

Choosing Our Next President

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Photo by Amanda Leung

The next president of the U.S. will face many serious issues — immigration, dealing with the terrorist threat, homeland security, the Iraq war, proliferation of nuclear weapons, improving our health-care system, reducing the economic gap between rich and poor, addressing social trends behind school violence, promoting a long-term transition to a safer and more peaceful Middle East, reversing the \$8.8 trillion national debt, and addressing global warming.

To evaluate a prospective president, it is important to look carefully at the candidates' positions on the issues. But it's not possible to determine in advance what issues a president will have to deal with and what will most test his or her capabilities, so we must evaluate a candidate's leadership capacities in addition to his or her views on the issues.

We have experienced two presidents recently who have not been able to effectively meet some of the nation's challenges because of flaws in their underlying qualities of mind or character. Bill Clinton's "zipper problem" distracted him and the political system away from meeting the challenges of leadership. George Bush's lack of understanding of what we were taking on in the Iraq war and how to go about pursuing his goal successfully have gotten us into a difficult situation economically and militarily.

A president well-equipped to provide leadership has some specific qualities. He or she is able to attract good advisers and get them to work together as a team. He or she has a realistic understanding of the major issues.

He or she has the ability to inspire, through articulate public speaking — Teddy Roosevelt's concept of the presidency as a "bully pulpit" — as well as through actions. He or she has a strong ethical sense, including the ability to imagine their private behavior as the next morning's news headlines and thus to avoid behavior that would damage their image or agenda.

He or she must understand government processes and be able to use them without being captive to them. He or she must be effective at retail politics — the kind of influence and ability to mobilize support necessary to assemble and lead coalitions at home and abroad.

But the most important quality a president must have is wisdom. *The New York Times Magazine* recently reviewed studies that have attempted to define wisdom. According to these studies, wisdom includes a clear-eyed view of human nature and the human

predicament; emotional resiliency and the ability to cope in the face of adversity; openness to a variety of possibilities; a knack for learning from lifetime experiences; knowing when to act and when to reflect, including the use of "judicious non-action", and I would add, the ability to think long term, to see the ultimate consequences of actions.

How do we, as voters, determine who has these qualities? The media cultivates a simplistic picture in which one candidate is up, another is down, one has a bad temper, another is attacking a fellow candidate, providing caricatures of who these people are. The media provides regrettably little context or depth in covering the candidates.

This campaign season, The Commonwealth Club is looking beyond the image-making and political stump speeches by holding "conversations" between the presidential candidates and thoughtful interviewers, so we can get to know the candidates at a deeper level. Often, clues to the future behavior of a president are found in how they have dealt with adversity in their lives, how they relate to their family, the stories they tell, their ethical or religious values, and what they highlight as important influences and meaningful relationships for them.

Ironically, the *San Jose Mercury News* reported that the questions The Club asked Senator Joe Biden at our recent conversation with him were "mostly softball," because we didn't ask confrontational questions that elicited easily quotable answers, like, "don't you believe President Bush is the worst president in history?" Instead, we asked how Biden squares his Catholicism with his views on stem cell research and a woman's right to choose, how he has handled life challenges like his two brain surgeries, and about his approach to the war in Iraq. These are the kinds of information we need to determine whether he is the president we need.

Such in-depth dialogue is the best way to evaluate which candidates have the qualities of wisdom and long-term thinking that will enable them to be better presidents than we've experienced over the past 15 years. Many of the challenges we face today are the result of poor leadership in the past — for example, bad decisions have left us with the same energy problems we had 30 years ago, and now the specter of global warming. The stakes are high — this country needs a president who can capably lead us in finding solutions to challenges of the magnitude we now face. Ω