

How Effective Leadership Reflects Evolving Values and Needs in the United States

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Whoever is chosen to be sworn into the office of the President of the United States has been elected to one of the most powerful and influential positions in the country and, arguably, the world. Due to the potent power the president holds, studying the characteristics of an effective U.S. leader is vital. There are a multitude of different qualities that emerge when analyzing presidents of the past, and several rise above the rest. Throughout the seventy-eight years since 1945, fifteen men have earned that title of President and they all effectively share extraordinarily similar qualities. However, while the country's need for certain qualities remains unwavering; rapidly evolving culture, the country's collective military memory, and differing faith in government impact the rest of the qualities required for effective leadership as times change.

Analyzing every U.S. President since 1945 results in the conclusion that there are three defining qualities of leadership that most presidents have shared. These characteristics not only likely won them the presidency, but also carried them through their terms as positive leaders for their party. These are: a distinct background in military, a charismatic personality, and effective or clear communication skills when addressing the public. Considering that their role as Commander in Chief is one of the larger responsibilities weighing on the President, it can be reasonably posited both the public and political spheres would assign value to a candidate with a military background. Of the forty-six presidents, twenty-nine have served in the military, and nine of those presidents had served back-to-back after World War II, only to be broken by Clinton. For example, Eisenhower's highest rank was General of the Army; additionally, he attended Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, where he graduated top of his class.¹ Kindness and charisma is the

¹ William H. Chafe, *The Rise and Fall of the American Century: The United States from 1890-2009* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 157.

second driving factor in effective leadership, as Eisenhower's support for his subordinates overseas shone like no other and he treated all with kindness. His actions overseas in Europe during WWII and treatment of his fellow soldiers lit the way for his presidency: "Ike finally permitted his name to be entered in the New Hampshire Republican primary. With a stunning victory there (he did not even campaign), he rapidly garnered mainstream party support."²

Similarly, Kennedy also paved his own way for respect and admiration. Kennedy, above all else, is known for his charismatic personality and contagious warmth, which garnered a new respect for the persona of the President. However, Kennedy also had a strong background in the Navy and is known as a war hero. He showed great heroism during the PT 109 incident; as commander of the boat, he saved many in his crew despite his own physical challenges.³ Kennedy's actions in the Pacific became widely known due to a bestselling book circulating at the time, which undoubtedly aided his political aspirations. Moving into slightly more recent presidents, Reagan also served in the Army Air Corps. His personality was his key to success. Reagan accomplished much through his motivation for change and through his infectious persona; he was funny, dedicated, simple, and eloquent. His personality "made it possible for him to pursue a few 'big' ideas with passion and success."⁴

The final common trait between presidents is the ability to communicate with the public and around political spheres effectively and clearly. This is most clearly seen through George H.W Bush, and his interactions with the former Soviet Union after its fall. After the fact, he treated them with "care, nuance, and patience. He never indulged in condescending glee, at the enemy's destruction. Instead, he showed respect and deference."⁵ Reagan also showcases the importance of communication in government. Reagan's personality and background as an actor served as the foundation for his moving speeches and addresses, so that his statements "register with maximum impact, from his state of the union addresses to his nationally televised speeches, such as the one on Beirut and Grenada that left his audience in tears."⁶ This is a common theme among presidents, as when candidates are

² Chafe, *Rise and Fall*, 157.

³ Chafe, *Rise and Fall*, 184.

⁴ Chafe, *Rise and Fall*, 248

⁵ Chafe, *Rise and Fall*, 262.

⁶ Chafe, *Rise and Fall*, 249.

campaigning those skilled in communication rise to the top as they can better connect to their target audience. Overall, these three traits of military background, charisma, and communication serve as a common ground between most presidents and provide key insights into common traits for successful leaders.

Although those three qualities stay mostly consistent throughout the defining characteristics in leadership, the scope is much wider. A positive and impactful leader must be viewed as stable, consistent, and trustworthy. The First World War did enough in creating potent memories and fears of foreign invasion and domination in the United States, but the second one did the U.S. in. Post WWII there was a spike in presidents serving more than one term; up to eight of the fifteen presidents since 1945 have served, or almost served, two full terms as President.⁷ This is largely reflective of the fears running rampant throughout the mid-Twentieth Century. Even after the Second World War, there was the Cold War, and even in the midst of that, wars raged on in Vietnam, Korea, Iran-Iraq, and Afghanistan, all of which have created a constant fear of change throughout the population. This fear gripped people and one way for them to gain any semblance of control, was to see the same face in the news or in television for as long as possible.

During this period people not only wanted a consistent president, but a president who was consistent: enter conservatism. It can be then argued the United States' rise in conservatism since WWII, has been heavily influenced by these fears of radical change. Conservatism is based on the maintenance of traditions, keeping small government roles, and an opposition to social or economic change; in other words, consistency and stability: "the second conservative impulse came from the linking of the "welfare state" with fears of international communism."⁸ This is seen through back-to-back presidents leaning either socially or economically conservative through this era regardless of party, indicating a strong fear of change.⁹

Although all that the people want is consistency, times change. The three persistent qualities established prior do hold true during that period; however, as America changes socially and as more experiences shape the history of the United

⁷ Truman and Nixon did not serve two full terms. Truman was three months short, as he assumed the presidency after Franklin Roosevelt's death, and Nixon resigned.

⁸ Carter, D. T. "The Rise of Conservatism since World War II." *OAH Magazine of History* 17, no. 2 (2003): 11–16. <https://doi.org/10.1093/maghis/17.2.11>.

⁹ An example being Carter, a conservative democrat.

States, the qualities that qualify a president as a good leader change with it. Due to increased and constant involvement in war overseas, it is likely Americans are now wearier of electing candidates bearing a military background. The last three presidents since Bush have had no experience prior to becoming Commander in Chief of the U.S. armed forces. This is a stark contrast to the sheer number of back-to-back presidents carrying prestigious military rankings and awards in the decades prior. A second example of this phenomenon is seen through looking at how radically different Obama, Trump, and Biden are as leaders. The United States is currently in a constant state of flux and that is being reflected by the radically different men that were last elected to the presidency. Obama took a communicative and bureaucratic approach to the presidency and Trump did the opposite, focusing on acting and a more individual approach. Biden takes on a more friendly, passive, grandfather type role, separate from anyone previous. The country reflects the president, but the president himself also is shaped through the needs and current state of the country after it has been influenced by the president prior, thus the traits that make a good leader change too.

Tracking and analyzing the qualities of leaders is tedious and near impossible to comb through thoroughly, but it provides strong insights into how a leader is chosen and how a democratic nation is shaped. The three constant qualities of militarism, communication, and charisma may not be so constant for long as the nation is always evolving. Every president was and is different in their entirety, but there is always common ground to be found, and by studying the persona of those elected to leadership, many can be uncovered.