



**WILEY-  
BLACKWELL**



The Center  
for the Study  
of the Presidency

---

"The Qualities of Effective Presidents": An Overview from FDR to Bill Clinton

Author(s): Fred I. Greenstein

Source: *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Mar., 2000), pp. 178-185

Published by: [Blackwell Publishing](#) on behalf of the [Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552077>

Accessed: 13/07/2011 12:59

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=black>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Blackwell Publishing and Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Presidential Studies Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# *The Qualities of Effective Presidents:* An Overview from FDR to Bill Clinton

FRED I. GREENSTEIN

*Princeton University*

*The highly personalized nature of the modern American presidency makes the strengths and weaknesses of the White House incumbent of the utmost importance. This article summarizes the conclusions of an interpretative study of the eleven American presidents from Franklin Roosevelt to Bill Clinton. It discusses the qualities that have served well and poorly in the Oval Office under six headings: communication to the public, organizational capacity, political skill, policy vision, cognitive style, and emotional intelligence.*

In some political systems, it does not much matter who serves as the nation's top political leader. In Great Britain, with its tradition of collective leadership, for example, the rare Winston Churchill, Margaret Thatcher, or Tony Blair is far outnumbered by the many Stanley Baldwins, Harold Wilsons, and John Majors, whose individual impact on governmental actions is modest. For the leaders of such political systems, personal effectiveness tends to be beside the point.

If a higher power had set out to design a democracy in which the person at the peak of the political system made a difference, the result might well resemble the United States. American chief executives have taken advantage of the separation of powers and the constitutional grant of independent powers to the president to place their imprint 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.

Then came the emergence of what is commonly called the modern presidency.<sup>1</sup> Spurred by the New Deal, World War II, and the entrepreneurial leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt, there was a quantum increase in the scope and influence of the federal govern-

---

1. There is an inevitable arbitrariness to efforts to date the emergence of a modern presidency. In beginning my analysis with Franklin Roosevelt, I do not mean to gainsay the value of studying the pre-FDR chief executives or deny that the presidential activism that is taken for granted today was anticipated by such earlier presidents as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

---

*Fred I. Greenstein is a professor of politics at Princeton University and director of the Woodrow Wilson School Program in Leadership Studies. His most recent book is The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Clinton (New York: Free Press, 2000).*

ment. Meanwhile, the United States became a world and then a nuclear power. In the same period, the chief executive became the principal source of policy initiative, proposing much of the legislation considered by Congress. Presidents began to make an increasing amount of policy independent of the legislature, drawing on their sweeping administrative powers, and the Executive Office of the President was created, providing presidents with the organizational support needed to carry out their expanded obligations.

The power of the modern American president manifests itself in its purest form in decisions of war and peace, but the occupant of the Oval Office is also of critical domestic importance. Not only does the president have the power of the veto and wide discretion over the implementation of laws and allocation of expenditures, his (and someday her) ability to command public attention and shape the national policy agenda also makes him politically potent, even when his opponents control Capitol Hill. Indeed, President Clinton scored significant political victories in 1998 on the very brink of the vote by the House of Representatives to impeach him.

## Qualities that Shape Presidential Performance

In what follows, I present a series of observations about the qualities that have contributed to the effectiveness of modern American presidents. My remarks are distilled from an interpretative study of the modern presidents that I embarked on in the final months of the Nixon presidency and concluded in the seventh year of the Clinton presidency (Greenstein 2000). My initial stimulus was an interest in understanding why Richard Nixon, who in his first term had been responsible for such leadership feats as the opening to China and détente with the Soviet Union, was succumbing to a self-inflicted political disaster. Rather than only study Nixon, I decided to explore the full array of post-Herbert Hoover chief executives in the hope of identifying qualities that have served well and poorly in the modern Oval Office. In the years that followed, I immersed myself in the literature on my subjects, mined their unpublished papers, and interviewed large numbers of past and current presidential associates.<sup>2</sup>

My observations fall under six broad headings, each of which pertains to a personal attribute that affects presidential job performance. The first, which relates to the outer face of presidential leadership, is the president's proficiency as a *public communicator*. The second, which bears on the inner workings of the presidency, is the president's *organizational capacity*: that is, his ability to rally his colleagues and structure their activities effectively. The third and fourth apply to the president as political operator: his *political skill* and the extent to which it is harnessed to a definite *vision* of public policy.

2. I also have had several brief, but instructive, contacts with the subjects of my study. I interviewed Presidents Ford and Carter shortly after they left office, met briefly with George Bush when he was vice president, and had a fascinating glimpse of President Clinton in action while attending one of his Oval Office bill-signing ceremonies. Well before beginning my study, I had the good fortune of meeting with ex-president Harry Truman during a week he spent in residence at Yale in 1958.

The fifth is the *cognitive style* with which the president processes the Niagara of advice and information that comes his way. The sixth relates to what Max Weber called “the firm taming of the soul” and in recent years has come to be called *emotional intelligence*—the extent to which the president is able to manage his emotions and turn them to constructive purposes rather than be dominated by them and allow them to undermine his public performance (Weber 1919, 115; Goleman 1995).<sup>3</sup>

### Effectiveness as a Public Communicator

For an office that places so great a premium on the presidential pulpit, the modern presidency has been surprisingly lacking in able public 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. Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Reagan—and Clinton, when he is at his best—are the shining exceptions.

Chief executives who find the most talented of the presidential communicators daunting should be relieved to learn that the eloquence of these three men was the product of effort and experience. In 1910, when Eleanor Roosevelt first heard her husband give a speech, she 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). When Kennedy was a freshman congressman, he had a diffident, self-effacing public manner. The dramatic public manner for which he is now remembered evolved out of his collaboration with his speechwriter and alter ego Theodore Sorensen during his years in the Senate. For all of Reagan’s early experience as a radio announcer and movie actor, he did not perfect the podium manner of his political years until the 1950s, when his film career was drawing to a close and he found employment on the corporate speaking circuit.

One president who allowed himself to be fazed by an accomplished predecessor was George Bush, who seems to have concluded that since he could not compare with Reagan as a communicator, he should minimize the role of rhetoric in his presidency. Bush used the White House briefing room for his public communications, only rarely addressing the nation from the Oval Office, and he instructed his speechwriters to temper his prose. Bush’s initial three years of high public approval provide a reminder that formal addresses are not the only way for a president to remain in the good graces of the public. Bush’s failure to win reelection in 1992 highlights the costs of a leadership style that gives short shrift to the teaching and preaching side of presidential leadership.

3. The question of a president’s emotional fitness for office is the central concern of Barber’s much discussed *The Presidential Character* (1972). Barber distinguishes between two kinds of presidential activists: those for whom political participation is a fundamentally positive experience and those for whom it is a source of negative feelings. The “active-positive” presidents, Barber argues, tend to be secure in their emotional moorings and free to channel their energies into productive leadership. The “active-negative” presidents are likely to be marked by emotional insecurities that are in danger of spilling over into their official actions. Barber’s active-negative classification is a reasonably persuasive indicator of such dour, emotionally driven chief executives as Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. However, it cannot accommodate the endlessly energetic and ebullient, but emotionally deficient, Bill Clinton. Johnson, Nixon, and Clinton are highly different in their outward manners, but they are alike in being emotionally obtuse, a term for which I am indebted to my colleague Stanley Kelley, Jr. For instructive discussions of presidential personality, see Greenstein (2000, 253-56); see also George and George (1998) and Renshon (1996).

## Organizational Capacity

A president's capacity as an organizer includes his ability to forge a team and get the most out of it, minimizing the tendency of subordinates to tell their boss what they sense he wants to hear (Janis 1982). It also includes a quite different matter: the president's ability to create effective institutional arrangements.

There is an illuminating postpresidential indicator of a president's success as a team builder—the way he is remembered by alumni of his administration. Veterans of the Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Ford, and Bush presidencies have nothing but praise for their erstwhile chiefs. In contrast, few Johnson, Carter, and Clinton lieutenants emerged from their White House service with unmixed views of the president they served. Most ambivalent are the former aides of Richard Nixon, many of whom went to prison for their actions in his service.

Presidents differ in their ability to avail themselves of a rich and varied fare of advice and information. FDR is famous for encouraging diversity in the recommendations that reached him by pitting his assistants against one another. Kennedy charged his brother Robert and his alter ego Theodore Sorensen with scrutinizing the proposals of his other advisers for flaws and pitfalls. The modern president with by far the greatest organizational experience was Eisenhower, who had a highly developed view of how to avail himself of advice and information. "I know of only one way in which you can be sure you have done your best to make a wise decision," he once remarked:

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 with each other. (Eisenhower 1967, 103)

Not all presidents have been willing to expose themselves to vigorous give and take. Nixon and Reagan were uncomfortable in the presence of face-to-face disagreement. Johnson's Texas-sized personality had a chilling effect on some of his subordinates. His National Security Council (NSC) staff member Chester Cooper recalled recurrent fantasies of facing down LBJ at NSC meetings when Johnson sought his concurrence on a matter relating to Vietnam by replying, "I most definitely do not agree." But when LBJ turned to him and asked, "Mr. Cooper, do you agree?" Cooper found himself replying, "Yes, Mr. President, I agree" (Cooper 1970, 223).

The capacity to design effective institutional arrangements has been in scarce supply in the modern presidency. In this department, Eisenhower was in a class of his own. The Eisenhower organizational innovation most worthy of emulation was the set of procedures that framed his administration's national security deliberations. Each week, the chief policy planners of each of the bodies represented in the NSC hammered out option papers stating the policy recommendations of their agencies.

When there were disagreements, they were clearly delineated and set before the full NSC, where they were the object of sharp, focused debate. The result was as important

for preparing Eisenhower's foreign policy team to work together as it was for grounding it in the issues bearing on unfolding global contingencies. Any president who wants to establish an effectively operating White House would be advised to examine Eisenhower's procedures, many of which are no longer part of the institutional memory of the modern presidency.<sup>4</sup>

### Political Skill

The classic statement of the centrality of political skill to presidential performance is Richard E. Neustadt's *Presidential Power* (Neustadt 1960, 1990), which has been described as the closest approximation to Machiavelli's writings in the literature of American politics. The question Neustadt addresses is how the chief executive can put his stamp on public policy in the easily stalemated American political system. Neustadt's prescription is for the president to use the powers of his office assertively, build and maintain public support, and establish a reputation among fellow policy makers as a skilled, determined political operator.

If there ever were reason to doubt the conventional wisdom that presidents need to be skilled political operators, it was eliminated by Jimmy Carter, who displayed great political adeptness in catapulting himself to the White House but was singularly lacking in competence once he was there. The Carter presidency provides a catalogue of avoidable errors, the bulk of which involved failing to build bridges to key Washington policy makers. The consequences for the fate of Carter's ambitious program were predictably negative.

Lyndon Johnson, by way of contrast, seemed almost to have taken his methods from the pages of *Presidential Power* (Neustadt 1960, 1990). Within hours after Kennedy's assassination, Johnson had begun to muster support for major domestic policy departures. He exhibited will as well as skill, cultivating his political reputation by keeping Congress in session until Christmas 1963 to prevail in one of his administration's first legislative contests. And his actions won him strong public support, making it apparent to his opposite numbers on Capitol Hill that it would be politically costly to ignore his demands.

Yet, the same Lyndon Johnson who was such a domestic political virtuoso embarked on an open-ended U.S. military intervention in Vietnam in 1965, skillfully playing down its importance so as not to distract the political community from the enactment of his legislative program. Johnson intervened in Vietnam without ever carefully examining the likely duration of the American military involvement and its probable troop requirements. Three years later, a half million American soldiers were mired in Southeast Asia, at which point Johnson announced that he would halt the military buildup, seek negotiations with the communists, and remove himself from the running for a second elected term.

4. For a valuable recent analysis of Eisenhower's national security deliberation process, see Bowie and Immerman (1998).

## Policy Vision

The term *vision* refers to a variety of specific qualities. One is the capacity to inspire. In this, the rhetorically gifted presidents—Kennedy, Reagan, and above all FDR—excelled. I am using the term in a narrower sense to refer to the extent to which the president holds policy views that inform his actions. Of the eleven twentieth-century presidents from FDR to Bill Clinton, three stand out for the explicitness of their policies: Eisenhower, Nixon, and Reagan.<sup>5</sup>

Vision also encompasses consistency of viewpoint. Presidents who stand firm are able to set the terms of policy discourse. In effect, they serve as anchors for the rest of the political community. George Bush was not alone in lacking what he once referred to as “the vision thing.” He falls in a class of presidential pragmatists that includes the great bulk of the modern chief executives. The costs of vision-free leadership include inconsistent policies that cancel one another out, programs that have undesired effects, and sheer drift.

## Cognitive Style

Presidents have varied widely in their cognitive styles. Jimmy Carter had an engineer’s proclivity to reduce issues to their component parts, a style that served him well in the 1978 Camp David negotiations but failed to provide his administration with an overall sense of direction. Carter’s fine-grained cognitive qualities contrast with a broader, more strategic intelligence that cuts to the heart of a problem, as Eisenhower did when he introduced his administration’s deliberations on Dien Bien Phu with the incisive observation that the jungles of Indochina would “absorb our divisions by the dozens” (Burke and Greenstein 1989, 32).

Another example of strategic intelligence is to be had from 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 an opening with China. By the final year of his first term, he had accomplished his purposes.

Nixon’s first-term successes contrast with the paucity of major accomplishments in the two White House terms of the first presidential Rhodes scholar, Bill Clinton. Clinton possesses a formidable ability to absorb and process ideas and information, but his mind is more synthetic than analytic, and his political impulses sometimes lead him to substitute mere rationalization for reasoned analysis.

Two presidents who were marked by cognitive limitations were Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan. Truman’s uncritical reading of works of popular history made him susceptible to false historical analogies. Reagan was notorious for his imperfect understanding of a number of his policy initiatives. That both presidents had major policy

5. But Reagan differed from Eisenhower and Nixon in that his policy views were poorly grounded in information.

accomplishments shows that intelligence and information as measured by standardized tests is not the sole cause of presidential effectiveness.

### Emotional Intelligence

Three of the twentieth-century modern presidents stand out as fundamentally free of distracting emotional perturbations: Eisenhower, Ford, and Bush. Four others were marked by emotional undercurrents that were problematic in certain respects but did not significantly impair their leadership: Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, and Reagan. That leaves Johnson, Nixon, Carter, and Clinton, all of whom were emotionally handicapped. The vesuvian LBJ was subject to mood swings of clinical proportions. Jimmy Carter evinced a rigidity that impeded his White House performance. The lack of self-discipline of Bill Clinton led him into actions that ensued in his impeachment.

Richard Nixon was the most emotionally impaired of the presidents I have considered. His anger and suspiciousness were of Shakespearean proportions. He, more than any other president, summons up the classic notion of a tragic hero who is defeated by the very qualities that brought him success. It has been argued that the tortured psyche of a Nixon is a precondition of political creativity. That is a variant of the proposition that the inner torment of a Van Gogh is the price of his creativity, but other great painters were free of Van Gogh's self-destructiveness, and the healthy-minded Eisenhower was as gifted as Nixon in the positive aspects of leadership. Great political ability does sometimes derive from troubled emotions, but the former does not justify the latter in the custodian of the most destructive military arsenal in world history.

### A Concluding Admonition

In the world of imagination, it is possible to envision a cognitively and emotionally intelligent chief executive, who happens also to be an inspiring public communicator, a capable White House organizer, and the possessor of exceptional political skill and vision. In the real world, human imperfection is inevitable, but some imperfections are more disabling than others.

Many presidents have performed adequately without being brilliant orators. Only a few of them have had strong organizational capacities. A minimal level of political skill is a precondition of presidential effectiveness, but skill is widely present in the handful of individuals who rise to the political summit. Vision is rarer than skill, but only Lyndon Johnson was disastrously deficient in the realm of policy.

Finally, there are the two broad components of personal character: thought and emotion. The importance of cognitive ability in the presidency should be self-evident. Still, Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Carter, and Clinton had impressive intellects but significant emotional shortcomings. In effect, they were the opposites of FDR, who in the well-known characterization of Oliver Wendell Holmes had a second-class mind but a first-class temperament.



Johnson and Nixon presided over major policy breakthroughs but also over two of the most unhappy political developments of the twentieth century—Vietnam and Watergate. Carter and Clinton were not responsible for comparable political disasters, but each had inner flaws that kept him from living up to his own towering aspirations. The experience of these four chief executives suggests the following admonition for those who participate in presidential selection: beware the contender who lacks emotional intelligence. In its absence, all else may turn to ashes.

## References

- Barber, James D. 1972. *The presidential character: Predicting performance in the White House*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bowie, Robert R., and Richard H. Immerman. 1998. *Waging peace: How Eisenhower shaped an enduring cold war strategy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Burke, John P., and Fred I. Greenstein, with the collaboration of Larry Berman and Richard Immerman. 1989. *How presidents test reality: Decisions on Vietnam, 1954 and 1965*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Cooper, Chester L. 1970. *Lost crusade: America in Vietnam*. Greenwich, CT: Dodd, Mead.
- Eisenhower, Dwight D. 1967. Columbia oral history interview.
- George, Alexander L., and Juliette L. George. 1998. *Presidential personality and performance*. New York: Westview.
- Goleman, Daniel. 1995. *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam.
- Greenstein, Fred I. 2000. *The presidential difference: Leadership style from FDR to Clinton*. New York: Free Press.
- Janis, Irving L. 1982. *Groupthink: A psychological study of foreign policy decisions and fiascoes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Neustadt, Richard E. 1960. *Presidential power: The politics of leadership*. New York: Norton.
- . 1990. *Presidential power and the modern presidents: The politics of leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. New York: Free Press.
- Renshon, Stanley A. 1996. *The psychological assessment of presidential candidates*. New York: New York University Press.
- Roosevelt, Eleanor. 1937. *This is my story*. New York: Harper.
- Weber, Max, 1919. Politics as a vocation. Reprinted in *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology*, edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press, 1956.