sense of the picture.

My sense is that even if we do not know the details, certain broad conclusions about leadership can be drawn from recent presidents. All the way along in this book, I have offered observations that seemed pertinent. There is no space to review each of them here, but it might be helpful to boil them down to those that are the most essential.

In my judgment, there are seven keys to responsible and effective leadership in the White House. They apply whether the administration is Democratic or Republican, liberal or conservative. In fact, they apply as well to leaders of most other organizations—CEOs, university presidents, military generals, and heads of nonprofit institutions.

### *1. Leadership Starts from Within*

Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton were the two most gifted presidents of the past thirty years. Each was inordinately bright, well read, and politically savvy. Each revealed in power. Nixon was the best strategist in the office since Eisenhower and possibly since Woodrow Wilson; Clinton was the best tactician since Lyndon Johnson and possibly Franklin Roosevelt. Yet each was the author of his own downfall. Nixon let his demons gain ascendancy, and Clinton could not manage the fault lines in his character. They were living proof that before mastering the world, a leader must achieve self-mastery. Or, as Heraclitus put it more succinctly, "Character is destiny."

The inner soul of a president flows into every aspect of his leadership far more than is generally recognized. His passions in life usually form the basis for his central mission in office. Nixon's search for a "lasting structure of peace" grew out of his dream of becoming a world statesman, just as the hardscrabble youth of LBJ led to his pursuit of a Great Society. We know, too, that the character of a leader heavily influences his decision-making—both how and what he decides. Ford's pardon of Nixon grew out of his own decency. Reagan showed us the degree to which personality shapes rhetoric as well as the ability of a president to work with Congress and the press. In Nixon and Clinton, we saw that the character of a president also determines the character of his White House—that the men and women around him take their cues from the man in the center. Finally—and most importantly—the character of a president determines the integrity of his public life.

In his small classic, *On Leadership*, John W. Gardner assembles a

list of fourteen personal attributes that he believes are important for leaders, public and private. He draws from his own experience as well as from scholars in the field such as Ralph Stogdill, Bernard Bass, and Edwin P. Hollander. A president certainly needs a high measure of all the qualities that Gardner lists: physical vitality; intelligence and judgment-in-action; a willingness to accept responsibility; task competence; an understanding of followers and their needs; skill in dealing with people; a need to achieve; a capacity to motivate; courage and steadiness; a capacity to win and hold trust; a capacity to manage and set priorities; confidence; assertiveness; and an adaptability of approach.

Of these, integrity is the most important for a president. As former senator Alan Simpson said in introducing Gerald Ford at Harvard a year ago: "If you have integrity, nothing else matters. If you don't have integrity, nothing else matters."

People can reasonably debate how virtuous a public leader must be in private life. Some believe that if a politician has erred in his adult life—by committing adultery, for example—he should be disqualified from high office: "If his wife can't trust him, we can't either." But experience suggests that this standard sets the bar higher than we need or should expect. Consider Franklin Roosevelt. Twenty years after he died, Americans learned for the first time that the Roosevelts did not have a perfect marriage. FDR was a father of five when he had a passionate affair with Lucy Mercer that nearly destroyed his marriage. He broke off the relationship, but it was Lucy, not Eleanor, who was with him on the day of his fatal stroke, and as Doris Kearns Goodwin points out, Eleanor bore the burden of the affair for over forty years. Despite this relationship—and perhaps others—FDR emerged as the greatest president of the twentieth century.

How can one resolve these dilemmas about private virtue? There is no easy or simple answer. The rule that journalists used to apply before the new era of sensationalism has always seemed best to me: when a politician's private life interferes with the way he conducts himself in public, we should draw the line. If he drinks too much, is licentious, uses hard drugs, gambles himself into debt—those go too far. Otherwise, we should show greater tolerance and respect for human foibles. Bill Clinton went over the line not because he had sexual relations but because he engaged a White House intern in the Oval Office and then blatantly lied about it.

346 While there is room for disagreement about private life, there can be none about the conduct of public life. To govern, a president

must have the trust of the public and people within the system. And trust does not come with the job anymore; it must be earned. It is thus vital that a president be truthful and accountable for his actions and insist that his staff meet the same rigorous standards. The government has a right to remain silent on matters of sensitivity, but no right to mislead through excessive spin. Those who preach otherwise do violence to democratic principles.

Beyond personal integrity, it is especially important that the nation's chief executive rank high in what political scientist Everett Carll Ladd called "presidential intelligence"—that ineffable blend of knowledge, judgment, temperament, and faith in the future that leads to wise decisions and responsible leadership. It is dangerous, of course, to have a president who is ignorant of the world and of history. But if brains were the only criterion, Nixon, Carter, and Clinton would have been our best presidents of recent years. Rather, as we saw with Reagan, it is a combination of core competence and emotional intelligence that is a better predictor of effectiveness.

Equally important for presidential leadership is courage. No one can succeed in today's politics unless he or she is prepared to fall on a sword in a good cause. Nixon would never have opened the door to China if he lacked guts, nor would Reagan have survived a bullet and hastened the end of the Cold War, nor would Clinton have ended the deficits and secured the passage of NAFTA. Courage must be tempered by prudence, of course—something that was lacking in the Clinton health care plan—but the sine qua non of leadership is inner strength.

## 2. A Central, Compelling Purpose

Just as a president must have strong character, he must be of clear purpose. He must tell the country where he is heading so he can rally people behind him. Lincoln's purpose was to save the Union, FDR's to end the Depression and then to win the war. People could say in a single sentence what their presidencies were all about. Among recent executives, only Reagan was clear about his central goals—to reduce taxes, reduce spending, cut regulations, reduce the deficit, and increase the defense budget. By campaigning on those goals, he not only won a mandate but also made substantial progress toward their achievement (with the conspicuous exception of the budget deficit). By contrast, consider Ford, Carter, Bush, and Clinton. They

had high hopes, too, but never articulated a central, compelling purpose for their presidencies, and they all suffered as a result.

A president's central purpose must also be rooted in the nation's core values. They can be found in the Declaration of Independence. As G. K. Chesterton famously observed, "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence: " All of our greatest presidents have gone there for inspiration and strength. Lincoln said he never had a political sentiment that did not spring from it. It was not intended to be a statement of who we are but of what we dream of becoming, realizing that the journey never ends. It is our communal vision. That's why a president, unlike a CEO, need not reinvent the national vision upon taking office. He should instead give fresh life to the one we have, applying it to the context of the times, leading the nation forward to its greater fulfillment. The reason Martin Luther King was so powerful when he declared, "I have a dream," was that he was standing at the Lincoln Memorial challenging us to carry out the promises of the Declaration.

Presidents depart from the nation's core values at their peril. The Clintons' health care plan failed in large part because it went against the grain. By contrast, FDR knew his Social Security plan was a sharp departure from past tradition but cleverly structured it so that the government did not pay for it out of general revenues, rather he designed it so that people "saved" for their own future. Making the plan consistent with core values was the secret to its passage.

### 3. *A Capacity to Persuade*

For most of the country's history, it didn't matter much whether a president could mobilize the public. From Jefferson until Wilson, the annual State of the Union was a written report to Congress. Even through Truman and Eisenhower, it was more important to be a good broker among interests than a good speaker. Television changed everything. Kennedy and Reagan now stand out in the public mind as the most memorable speakers of the late twentieth century because they were masters of the medium. They both had a capacity to persuade a mass audience through television, and in Reagan's case, he turned it into a powerful weapon to achieve his legislative goals.

348 If anything, the danger today is that presidents blab on so much

that their audiences tune out. George Bush actually gave more public talks per year than Reagan, and Clinton has delivered more than both of them combined. In 1997, Clinton delivered 545 public speeches. He is unusually good at explaining complex public policy issues in simple terms that connect with his audiences, so that in any given forum, he is highly effective. But overexposure has dulled his impact.

### 4. *An Ability to Work within the System*

A common mistake among political consultants today is to believe that the only thing that counts in governing anymore is public persuasion. Television has become an indispensable tool for leadership, but as Reagan's success showed, it is still important that a president and his team be effective in working with other elements of our democratic system. Congress remains a coequal branch of government, and the press acts like one.

In effect, a president should see himself as the center of a web. Surrounding him are six different institutional forces with whom he must form successful working relationships, whether by cooperation, charm, or persuasion. The public, Congress, and the press are obviously the most critical. But there are other players who must also be approached with political savvy: foreign powers, domestic interest groups, and domestic elites. All of these outside players expect to have a place at his table and to share in decision-making; most of them will put their own needs first. No one in the twentieth century was better at juggling these many groups than Franklin Roosevelt. He was, as James MacGregor Burns wrote, both the lion and the fox, and that accounted in large measure for his extraordinary success.

Among recent executives, it is surprising how often that lesson has been lost. Nixon, Carter, and Clinton all seemed to thumb their nose at institutions like Congress, the press, and the political elite of Washington. It is difficult enough to govern in today's climate, but they managed to make it almost impossible by doubling the resistance to their agendas. Future presidents ought to go to school on FDR's success in the New Deal, Harry Truman's passage of the Marshall Plan, LBJ's victories in the civil rights bills of 1964 and 1965, and Reagan's passage of his economic program.

## 5. *A Sure, Quick Start*

If contemporary experience has taught us anything, surely it is the need for a president to "hit the ground running." The difference between Reagan's quick start and Clinton's stumbles put one on the path toward a succession of legislative triumphs and the other on the road to a debacle in health care and a loss of Congress. Had Clinton not been as agile as he was in recovering in late 1993 and then again in 1995-1996, he would have been a one-term president. As it was, he never became the transformational figure he had hoped.

In most institutions, the power of a leader grows over time. A CEO, a university president, the head of a union, acquire stature through the quality of their long-term performance. The presidency is just the opposite: power tends to evaporate quickly. It's not that a president must rival Franklin Roosevelt in his First Hundred Days, but his first months in office—up to the August recess of Congress—are usually the widest window of opportunity he will have, even if he serves two full terms. That's why he has to move fast.

Achieving a smooth, successful start is more arduous than it looks. Those who have been well schooled in national life have a definite advantage. FDR, LBJ, and Reagan knew how to pull the levers of power before they got to the White House; Carter and Clinton had to learn on the job. The campaign itself must also be focused on governing. By giving voters a clear sense of what they wanted to do in office, LBJ in 1964 and Reagan in 1980 both won mandates that greatly strengthened their hands in the months that followed. By contrast, Reagan never sought a mandate in the 1984 campaign, and his second term never matched his first. A well-run transition is a less appreciated but equally important element. Had Clinton settled down in the eleven weeks between his election and inauguration, he would have arrived in Washington with a more experienced White House team, a game plan for his first weeks in office, and a storehouse of personal energy. He lacked all three.

## 6. *Strong, Prudent Advisers*

When George Washington was preparing his third annual message to Congress, as biographer Richard Brookhiser has pointed out, he first took suggestions from James Madison and Thomas Jefferson.

He then asked Alexander Hamilton to draw up a first draft, which went back to Madison for a rewrite. Not a bad lot.

The Washington experience underscores a repeated lesson from presidential history. The best presidents are ones who surround themselves with the best advisers. Lincoln wrote down the names of his potential cabinet on the night of his election and from them recruited a team that rivaled Washington's. Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman—all were noted for the quality of the people around them. Of the presidents I have served, Reagan started with the best White House operation, and Ford wound up with the best cabinet. In each instance, one could see a palpable difference in the dynamics of their leadership.

In the future, we are likely to see the First Lady or the First Man exercise an ever-larger influence upon the political thinking of the president. Hillary Clinton is the first woman in the post with a professional degree, but she will be far from the last. The trend should be a welcome one: a president needs a friend in whom he can confide his private thoughts, and if that person is also an empathic, educated, helpmate, all the better. The only caveat is whether the two keep their roles strictly separated. The Clinton experience should be lesson enough.

## 7. *Inspiring Others to Carry On the Mission*

One of the most instructive books about the leadership of Franklin Roosevelt starts with his death. Historian William Leuchtenburg shows that the next eight presidents after him all lived in his shadow. Three of them—Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson—were Democrats who consciously set out to complete the New Deal. Two—Eisenhower and Nixon—were Republicans who accepted it and even added on to it. In fact, Nixon was in many ways the last of the New Deal presidents. Even Reagan, who rejected the Great Society, didn't want to disturb the work of his first political hero and adopted much of his leadership style.

The point is that the most effective presidents create a living legacy, inspiring legions of followers to carry on their mission long after they are gone. Among contemporary presidents, only Reagan has come close to doing that. While he never built a coalition to match FDR's, he put a stamp upon his party and upon the nation's political culture that shapes it still.

As political scientist Stephen Skowronek has demonstrated, there is a pattern to the way presidents like Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, FDR, and Reagan have created a new politics. In each case, they came into power by knocking down an old orthodoxy and in its place built what is now popularly called "a new paradigm." Roosevelt gave the boot to laissez-faire and put government at the helm of the economy. Reagan shifted the balance away from a government-centered system and embraced an entrepreneurial culture. They also built new political movements and created cadres of loyal followers who would pick up their banner when they fell. Inevitably, they also left behind an agenda of unfinished work that subsequent presidents tried to complete.

Today's politics is ripe for a president to come into office and offer "a new paradigm." There may not be an old orthodoxy to knock down; no single regime of ideas is now dominant. But the winds of change are blowing so hard that voters are eager to find a leader who will set forth a clear, steady path into the future. The next president who does that successfully will also be the next to have a living legacy.

THERE ARE, as we have seen over the course of this book, a good many other lessons that recent experience suggests about leadership, but the seven enumerated here seem fundamental. They are the principles upon which to build. They do not guarantee success. Certainly, they offer no guarantee of producing a new candidate for Mount Rushmore. Great crises usually bring forth great leaders, as Abigail Adams once observed, and, for now, neither war nor depression is looming. But these principles do hold out the promise that if they are followed, the nation might once again enjoy a steady stream of presidents who are strong, honest, and effective. Who can ask for more? We might just find that new golden age.

## Notes

### Preface

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