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A Century on the Campaign Trail

The Ten Best & Ten Worst Presidential Candidates in the Last 100-Years

Commentary by Mark Couturier

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As the 2008 election between Barack Obama and John McCain heats up, all signs point toward a narrow victory on either side. Given the circumstances that marked the beginning of this contest, this is a strange development in what has proven in many ways to be a strange election.

Senator Obama has been considered by many to be nothing less than John F. Kennedy reincarnated. Perceived to be a man of great intelligence and charm, he has a lot going for him, particularly the fact that his opponent is viewed as a boring and tired old fuddy-duddy with an unpopular war and eight years of George W. Bush hanging around his neck. Obama would seem to offer a fresh new flavor after the stale taste of Republicanism. "Change We Can Believe In" is his campaign motto, and many Americans have taken it quite literally. Given these fortuitous factors, Obama should be leading by double-digits in the polls.

Yet, as some commentators have noted, the Illinois senator has been unable to close the deal with the American electorate. In fact, recent polls show McCain gaining in several key areas.

What gives?

Apparently, many people – especially in Obama's amen corner on the Left – are beginning to realize that the senator is nothing more than a slick, run-of-the-mill politician, and not the savior they thought he might be. All too often, his words, while delivered with a great deal of eloquence, are worth no more than the air in which they are uttered.

Political circumstances and personality aside, there are two main ways for a presidential candidate to win over the hearts of the American people. He must be either sincere or appear as such.

Ronald Reagan and Harry Truman were the first kind of candidate. Whether or not you agreed with them, you knew exactly where they stood on the issues. Both men had their core principles and almost never changed course.

John F. Kennedy and Franklin D. Roosevelt were of the second kind. Although they, too, had core beliefs, they also mastered the art of shape-shifting whenever it suited their political ambitions.

In contrast, Obama has angered many in his party's base for switching gears and moving toward the political center, while many working-class Americans of a more conservative bent remain suspicious of his motives and policy proposals. Clearly, the man doesn't possess the magic instinct.

McCain, on the other hand, is displaying the same resolve that saw him through five-and-a-half years of captivity at the hands of the North Vietnamese – an experience only slightly more arduous than a presidential election. This should come as no surprise. McCain's history shows him to be the kind of guy who keeps bouncing back when you think he's down. He's like Hillary Clinton, albeit with a genuine combat record.

As much as I thought I would never be saying this, the Republican might actually win.

So how do Obama and McCain measure up, overall? Not very well. Given Obama's youthful age and McCain's military record and prowess with the shot glass, there should be rivers of testosterone running through this campaign. Instead, both candidates have been behaving like pampered princesses who throw temper tantrums when things don't go their way.

For instance, McCain – who can remember using flintlocks and muskets as a young naval officer – got his feathers ruffled when someone brought up the heretical notion that this war hero might pull a Zachary Taylor and make a lousy commander-in-chief. He has also complained that his campaign doesn't get enough media coverage while his opponent gets too much. For his part, Obama seems to whine whenever anyone criticizes him about anything.

This election may be an important one for America, but the candidates have yet to distinguish themselves in any way. Mind you, neither of them are particularly bad on the campaign trail, it's just that they are mediocre.

What about presidential candidates from past elections? How did they measure up?

Well, some were great, some were lukewarm, and some were just plain awful.

In honor of this year's election, I would like to present lists of the 10 best and 10 worst presidential candidates from the past 100 years, starting with the latter. The main criteria for these lists are the overall effectiveness or ineffectiveness of particular candidates, while taking factors such as personality, effort, tactics, election results, and external circumstances into account.

Being on the 10 Best List does not necessarily mean that the candidate was a great chief executive or politician. Conversely, being on the 10 Worst List does not necessarily mean that the candidate was a bad chief executive or politician. We are concerned only with assessing a person's merits as a candidate in a presidential election.

Also, it is possible for someone to be a bad candidate in one election and a great candidate in another. In fact, one politician appears on both lists.

And so without further ado, here are ten candidates who really stunk on the campaign trail.

10 WORST Presidential Candidates

10. Herbert Hoover (R) – 1932 Election

Although historical evidence suggests that President Herbert Hoover had little, if anything, to do with the cause of the Great Depression, it was a bad turn of luck for him to be in office during its occurrence. By the time the 1932 election rolled around, he seemed to be the certain loser no matter who ran against him. Fortunately for America, his competitor turned out to be Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Despite the claims of many historians, Hoover made several attempts to alleviate the effects of the Depression. However, these were limited to small-scale measures because Hoover believed that too much interference from Washington would cause citizens to become too dependent on the federal government. None of these measures worked.



Truman stunned Dewey with an unexpected, come-from-behind victory in the 1948 presidential election – so much so that the Chicago Daily Tribune got the headline wrong.

The president's reelection bid was a disaster, as he kept finding himself the recipient of rotten fruit wherever he went on the campaign trail. Hoover tried to paint FDR as some dangerous radical who would exacerbate the effects of the Depression by raising taxes and enlarging the national debt. Millions of desperate voters ignored him and gave his opponent a landslide victory.

9. Gerald Ford (R) – 1976 Election

Gerald Ford ascended to the presidency upon the resignation of Richard Nixon in 1974. When Ford ran for election in his own right against Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter, he had to bear his predecessor's legacy like a heavy cross. Jerry also made the situation worse by granting a pardon to Nixon – an action that proved to be hugely unpopular with the American people at the time.

As if this situation weren't bad enough, Ford – an honest and decent person who lacked charisma – made several serious blunders in the campaign, like when he stubbornly clung to a statement he had made during a debate that there was “no Soviet domination” in Eastern Europe. Still, Ford tried his hardest and the best that can be said of him was that he managed to avoid a landslide defeat by getting 48 percent of the popular vote, to Carter's 50 percent.

8. Jimmy Carter (D) – 1980 Election

When Jimmy Carter made his first successful bid for the presidency in 1976, he offered a fresh face for Americans who were weary of the Vietnam War and the shenanigans of President Richard Nixon.

Four years later, however, it was Carter who the American people were tired of. The economy was in terrible shape and Uncle Sam had lost much of his prestige around the world as a result of Vietnam and the Iranian hostage crisis. In contrast with the sunny image projected by his Republican opponent, former California governor Ronald Reagan, Carter appeared to be worn-out and demoralized. When Reagan asked Americans, “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” the American people answered by giving him a landslide victory.

7. George McGovern (D) – 1972 Election

In the fall of 1972, Senator McGovern entered the general election in terrible shape. Although he managed to win the Democratic primary because of recent changes in his party's nominating process – changes he helped bring about – McGovern alienated many in the Democrats' base in the process, causing them to withhold essential funds and, in some cases, back his rival, President Richard Nixon.

Things didn't get any better after he secured the nomination. McGovern's campaign was dealt a crippling blow to the knee when the media revealed that his running mate, Senator Thomas Eagleton of Missouri, had received electro shock treatment on two occasions. He was forced to replace Eagleton with Sargent Shriver, John F. Kennedy's brother-in-law.

Because of McGovern's liberal views as well as his staunch opposition to the Vietnam War, the Nixon campaign successfully portrayed the Democrat as the candidate of “Amnesty, Abortion, and Acid.” McGovern was also hampered by the mainstream media's apparent bias towards his opponent.

The result was an electoral blowout. Losing by more than 23 percent of the popular vote, the only state McGovern was able to win was Massachusetts; the other 49 went for Nixon.

6. William Howard Taft (R) – 1912 Election

When President Taft ran for reelection in 1912, he faced an irreconcilable split in his own party between the conservative and progressive wings. Worse yet, his old mentor, former president Theodore Roosevelt, had taken to denouncing him and his policies, and even sought a third term by running in the Republican primary. Although Taft was able to secure the nomination, TR bolted from the GOP and became the nominee of the newly-formed Progressive Party.

Faced with the upheaval in his own party as well as a spirited campaign on the part of Democratic candidate Woodrow Wilson, Taft gave up early in the game and went into a state of catatonia. The most he would do was make feeble attempts to accuse Roosevelt of being a radical – a charge that fell on deaf ears, as the American public knew Teddy too well to buy into such a lame attack.

Taft ended up suffering the worst defeat of any incumbent in American history, capturing only 23 percent of the popular vote and a measly eight votes in the Electoral College. He not only lost to Wilson, who received a plurality of the popular vote – 41 percent – and 435 electoral votes, he even lost to Roosevelt, who managed to get over 27 percent of the popular vote and 88 electoral votes.

5. Michael Dukakis (D) – 1988 Election

Although Dukakis deserves credit for standing up for his liberal principles – which many Democratic candidates have tried to run away from – he nonetheless proved to be an ineffective candidate.

Aside from being about as interesting as his rival, Vice President George H.W. Bush, (which is to say, not interesting at all) Dukakis made some serious blunders in the campaign, such as staging a ridiculous photo-op in an M1 Abrams tank and bragging that he was a “card-carrying member” of the American Civil Liberties Union. It also did not help that the Massachusetts governor supported the state's controversial prison furlough program – a policy that resulted in the rape and assault of a Maryland couple by a convict named Willie Horton. The Bush campaign exploited this issue by running an effective ad linking Dukakis's support for the program with Mr. Horton's crime.

The result was predictable. Bush ended up winning 40 states and a popular vote margin of nearly 8 percentage points.

4. John Kerry (D) – 2004 Election

It will always remain a mystery to me why the Democratic Party picked this guy to be their candidate in 2004 against President George W. Bush. Aside from bearing a striking resemblance to a wooden board – which, incidentally, has more charm and a greater sense of humor – Kerry was lousy on the campaign trail, as was evidenced by his failure to unseat a mediocre commander-in-chief who had dragged the nation into a war that was turning out to be unpopular with the American public.

For starters, he made the mistake of centering his campaign around an undistinguished, albeit honorable, war record. This tactic exposed the Massachusetts senator to the notorious Swift Boat Ads, which sought to portray him as a bogus war hero and a treasonous and incompetent officer. Kerry also gave weak replies to accusations from the Bush campaign that he was a flip-flopper and an out-of-touch liberal. He declined to campaign in many states, thus relinquishing an astonishingly high number of electoral votes to his opponent. But perhaps worst of all, Kerry still had \$15 million in his war chest at the end of the election,

which he had neglected to spend. Just imagine what that money could have done in a state like, say, Ohio.

3. Richard Nixon (R) – 1960 Election

The 1960 election was the first in which Richard Nixon did not employ the scorched-earth tactics for which he became famous. It was also the first election that he lost.

The decision on the vice president's part to erase the assassin image hurt him a great deal, but other factors played a role in his defeat to Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy.

For starters, there was Kennedy's good looks and likable personality, which contrasted with Nixon's shadowy features and social awkwardness. Nixon also experienced a great deal of bad luck on the campaign trail as well as cold ambivalence from his boss, President Dwight Eisenhower. He also made a huge mistake by stubbornly clinging to a pledge he had made to campaign in all fifty states. The move turned out to be a huge waste of time and resources.

To be fair, Tricky Dick came within a hair of winning the presidency; he lost by only 100,000 votes. Nixon learned from his mistakes and went on to win a close election in 1968 and a landslide victory in 1972.

2. Barry Goldwater (R) – 1964 Election

Senator Goldwater's loss to President Lyndon Johnson in 1964 proved to be nothing less than a magnificent political phoenix, for out of the ashes of defeat rose a conservative movement that swept Ronald Reagan into the White House and facilitated the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994. The beginning of this phenomenon was not noticeable in the 1964 election, however, as the liberal consensus of the Cold War still held a firm grip on American life and politics.

Johnson enjoyed a considerable advantage because of his association with the legacy of his late boss, President John F. Kennedy, who had been assassinated a year earlier. Needless to say, LBJ milked that cow for all it was worth, promising voters that he would continue the policies of his fallen predecessor.

The president also sought to portray his Republican opponent as a racist, warmonger, and ideological extremist who would tear the New Deal out root and branch if elected. Goldwater played right into his hands with his Old Testament style of campaigning as well as his propensity for uttering wildly inappropriate remarks in public. The GOP candidate was also not helped by the fact that he had alienated many moderates within his own party, particularly former president Eisenhower.

The result was a predictable landslide victory for Johnson, who won 61 percent of the vote to Goldwater's 38 percent. LBJ also carried 44 states against his opponent's six. Still, in a way, Goldwater can be considered to have actually "won" the 1964 election when Ronald Reagan took the conservative movement that he had helped shape and used it to capture the White House in 1980 and win a landslide reelection in 1984.

1. Thomas E. Dewey (R) – 1948 Election

This guy was a real piece of work. Despite the fact that the Democrats were split three ways and that his opponent, President Harry S. Truman, was roundly despised by many people, including members of his own party, New York Governor Thomas Dewey managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

Everyone predicted that the election would be cakewalk for Dewey. Even Truman's own wife doubted that he could stay in office. So just how did the governor perform the incredible feat of defying the experts and losing?

Dewey avoided taking risks, believing that a cautious approach would allow him to maintain his lead in the polls. He stayed away from hot-button issues and spoke of his presidential agenda in vague terms.

Alas, Dewey had not counted on the fact that his opponent was one tough son-of-a-bitch – a man who once dropped a couple of A-bombs on a foreign country in order to end a war. Like a wounded animal that has been cornered, Truman bared his fangs and went on the attack. When it was all over, Dewey didn't know what hit him. He lost by four percent of the popular vote and 114 electoral votes.

And now that we have got the worst candidates out of the way, here are ten people that really stood on the campaign trail.

10 BEST Presidential Candidates

10. Lyndon Johnson (D) – 1964 Election

By any measure, "Landslide Lyndon" was as crooked as a question mark. In fact, he received that nickname because of an earlier victory in an ironically close Senate election where two hundred people voted for him in alphabetical order.

In the 1964 election, Johnson – who had ascended to the presidency after John F. Kennedy's assassination the previous year – ran a scorched-earth campaign against Republican Senator Barry Goldwater, portraying him as a dangerous extremist and warmonger. The latter depiction would later prove ironic in light of LBJ's actions in Vietnam.

Nothing was spared in Johnson's effort to become POTUS in his own right – not even the law. In his book, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*, liberal pundit Rick Perlstein touches upon a typical campaign tactic of LBJ's. The president would dial up prominent contributors of his opponent and say, "I am looking at your tax returns right now, and they make for interesting reading." Johnson also unleashed the infamous "Daisy Commercial" that sought to convince voters that a nuclear war would break out between the United States and the Soviet Union if Goldwater was elected.

To be sure, many of LBJ's campaigning methods were highly questionable – both legally and morally – but the Texas giant knew that one doesn't win elections by playing the role of the respectful nice guy.

He was right. Johnson buried his opponent with a 44-state landslide and 61 percent of the popular vote.

9. Bill Clinton (D) – 1992 Election

Despite suffering several major setbacks in the Democratic primaries – including revelations that he had had an affair with a woman named Jennifer Flowers – The Man from Hope showed Americans why he was the Comeback Kid by beating his opponents and becoming his party's nominee. With his youth and charisma, and helped along the way by a recession and the recent conclusion of the Cold War, Clinton was able to maintain a steady lead over incumbent President George H.W. Bush throughout the general election, despite his reputation as a philanderer as well as a murky past that included draft-dodging and drug use.

Although Bubba did not capture a majority of the popular vote on election night – his share was 43 percent – he convinced enough

Americans to give him a plurality by focusing like a laser beam on the troubled economy and promising to govern as a new kind of Democrat.

8. John F. Kennedy (D) – 1960 Election

Like Barack Obama, John F. Kennedy came out of nowhere to snatch his party's nomination away from more experienced politicians. Aided in great part by the new medium of television and the ineptness of his opponent, Vice President Richard Nixon, Kennedy convinced many Americans that he was a born leader and the best person to succeed President Dwight Eisenhower. He also projected the image of a youthful and healthy man, despite having various, life-threatening diseases.

Like a good campaigner, JFK was constantly on the offensive, claiming – erroneously – that America was falling behind the Soviets and promising to get the country “moving again.” Although he only won by a little over 100,000 votes, Kennedy would become one of the nation's most beloved presidents.

7. Richard Nixon (R) – 1972 Election

Like his predecessor, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon was a master politician who had no qualms about beating his opponents by whatever means necessary. Helped in large part by the weakness of the opposition as well as questionable campaign tactics that would lay the groundwork for the Watergate Scandal, Nixon crushed the Democratic candidate, Senator George McGovern, with a 49-state landslide and won 60 percent of the popular vote.

The 1972 election is also significant in that it saw Nixon put together the broad coalition that would give the presidency to the GOP in five of the eight subsequent elections.

6. Dwight Eisenhower (R) – 1952 Election

In the lead-up to the 1952 election, General Dwight Eisenhower was everybody's favorite to run for the White House. Courted by members of both parties, Eisenhower decided to run as a Republican.

During the course of the campaign, Ike attacked the Democrats – particularly the Truman Administration – on the issues of Korea, communism, and corruption. He promised to bring a swift end to the Korean War and rid the government of corrupt bureaucrats and communist spies. The American public, enamored with the general and sick of 20 years of Democratic rule in the White House, gave Ike a landslide victory.

5. Theodore Roosevelt (P) – 1912 Election

Disillusioned with the conservative policies of President William Howard Taft, former president Theodore Roosevelt decided to thwart the political ambitions of his former protégé and seek an unprecedented third term. After an unsuccessful bid for the GOP nomination, TR turned to the newly-formed Progressive Party – nicknamed the Bull Moose Party – and became its presidential nominee.

True to his nature, Roosevelt ran a spirited campaign, promoting a program of federal regulation that he named “The New Nationalism” and attacking both Taft and Democratic candidate Woodrow Wilson.

Although he failed to win the presidency, Teddy became the only third-party candidate in history to win more votes – electoral and popular – than a candidate of one of the two major parties. He also had the satisfaction of spoiling Taft's chances for reelection and handing the presidency to the more progressive Wilson.

4. Ronald Reagan (R) – 1980 Election

When Ronald Reagan ran for president in 1980 against incumbent Jimmy Carter, America was suffering from high rates of unemployment and inflation as well as a feeling of “malaise” that had settled in after Watergate and the Vietnam War. Despite Carter's attempts to paint him as a conservative extremist, Reagan used his charm and wit to convince millions of people that he was the right leader at the right time. The American electorate, fed up with the national situation as well as Carter's leadership, handed the Gipper the first of two landslide victories.

3. Franklin D. Roosevelt (D) – 1932 Election

The 1932 election was held in the midst of the worst economic crisis in the nation's history, the Great Depression. Millions of Americans had lost their jobs and been rendered homeless. Although Republican President Herbert Hoover attempted to alleviate this dire situation through a series of government measures, nothing seemed to work. Indeed, despite Hoover's efforts to lower the unemployment rate, the only thing that fell was his standing with the American people.

Democratic candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt used his extraordinary political and people skills to bring hope to the nation. Naturally, the electorate handed him a landslide victory. FDR would go on to win three more elections and guide America to victory in the Second World War.

2. Warren G. Harding (R) – 1920 Election

For the 1920 election, both the Republican and the Democratic parties selected dark horse candidates from the state of Ohio – the former picking a little-known junior senator named Warren G. Harding and the latter picking Governor James Cox. As it turned out, the GOP made the winning choice.

Harding's campaign strategy was to ignore his opponent and concentrate on the highly unpopular Woodrow Wilson instead. He outspit Cox by a ratio of 4-to-1 and ran a “Front Porch Campaign,” in which visitors from miles around could come to his home and hear his ideas for improving the country. Harding also took advantage of the American people exhaustion with the social tumult of the Progressive Era and the First World War by promising a “return to normalcy.” As a result, Harding became the first sitting senator to win the presidency. He also won the largest popular vote margin – 26.2 percent – of any candidate since the election of 1820.

1. Harry S. Truman (D) – 1948 Election

Truman's victory in the 1948 election has got to be the greatest political miracle of the 20th Century. Everyone was certain Truman would lose, or at least doubted that he could win – including his own wife.

To be sure, Truman faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles to winning election in his own right. For starters, he was deeply despised by many in his own party, and some Democrats even mounted an unsuccessful attempt to dump him in favor of General Dwight Eisenhower.

There was also the ascendancy of the GOP to contend with. The Republicans had already taken both houses of Congress in the 1946 Midterm Elections, and many observers believed that the 1948 contest was theirs to lose.

But worst of all, the Democratic Party had suffered a serious split between its national, progressive, and Southern “Dixiecrat” wings. Few candidates could be expected to overcome something like that, no matter who they are.

As George W. Bush would put it, Truman hit his own trifecta – a negative one, that is.

Instead of folding up the tent and giving in to what seemed like the inevitable, as many lesser candidates would have done, Give’em Hell Harry threw off the gloves and played hardball, Missouri-style.

The president went on a whistle stop tour of the country, ridiculing his opponent and attacking the Republican-controlled “do-nothing” Congress. What Truman lacked in eloquence, he more than made up for in passion. Millions of Americans were enthralled by the president’s down-to-earth character and red-hot oratory. The result was one of the biggest upset victories in American political history.