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Presidential Greatness

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Presidential Greatness

What makes a President great?

Your question goes to the heart of leadership. It is one of the cornerstone questions we ask at the Hauenstein Center.

One of the leading presidential historians of our day, Robert Dallek, believes that America's greatest presidents possess six qualities:



1. Vision: great presidents capture the public imagination by vividly showing people where they are headed. Listen to how the presidents use words to explain where they want to take the nation-- words like "freedom," "opportunity," "justice for all," "peace through strength."
2. Command of practical politics: our best presidents have knowledge and experience when it comes to the political process -- they know how to get things done. Lyndon Johnson was a master of practical politics, and his Great Society was comprised of almost a thousand bills.
3. Character: a strong leader is someone who shows courage, who inspires trust, who is temperate and persistent and disciplined and not afraid of hard work.
4. Presidential personality: leaders by definition need followers, and persuasive leaders have the charisma to make people feel attracted to them.
5. Consensus builders: effective leaders can work with diverse interest groups, the Congress, the bureaucracy, the media, and ultimately citizens to build support for their programs. This has presented challenges to the military men who have become presidents. Michael Korda observes that Truman "would remark of Eisenhower that he would never know what hit him when he reached his desk in the White House -- as a general, when he gave an order it would be obeyed instantly, but in the White House he would give an order and nothing would happen. The same phenomenon hit Grant almost immediately. He too, like Ike, was accustomed to instant obedience, not to the political process of building up support for a policy in Congress, or appealing for support to the public, or wooing newspapermen to obtain it. He expected at the very least the backing of his own party, without realizing that everything in politics has to be negotiated -- at a price."^[1]
6. Luck: highly-ranked presidents need to have circumstances go their way -- they're just lucky. FDR's New Deal floundered in his second term; his reputation as a leader was probably saved by Tojo, Hitler, and the hostile regimes that forced America into World War II.

Lots of books have been written about effective leadership; no doubt there will be many more. Hauenstein Center associate Marc Jordan, personally and professionally curious about the elements of presidential leadership, earned a Master's degree from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. He and I recently talked about the insights he derived from classes and conversations with David Gergen, Roger Porter, Richard Neustadt, and other Harvard faculty. Great and near-great presidents need certain abilities, skills, and attributes to get to the White House, stay there with any success, and leave a worthy legacy. They need (in no particular order):

1. Intellectual curiosity from an early age: leaders have active minds and are driven to know how things work. They have the capacity to teach themselves. Many of our presidents, in fact, did. Abraham Lincoln hungered for knowledge and could become absorbed in all manner of things. During the Civil War, for instance, he became intensely curious about weapons and gun powder. No question escaped his roving, curious mind.
2. Ability to speak, write, and communicate effectively with staff, other political leaders, and the public. Among recent presidents the Great Communicator, by all accounts, was Ronald Reagan. Bill Clinton was also extremely effective connecting with audiences.
3. Ambition, with a willingness to accept increasing responsibility at every stage of their career
4. Ability to focus on three to four things that can be accomplished.
5. Management skills that include the ability to delegate, thus succeeding with growing responsibility
6. Character, a moral compass
7. Strong mentors or role models
8. Sociable, a team player !! not a lone wolf or overly introspective
9. Good at self-promotion and managing a public image: Ike used Reeves in 52' an ad genius.
10. Sound judgment
11. Ability to assemble a championship team: great presidents are good judges of character. They have an ability to read people and know how to motivate them to be loyal and hard-working members of an administration. One great example is George Washington's decision to bring into his cabinet the two most brilliant men of the founding generation: Alexander Hamilton (secretary of the Treasury) and Thomas Jefferson (secretary of State). Another good example is when President William McKinley asked Elihu Root to join the administration. Peter Drucker and other management gurus have pointed to this as one of the greatest management decisions of all time [Stuart Cramer]. Gerald R. Ford also assembled one of the most talented staffs in the post-war presidency.
12. Capacity to deal with the cacophony of voices and views in Congress
13. Ability to multi-task
14. Vision & a clear sense of what the mission is: George Washington knew that he had to do everything in his power to establish a republic and set good executive precedents. Abraham Lincoln knew that he had to do everything in his power to save the Union. Franklin Roosevelt had to defeat economic depression and warring tyrants. Ronald Reagan confronted an evil empire and set his sights on winning the Cold War. George W. Bush has to fight and win a war on terror.
15. Adaptability to new circumstances: Thomas Jefferson was a strict constructionist when it came to interpreting the U.S. Constitution. That document says nothing about acquiring or purchasing new territory, only about how to form states from the nation's existing land. When the opportunity presented itself to purchase Louisiana, Jefferson found a way, even though it conflicted with his earlier, rigid stance on interpreting the basic law of the land.
16. Continuous learning, combined with an ability to accept new challenges
17. Strong faith: virtually all our great presidents believed that they had to recharge their battery by being connected to a higher moral power.
18. Ability to make tough decisions. Gerald R. Ford made an extremely unpopular decision when he pardoned former President Richard M. Nixon. But he thought it was the right thing to do because the nation faced so many problems and had to move on.

(Question from Karrie J. of East Lansing, MI)

^[1] Michael Korda, *Ulysses S. Grant: The Unlikely Hero* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), pp. 118-19.