

Bush and Obama – Partners in Failure

Op-ed writers, columnists and talk show hosts have been spending a lot of time lately deciphering who is most to blame for America's foreign policy failures and the general malaise at home. Russia is poised to control the Ukraine and Eastern Europe, while the springing tiger of China now dominates the Far East. The United States has little respect in its own hemisphere. Our economy continues to sputter, while our children spend their time hooked on drugs and social media.

Democrats say the problem is all due to George Bush and the Republican-dominated House, which has ignored a social agenda at home and has alienated Muslims abroad. Republicans complain about over-taxation, too much spending and a weak military. A robust war on terrorism, argue Republicans, will result in a more successful foreign policy.

It all comes down to who is more to blame: George Bush for starting the downslide, or Barack Obama for accelerating our precarious plummet. The truth is less comfortable than the propaganda.

Studying great leadership over the centuries in America yields plenty of information and guidance for future leaders and helps us to understand the failures of the immediate past. Most historians would agree that great U.S. leaders in the presidency were George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, and perhaps Harry Truman. The debate becomes more intense over Kennedy, Johnson, Reagan and Clinton.

One of the clear characteristics of those who we might all agree were great Presidents was a fair amount of experience in government or, at the very least, a clear, determined and comprehensible theme. Not all of these Presidents were totally moral and always honest, but for the most part they appeared to have America's interests foremost in their vision.

I recently talked to a woman who went to Washington to assist Kathleen Sebelius in fixing the problems with the Affordable Health Care Act. My friend has a list of degrees as long as anyone's forearm. She came back after two years, extremely disillusioned. Not only did she have very negative things to say about her boss, who has now left Health & Human Services, but she had an interesting observation about the administration. "They run the government out of their hip pocket. They trust no one. The United States is currently run by a small cadre of very paranoid and defensive people. They do not trust or rely on the expertise of the government bureaucracy, and their path is self-centered."

Similar accusations were made against the Bush Administration. It seems as though both of these presidents failed because they did not have the ability to work with the nonpartisan bureaucrats in government who really understand the day-to-day operation of this country. Hooray for bureaucrats! You will not read that in too many

places. The truth is sometimes a bit difficult to swallow, but reality is that businesses and government are run by middle management and top management whose expertise is in making things work efficiently, reasonably, and inexpensively.

A friend of mine who set up medical clinics in Vietnam told me that Vietnam, and to some extent, China, are nothing more than well-run corporations. Corporations give virtually no power to their shareholders, but they are successful if they have a clear understanding of their mission and if the people who run the operation are dedicated to a particular ethic predicated upon long-term success.

Using this analysis, the frontrunners for the next presidency may very well be Mitt Romney (again) and Hillary Clinton. With all of their faults, and they have plenty, both of these people have had a lot of experience with government. Can they keep their personal agendas and petty political grievances out of the middle of the road? No one can know that for sure.

It is not sex, but those in government who have the most experience with government, and may even be a bit on the older side, probably would make the best leaders. Both McCain and Romney revealed something negative about themselves by choosing running mates who were neither mainstream nor recognizable as highly competent. Kennedy was smart to choose Lyndon Johnson, and probably the best decision President Obama ever made was the selection of his Vice-Presidential running mate, Joe Biden.

In the upcoming primary and election, I am going to look primarily at the government experience of the candidates, who they surround themselves with in the way of advisors, and how much respect they have for a highly trained and often effective bureaucracy. One of the Presidents who was not on my list but deserves far greater respect than he gets was Dwight Eisenhower. Eisenhower, like Washington, was the quintessential General who knew how to delegate and understood what he had to decide on his own.

Experience in government and a determined mainstream approach to solving American problems domestically and abroad is sometimes very boring work. Americans will need to put aside who they think is the coolest, best looking or most worthy to have a beer with at the corner bar. Let's face it; none of us are going out to dinner with or having a beer with the next President of the United States. I have met Bill Clinton a few times, and I never wanted to have a beer with him. Each time he struck me as one of the best schmoozers known to man. Clinton did navigate his way through plenty of problems, but as we all know he bungled a few others as well. His personal morality and sense of candor were abysmal. That was a leadership failure which in many ways, like Vietnam, has disaffected Americans for a long period of time.

It will be difficult to put aside petty pride, jealousies and party loyalty, but try we must in the interests of our country and a coherent foreign policy.

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