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9/11 and the Presidency

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9/11 and the Presidency

How did 9/11 change what we look for in a president?

In short and above all: we want a commander in chief more than an economic manager.

That was hardly the case a few short years ago. We Americans live in interesting times. Our nation has experienced three distinctly different eras during the last five presidential election cycles. We have gone from the Cold War to peacetime to the war on terror. You'd be hard pressed to find a comparable period in our history when the challenges have been so differently defined. Election cycles reflect those changing challenges.



WANTED IN 1988: A RETIRING COMMANDER IN CHIEF

In 1988, when Vice President George H. W. Bush ran against Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, we were dialing down our nation's epochal struggle against the Soviet Union. Yet there were lingering dangers with all those missiles pointed at us, so foreign policy was still high on our list of political priorities. Bush struck most people as the better man for the job.

Dukakis, in retrospect, hardly stood a chance. No image better encapsulates his failed bid for the White House than the one of him riding around in a tank in Warren, Michigan, an oversized helmet on his head. The diminutive governor hardly looked like the stuff of which commanders in chief are made, and he was practically laughed out of his campaign.

In the public imagination, the phony photo-op of Dukakis riding around in a tank was juxtaposed to something authentic: the grainy film clip of fighter pilot George H. W. Bush being rescued by a submarine after a dangerous mission in the Pacific during World War II. Americans wanted the Real Thing. Is there any question who looked more suited to finish the Cold War?

Now, it didn't hurt that Bush proposed steering the ship of state out of choppy seas and back to calmer waters where the nation could be its "kinder, gentler" self. Bush did have a domestic dimension to him; he had majored in economics at Yale University. But the habits of the Cold War were still very much with us in 1988, and that is why Bush won.

WANTED IN 1992, 1996, 2000: ECONOMIC MANAGER

Yet the times they were a changin'. Once the Berlin Wall fell in 1989; once the Soviet empire collapsed in 1991; once the exuberance of those heady days faded; Americans lost interest in a man who represented an older generation and its heroic role in the last "good war." Although Bush was known for his exploits during World War II, for his outstanding foreign policy experience, and for his stunning victory in the Persian Gulf War, during which he forged an alliance of more than 50 nations, the voters were predisposed for a change. Bill Clinton was the change.

By 1992 the U.S. was basking in the post-Cold War peace dividend. Intellectuals were bloviating about "the end of history." America was the undisputed king of the jungle. The nation's economy was emerging from a recession. Peace and prosperity stretched to the horizon. Americans basically wanted their president to be a competent economic manager. Little attention was paid to foreign policy -- or to Bill Clinton's crafty avoidance of serving in the armed forces during the Vietnam War. That's why the Democrats' slogan in '92 -- "It's the economy, stupid!" -- captured the zeitgeist, and with it Clinton captured the White House.

In retrospect, the emphasis on the economy also helps explain why Clinton so easily turned back challenger Bob Dole -- another World War II veteran -- in 1996. The majority of Americans may have disapproved of Clinton's personal behavior, but they clearly were all right with his presidential performance, especially when it came to economic management.

This emphasis on things economic also helps us understand why, in 2000, both major candidates ran on their domestic vision. It is interesting to speculate whether Senator John McCain would have beaten out George W. Bush in the Republican primaries had 9/11 occurred *before* the 2000 contest.

Of course, 9/11 had not occurred, and when voters had a choice between two younger men who had Ivy League credentials but little foreign policy experience, the election was a toss-up. Al Gore won the popular vote, but George W. Bush won the vote that counts -- in the Electoral College.

WANTED IN 2004: COMMANDER IN CHIEF

9/11 totally redefined the challenges of our day and the Bush presidency along with it. In 2004 our national challenges were somewhat different from either the four decades of Cold War or the one decade of hot stocks. The greatest effect of 9/11 on our national politics by 2004 was that we didn't just want an economic manager in the White House; we wanted a commander in chief. Our highest priority was preventing another terrorist attack by jihadists on our soil. So we wanted in our president a leader who would increase security at home, forge anti-jihadist alliances abroad, and take the battle to the terrorists who would destroy us.

Both John Kerry and George W. Bush understood the requirements of the new zeitgeist: commander in chief became the most important role in a president's job description. That was why, during the 2004 campaign, Senator Kerry stood by his vote backing President Bush to go to war against Iraq. And it was why, at the Democratic National Convention in July, Kerry emphasized his service in Vietnam; his argument was that his tour of duty on a Swift boat in Southeast Asia qualified him to be a strong commander in chief in the war on terror. And it was why, at the Republican National Convention before Labor Day, Bush emphasized his leadership after the 9/11 attacks; his argument was that his actions had resulted in the terrorists having fewer bases, less money, and diminished opportunities to strike on U.S. soil.

The need for a thoughtful, decisive commander in chief -- that was the key difference after 9/11.

WANTED IN 2008: A MULTI-TASKER

President Bush's decision to order a troop surge in Iraq has been effective, but lingering problems remain in that troubled region, and Afghanistan is seeing a resurgence of Taliban resistance. Clearly, the next commander-in-chief of the United States will have much on his hands, and we haven't even mentioned Russia, Pakistan, North Korea, Venezuela, and Iran.

In 2008, the economy and energy problems have eclipsed national security in the minds of most Americans. Nevertheless, Osama bin Laden has not been captured, Putin is still powerful, Chavez is more than an annoyance, and Iran's leaders defy world opinion. So, the race in 2008 certainly continues the concerns of 2004. Until November 4th, both John McCain and Barack Obama will keep trying to persuade the American people that they are competent economic managers and prudent, courageous commanders-in-chief.

(Original question from Monica P. of Colorado Springs, CO, in 2004; updated 9/11 2008)