What makes a successful president?

Bennett, Anthony J. "What makes a good president? Debate often focuses on the power of the US president. Is the presidency 'imperial or 'imperilled'? In this article Anthony Bennett asks a possibly more important question when he explores what makes a good or successful president. " [Politics Review](http://find.galegroup.com/gps/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T003&prodId=IPS&docId=A108113657&source=gale&userGroupName=wfield&version=1.0). 13.1 (Sept 2003): 30(3).

What are the qualities likely to enable a president to achieve what he wants to achieve? Before we can answer that question, we must remind ourselves about some fundamental characteristics of the American political system. The American presidency is essentially a weak office because of the significant checks which the Founding Fathers put upon it, especially those exercised by the Congress.

In 2002, both Tony Blair and George W. Bush wanted to make changes to the structure of their government departments. Blair wanted to rearrange the responsibilities between the departments Of transport, local government and the regions and replace, a rather tarnished transport secretary--Stephen Byers--at the same time: he quite simply made both those changes. Bush wanted to rearrange the responsibilities of the agencies involved in domestic security, thereby creating a Department of Homeland Security, but it was over 6 months before he could gain the necessary agreement of Congress.

Add a further ingredient: in Britain, the prime minister is the leader of the largest party in the House of Commons and, as the House of Lords has little effective power, he thus controls the governmental machine. In the US, it is possible for the president to be of one party whilst the majority of Congress is of the other. How would Blair be a good prime minister if the Conservative Party had a majority in the House of Commons? But in the US not only is such 'divided government' possible, it has become much more common in recent years. Take the years 1969-2003: in only 6 of those 34 years has the president's party been in the majority in both houses of Congress. In the previous 34 years (1934-68), the president's party had a majority in Congress for 26 of those years.

Having said all that, let us consider six factors which go to make a good president.

## (1) Relevant policies

If you don't have this first ingredient, you are unlikely to make it to the White House at all or may not stay there very long. The trouble with George Bush in 1992 and Bob Dole in 1996 was that Americans did not think they were talking about the policies which were important to them. In the early 1990s America was entering a period of economic recession; but in 1992 George Bush wanted to tell voters what a great international coalition he had built up for the Persian Gulf War. When Bill Clinton was asked what was the key issue in his campaign, he remarked in that now famous phrase: 'It's the economy, stupid!'

### (2) Popularity

Some presidents only just win elections: Nixon (1968), Carter (1976) and Clinton (1992 and 1996) are examples, in neither of his elections did Bill Clinton win 50% of the popular vote. Even in the Electoral College, Carter defeated Ford in 1976 by just 291 to 247 electoral votes. It is always difficult for such presidents to claim a mandate for whatever policies they wanted to pursue.

Some presidents have won by a landslide: Johnson (1964) and Reagan (1984) stand out. Both won over 60% of the popular vote and trounced their opponents in the Electoral College. This does make a president's job somewhat easier, though it's no guarantee of success, as Nixon (1972) found out. Some presidents--like George W. Bush in 2000--never even won the popular vote. One suspects that, had it not been for the traumatic events of 11 September 2001, this would have proved a severe handicap. It may still prove to be.

It is not only winning elections that is important, but remaining popular with the public too. Bill Clinton survived his impeachment in 1998 largely because of his consistently high levels of public approval. George W. Bush's ability to get things done was significantly increased by his high levels of public approval in the year following '9/11 '.

### (3) Oratorical skills

An ability to communicate with the electorate is vital for a successful presidency. This was the strength of both Reagan--dubbed 'the Great Communicator'--and (Clinton. Here's Reagan speaking about what he saw as an overly powerful and intrusive federal government:

The trouble with this government in Washington

is that it works on the following principles:

if it moves, tax it; if it keeps moving,

regulate it; and if it stops moving, subsidise

it. It spends millions of your dollars inventing

miracle cures for which there are no

known diseases.

It may be simplistic but it can be understood by ordinary voters.

In contrast, when President Carter's administration hit the buffers in mid-1979, Carter went on television and talked to the American people about how he had discovered 'a crisis of the spirit that is threatening to destroy the social and political fabric of America'. He used words like 'fragmentation' and 'immobility'. The speech, like the presidency it was meant to rescue, was a flop.

The importance of oratorical skills was clearly seen in the 1992 presidential debates featuring about-to-be-defeated-president Bush and about-to-become-president Clinton. Here's an extract from Newsweek's account of just one moment in the second debate.

A young black woman asked an awkwardly framed question about how such powerful and sheltered men had been personally affected-by the national debt. She meant the recession, not the debt, but only Clinton was quick enough to catch her drift. A puzzled-locking President Bush .began his faltering answer with the words which could have served as an epitaph for his entire presidency. 'I don't think I get it,' began Bush. But a few minutes later, Clinton with his touchy-feely gifts at human connection walked up close to the woman, made eye contact with her and spoke meaningfully about being Governor of a poor state in hard times. He knew people who had lost their jobs or their businesses and he felt their pain.

### (4) An understanding of Washington politics

A phenomenon of modern American politics is the anti-Washington mood of voters especially in presidential elections. In the mid-twentieth century, Americans elected a parade of Washington politicians as president: former Senator Harry Truman, Senator John Kennedy, former Senator Lyndon Johnson, former Senator Richard Nixon. Since the Vietnam War was lost and Nixon was forced to resign, Americans have elected four state governors: Carter of Georgia; Reagan of California; Clinton of Arkansas; Bush of Texas. The only break in that line was the election of George Bush in 1988, a quint-essential Washington insider.

The trouble with this is that state governors have little or no knowledge of how Washington politics works. These 'outsider' presidents all chose 'insider' vice-presidents to help them, politically, find their way around Washington: Walter Mondale (Carter); George Bush (Reagan); Al Gore (Clinton); Dick Cheney (Bush). The principal job of these vice-presidents has been to bring a Washington perspective to White House decision-making, and to some extent they have been successful.

There seems little doubt that having Washington experience can be a significant determinant of presidential success. A Harry Truman or a Lyndon Johnson starts with a much better political roadmap than does a Jimmy Carter or a Bill Clinton.

### (5) Organizational skills

The federal government is a huge enterprise: there are now 15 executive departments, the giants of the Washington bureaucracy. There are another 59 independent agencies and regulatory commissions. Altogether over 3 million people are on the civilian pay-roll of the federal government. Being president of the United States is a significant executive job, and presidents who don't have the organisational skills to cope, won't be good presidents. Here, by the way, might be a plus for choosing big-state governors--such as Franklin D. Roosevelt of New York and Reagan of California--as president, rather than senators. Governors, too, are executives. They have to get things done. Senators are paid to talk.

A good president will need to delegate. After he had left office, I interviewed Don Regan, who had been Reagan's chief-of-staff. Regan told me that, in the first weeks of Reagan's second term, he (Regan) had prepared a file on the policy priorities for the next 4 years. He presented it to the president, suggesting that once Reagan had read the file they might have a discussion on possible policy priorities. But the next morning, the president handed the file back to Regan with the following words: 'Let's do it.' Reagan clearly had done no more than glance at the policies. That's all he regarded as his job.

Linked with this ability to delegate is the importance of choosing high-calibre staff. The appointments that an incoming president makes to key White House posts are often decisive. Contrast the two Reagan terms: the first, in which Reagan was served by a highly efficient 'troika' of James Baker, Michael Deaver and Ed Meese; and the second term, in which advisers served up a foreign policy disaster for the president and key aides were forced to resign. The first 6 months of Clinton's first term were equally disastrous because of poor-quality, inexperienced staff.

### (6) Ability to persuade

In December 1952, outgoing President Truman was sitting behind his Oval Office desk, contemplating what it would be like for incoming President Eisenhower, a former army general--known always as 'Ike', to become president. As a general, Ike was used to giving orders and having them obeyed. 'Poor old Ike,' mused Truman. 'He'll sit here and he'll say "Do this" and "Do that" and nothing will happen. He'll find it very frustrating.'

It was Truman, too, who came up with this most accurate of thoughts on presidential power.

I sit here all day, trying to persuade people

to do the things they ought to have the

sense to do without my persuading them.

That's all the powers of the president

amount to.

Professor Richard Neustadt put it this way: 'The president's power is the power to persuade.'

To get things done in Washington, to be a good, effective and successful president, you've got to be a good persuader. In 1981, Reagan persuaded a Democrat-controlled House of Representatives to vote for huge tax cuts. In 2001, George W. Bush managed to persuade a Democrat-controlled Senate to vote for his education reform package. He did this by negotiating with the chairman of the Senate Education Committee, Democrat Edward Kennedy. True, the president had to ditch his school voucher plan, but he still got a good deal of what he had wanted.

Contrast that with incoming President Bill Clinton 8 years earlier. Clinton was in a much stronger position politically to get his reforms through Congress. He was a Democrat and had Democrats in the .majority in both houses of Congress. In his 1992 election he had made health-care reform his number one legislative priority. But he didn't get it because he broke two golden rules of Washington politics: he didn't talk with folk from the other party; he wasn't prepared to compromise.

As expert David Mervin has written: 'Without bargaining skills, the president will be a nonentity in the White House, unable to control other political leaders and incapable of meeting his responsibility to govern.'

### Conclusions

Success in the White House requires a clear understanding of the limits of the political system. The men who invented the presidency did not wish for a ruler. Instead, as Michael Cronin has written, 'they created a system in which they hoped leadership would flourish'. They wanted a leader, not a ruler. A ruler commands; a leader influences. A ruler wields power; a leader persuades. According to the Constitution, the president is commander-in-chief, and in foreign policy, as we have seen during 2002/03, indeed he is. But in ordinary, everyday policy the president is not commander-in-chief, he is bargainer-in-chief. So, to be a good president, one needs to have the policies of a Franklin Roosevelt, the popularity of a George Washington, the oratory of a John Kennedy, the insider knowledge of a Lyndon Johnson, the organisational skills of a Dwight Eisenhower and the persuasive skills of a Ronald Reagan. No wonder there are few good presidents!

## Exam focus

Using this article and other resources available to you, answer the following questions.

(1) 'The American presidency is essentially a weak office.' How far do you agree with this view?

(2) How much of a problem for presidents is 'divided government'?

(3) To what extent do successful presidents have to meet the six criteria?

(4) Does George W. Bush qualify as a 'good' president by these criteria? Give reasons for your answer.