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LESSONS FROM THE LIVES AND TIMES OF PRESIDENTS
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Dr. Robert Dallek: Lessons from the Lives and Times of Presidents
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For the last forty years or so, I’ve been studying presidents and their tours of duty, so to speak. I’ve been trying to figure out, as Jim Burns and the Jepson School have, what it is that goes into effective leadership. Why have some presidents been more effective than others and come down to us through history as distinguished, as great, as near-great? Why are others now seen as ineffective leaders, as failures? I’ve tried to understand what it is about these men and the office which has allowed some to be so much more effective than others.

I have a certain sympathy for anyone who serves in the office of president. It’s probably the most difficult job anyone could ever undertake. Thomas Jefferson called it a “splendid misery.” Andrew Jackson said it was a form of “dignified slavery.” James Garfield wondered, after he’d been in office for just a month, why anyone would ever want to be president. Woodrow Wilson said that the demands and pressures and crosscurrents of the presidency required a steel constitution. Herbert Hoover called the presidency a “compound hell.” Harry Truman said it was like riding on the back of a tiger.

The photographs of the men who served as president during the last century reveal a marked change in each man’s appearance during his term in office. The demands of the office took a toll that none of them were fully equipped to handle. I also find it interesting that of the forty-three presidents who have served to date, only sixteen have won election to a second term. It’s really an amazingly small number. George W. Bush is the sixteenth. Only twelve have served eight years or more in the office. Abraham Lincoln and William McKinley were both assassinated, and Richard Nixon was forced to resign. So at this
juncture in our history, only twelve presidents out of fortythree have served eight years or more. Of course, Franklin Roosevelt, who served for a little over twelve years, was the only president to serve more than two terms. I think the fact that so few presidents serve eight years in office speaks volumes about the demands, the pressures, the difficulties of holding the office and of running again and winning a second term. So as the core of my lecture, let me share my speculations on what has gone into effective and ineffective leadership in the White House.

First, the most successful presidents have been men of vision. The first George Bush made light of this, referring to “the vision thing.” But in order to be an effective leader of this country, it is absolutely essential, in my judgment, to be able to communicate a vision that the people can readily understand. Franklin Roosevelt may have put it best in his first inaugural when, borrowing from the Bible, he said, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” But it’s not enough to have some long-term strategy, some grand idea of a way to lead the country—it’s also necessary to be able to communicate it to the mass of society in some concise way.

Think of it as a slogan, if you want. Theodore Roosevelt spoke of the “Square Deal.” He let people know that he was intent on dealing with problems in ways that would serve the largest number of citizens in this country. Acknowledging that the country had passed through an age in the late nineteenth century when special interests predominated, he said he wanted to serve what the progressives called the “general interest,” the “common interest.” He communicated his vision to the public by championing what he dubbed the “Square Deal.” Woodrow Wilson struck a chord with Americans when he described the “New Freedom”—a movement toward a kind of new freedom and away from the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few that typified the late nine-
teenth century. Franklin Roosevelt envisioned the "New Deal." Harry Truman captured the public's imagination with the term "containment"; John Kennedy, the "New Frontier"; Lyndon Johnson, the "Great Society"; Ronald Reagan, the "Reagan Revolution." All these ideas resonated with the people.

Woodrow Wilson became the greatest presidential visionary in our history, I think, when he announced at the end of World War I that the United States had fought this war in order to make the world safe for democracy and that he believed it would end all wars. Of course he was wrong on both counts. And yet Wilson is now remembered as one of the near-great presidents, and not simply because of his vision. He also implemented some great domestic policies which advanced the well-being of the country. But above all, people remember him as the greatest presidential visionary in the country's history.

Indeed, I'm always struck by how little people remember exactly what presidents accomplish during their time in office. If you went out on the street today and asked a cross section of Americans who gave the country Medicare and Social Security, many educated people would remember, of course. But I think millions and millions of others don't associate these programs with any particular president or administration. What people do remember is presidential rhetoric, an inspirational phrase or idea. Franklin Roosevelt: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." John Kennedy: "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." These words resonate with millions of Americans and continue to give these presidents a hold on the public that I think exceeds even the achievement of their terms.

Consider John Kennedy, for example. For forty years now, public opinion polls have consistently named Kennedy as one of the four or five greatest presidents in
the country’s history. On the face of things, this is almost ridiculous. Kennedy held office for only a thousand days. His accomplishments were very, very modest. None of his domestic issues passed during his administration. It was Johnson who enacted the Kennedy agenda. And yet Kennedy has this extraordinary hold on the public. Yes, he was assassinated, and that probably worked in his favor in terms of public opinion. But it can’t totally explain his lasting appeal. For example, William McKinley was assassinated in 1901, but forty years later nobody remembered who McKinley was.

But Kennedy continues to have this hold on the public. I think it has to do less with presidential personality and more with the ability to inspire hope. Kennedy had a vision he called the “New Frontier” that inspired people. To this day, people think of him as an inspirational voice, an optimist, someone who thought in terms of a better America and a better world. So the ability to express a vision is absolutely essential to a successful, effective presidency.

A second essential component is **pragmatism**, good practical politics. There’s no substitute for it for those who aspire to be a truly effective president. Franklin Roosevelt, probably the greatest pragmatist of them all, compared himself to a quarterback on a football team. He said, “I try one play, and if it doesn’t work, I move on to something else.” Herbert Hoover called it exactly right in the 1932 campaign when he termed Roosevelt “a chameleon on plaid.”

After Roosevelt, there was no greater pragmatist than the man who thought of himself as Roosevelt’s protégé: Lyndon Johnson. Johnson studied, contemplated, practiced, and refined the art of politics. I think he was the greatest Senate majority leader in the country’s history. When he came to the Senate, he wasn’t interested in
serving on a particular committee. He wasn’t interested in foreign relations, or commerce, or the Treasury, or the judiciary—none of those things. He wanted a leadership post. And he cultivated other senators; he acquired a kind of body of intelligence about what they liked, what was important to them. He wanted to know where their wives wanted to go on a congressional junket. What they liked to drink. Their favorite restaurant. Whether they were happy with their parking space.

A fellow named Bobby Baker gathered this information for Johnson, and Johnson would use it in his interactions with other senators in order to control them, move them, and lead them. For example, Johnson described Senator Hubert Humphrey as a “red hot,” a far-left-leaning liberal. But when a piece of legislation was on the table, Johnson didn’t care about Humphrey’s leftist politics. He wanted to cultivate Humphrey and bring him into camp, so to speak. So Johnson would rehearse a speech and then deliberately seek out Humphrey, feigning surprise when he ran into him. He’d say: “Hubert, I was thinking about you. I wanted to see you. Come on back to my office, or I’ll go to your office.” Then Johnson would back Humphrey into a corner and give him his spiel. The “Johnson treatment,” as it came to be known, proved to be a highly effective strategy.

Johnson loved to tell a story about himself and Richard Nixon. Johnson was the Senate majority leader when Vice President Nixon went to Latin America in 1958. Crowds demonstrating against U.S. policy in Latin America stoned, spat upon, and almost killed Nixon in Caracas, Venezuela. He demonstrated considerable heroism in confronting that danger and returned to a hero’s welcome at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. Johnson and other dignitaries turned out to greet and embrace Nixon. A few days later, a young reporter confronted Johnson about his seemingly inconsistent behavior.
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Senator, I saw you out there at the airport the other day embracing Vice President Nixon. I thought you told me a couple of weeks ago that this guy Nixon was nothing but chicken shit.’” To which Johnson replied, “Son, what you gotta understand is that in politics, overnight chicken shit can turn to chicken salad.”

Johnson, who was brilliantly manipulative, knew every trick in the book. At the end of his career, for example, he wanted to have a medical corpsman with him on his Texas ranch. His health was questionable, and he worried about being alone without access to immediate medical attention. So in the waning days of his White House service, Johnson went to Independence, Missouri, to see Harry Truman. He said to Truman: “Harry, you know, you and Bess are living in this big, old house here in Independence. You’re getting on in years, man. You oughta have a medical corpsman from the nearby Army base living here at the house with you.” And Truman, being a bit gullible, said, “Really, Lyndon, can I have that?” Johnson said: “Of course, man! You’re an ex-president of the United States. I’ll arrange it.” About three months after Johnson left the White House, an enterprising reporter caught up with him on the ranch and asked: “President Johnson, I understand that you have two medical corpsmen living here on the ranch with you. Is that true?” Johnson said: “Of course it’s true. Harry Truman has one.”

Ronald Reagan was also a highly pragmatic, very shrewd politician. As governor of California, he announced that “his feet were in concrete”—meaning he would not budge—regarding his opposition to the withholding tax. He said: “Taxes should hurt. People should pay them once a year. If they’re paying once a week or bimonthly or once a month, it doesn’t hurt as much. They get used to paying these taxes. I want it to hurt. I’m against the withholding tax.” Then the state of California got into all sorts of fiscal
difficulty, and Reagan signed a withholding tax bill into law. The reporters at a press conference said to him, "Governor, we thought your feet were in concrete on that issue." And Reagan smiled and said, "Gentlemen, the sound you hear is the concrete breaking about my feet." He also signed into law the most liberal abortion statute of any state in the Union. Although he said he was against the statute, he wanted to get reelected, and he knew that the majority of voters in the state favored a liberal abortion statute.

As president of the United States, Reagan described the Soviet Union as an "evil empire." When Gorbachev came to power, Reagan, then in his second term, held a series of four summit conferences with him. The relationship he developed with Gorbachev as a result of those meetings ultimately led Reagan to change the dynamic of the Soviet-American relationship. His anti-Soviet rhetoric trimmed sail in a highly pragmatic way, largely as a result of the United States winning the Cold War. All this is to say that, along with vision, pragmatism is an essential ingredient of effective presidential leadership.

The third ingredient is charisma, the power of presidential personality, which has become particularly important in this modern age of televised politics. But even before the dawn of television, charisma played an important role in presidential politics. Consider how the public adored Theodore Roosevelt, who preached the strenuous life. Though he wasn't the first one to hold press conferences, he pioneered the use of the press. He communicated his private life, including the antics of his large, unruly bunch of children, to the public through the press, thereby ingratiating himself with millions of Americans. He often invited people to the White House where they could meet his family. When he went horseback riding in the mornings in Washington, he would challenge the ever-present newsmen to keep up with him. They would write stories and
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anecdotes gleaned from these morning outings that resonated with millions of people.

Likewise, Woodrow Wilson proved popular with the public. Many people were drawn to the personal quality of his leadership and delighted in the lyrical nature of his speeches.

No one, however, was more effective on this count than Franklin Roosevelt. FDR was simply brilliant at ingratiating himself with millions and millions of Americans. He used the radio for his pioneering fireside chats. He aimed, in a sense, to come into the public’s homes, their living rooms. Most people think he gave dozens and dozens of these talks, when in fact—I think I have this right—he gave only thirty-one.

When the banks in the country began collapsing four days after he became president, FDR went on the radio and gave the first of his fireside chats. He spoke to the country on that occasion about the banking situation, but he never intimated that it was a crisis. Instead, he said the country needed a banking holiday and suggested that people should go out and enjoy themselves for a couple of days. There he was in the White House sitting by the fireside speaking to the country as if he were paterfamilias. He was your uncle, he was your friend, he was someone who created a reassuring rapport with people during a time of terrible crisis. And he was brilliantly effective. After he died, somebody stopped Mrs. Roosevelt on the street and said, “Mrs. Roosevelt, I miss the way your husband used to speak to me about my government.” Can you imagine anyone saying that about a politician today?

As you know, FDR was paralyzed from the waist down from an attack of infantile paralysis he suffered when he was in his forties. None of the pictures taken of
him during his time in the White House reveal this disability. The only time he ever made a reference to it was when he addressed Congress after returning from the Yalta Conference: “I know you will forgive me for sitting down, for I carry ten pounds of steel around each of my lower limbs, and I’ve just returned from a journey of ten thousand miles.” The country found psychological comfort in this man who many thought had recovered from his polio because he had developed his upper torso by lifting weights and looked so robust, so strong, so competent, so self-assured. The country identified with him: Here’s a man who suffered this crippling disability and recovered. And so too the country can recover from the Depression, people thought. In a sense, FDR played brilliantly upon that unspoken analogy to make a very personal connection to the public.

Lyndon Johnson provides a good contrast with TR, Wilson, and FDR. His unlovable personality undermined his leadership effectiveness. Johnson was a narcissistic character—overbearing, reaching, reaching, pushing, pushing. He had to be the best, the greatest. When he was Senate majority leader, he became the first congressman to get a telephone for his limousine. His chief rival, Republican minority leader Everett Dirksen of Illinois, went out and got a phone for his limo and called Johnson. He said, “Lyndon, I wanted you to be the first one I called on my new car telephone.” And Johnson said, “Can you hang on a second, Ev? My other phone is ringing.” He was such an overbearing and, in many ways, vulgar character. His behavior often offended people and ultimately undercut him.

Then there was Ronald Reagan, the Great Communicator. When Reagan died recently, I found it fascinating that the public responded with a great emotional outpouring characterized not so much by grief as by a celebration of his life. People perceived Reagan as the great
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optimist. Like Kennedy, he inspired hope. He gave people a feeling that better days lay ahead. Remember the TV ads in 1984? "It's morning in America? Reagan is indelibly associated with a new era of national pride. His personality made such an important stamp on the country. Those of us in the academy often think that brain power is absolutely the first and most vital component of effective presidential leadership. But there's something else which is more important, something I'll call political intelligence. Franklin Roosevelt had it. Ronald Reagan had it. Harry Truman had it.

In 1948 everyone except Harry Truman said Truman was going to lose the election. Hardly a poll or a newspaper gave him a ghost of a chance. Not only was he running against Tom Dewey, but he was also running against two fellow Democrats following a three-way split in his own party: Henry Wallace on the left, Strom Thurmond on the right, and Harry Truman in the middle, sustained by the power of his personality. He hit the campaign trail and went around the country giving speeches off the back of trains. He would tell his audiences: "If you vote for this Dewey, if you vote against me, you're a bunch of damn fools. Remember what Roosevelt and the New Deal did for you? If you lose track of that, you're a bunch of damn fools." And people warmed to him and would start shouting, "Give'em hell, Harry, give'em hell!"

We can all visualize that wonderful, famous photograph of Truman holding up the Chicago Tribune with headlines proclaiming, "Dewey wins, Truman out!" And of course, Truman, not Dewey, had actually won the election. It's an image indelibly imprinted on the public's mind. It's unlikely that an upset victory of that magnitude will ever happen again in a presidential election; Truman was sui generis. Nevertheless, every time a candidate is behind in a race, they invoke the experience of Harry Truman. And so I would say the power of presidential person-
ality, the charisma of a president, is so important in this age of rapid communications and television.

Fourth, consensus. The greatest, most successful presidents have been those who’ve been able to build a national consensus. Theodore Roosevelt was masterful at this. TR was a great believer in projecting American power around the globe. The public was isolationist and resistant to this idea. TR wanted to create a consensus for a larger American role in world affairs. He didn’t talk about power. He didn’t talk about the idea that he wanted America to be a competitor with Britain and France and Germany and Russia and Japan. Instead, he spoke about the country’s ideals. Take the Panama Canal, for example. Did he talk about it as a way to assure the building of a two-ocean navy and establishing America as a power in the Atlantic and the Pacific? On the contrary, he talked about the idea that America was going to be serving the purpose of world commerce, advancing international prosperity.

The role TR played in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 provides the best example of TR’s consensus-building prowess. TR was a balance-of-power foreign policy leader. He was delighted when the Japanese attacked the Russians for what he perceived as Russian transgressions in Manchuria, because, as he said, he was happy to let the Japanese do the work and save the United States the trouble. But the Japanese piled up so many victories so quickly, that TR became worried that the balance of power would tip precipitously in favor of the Japanese. He wanted to sustain some kind of balance between the Japanese and the Russians. By 1905, the Japanese were finding it increasingly difficult to finance the war, and the Russians were facing great turmoil at home. Sensing that both sides were eager for peace, TR called the Japanese and the Russians to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where he would mediate the conflict.

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But why did he choose Portsmouth, New Hampshire, of all places? Yes, it was a nice watering hole in the summer, the time of their meeting. But what was in Portsmouth? The American battle fleet. In essence, TR took the Japanese and Russians to Portsmouth, clasped his arms around their shoulders, and let them take a gander at American power. The American public did not hear about how he was asserting American power and sustaining some kind of balance of power. The public heard only the idealistic spin: Through his mediation of the Russo-Japanese War, he was building a consensus on America’s role as a great pacifist nation serving the interest of international peace. He won the Nobel Peace Prize as a result of his efforts, becoming the first American president to receive this award. And he created a consensus for this new kind of American adventurism in international affairs.

One other example: In the 1920s, the country was bitterly divided between urban modernists and rural fundamentalists. The famous Scopes trial pitted the state of Tennessee against John Scopes for teaching evolution in the schools. I remember the play and film Inherit the Wind, depicting the contest between William Jennings Bryan, the embodiment of fundamentalist America, and Clarence Darrow, the embodiment of modern, urbane, urban America. Along came the Depression, and Franklin Roosevelt created a new consensus in the country—a coalition of rural and urban political machines, a New Deal coalition that reached out across party lines, and most of all, across regional and economic lines. A brilliant consensus builder, FDR put together a coalition that lasted for almost fifty years. So I would say, the most effective presidents have been men who created consensus, created unity, in the country.

Fifth, the issue of trust, of credibility. Presidents who lose credibility, who lose the trust of the public, cannot
lead anymore. Presidents have lost credibility in two ways. One is by overreaching themselves, as Lyndon Johnson did by promising a Great Society and promising a War on Poverty that would abolish poverty. You can raise people up, but you can’t abolish poverty. Johnson’s grandiosity and use of hyperbole ultimately hurt his credibility with the public. Remember his famous credibility gap regarding the Vietnam War? How did you know when Lyndon Johnson was telling the truth? Some claimed that when he pulled his earlobe or rubbed his chin he was telling the truth and that when he began to move his lips he was lying. Johnson didn’t think such commentary was funny, but it revealed how much he had lost his hold on the public. And, of course, on March 31, 1968, he announced that he wouldn’t seek reelection because he’d lost the trust of the public.

The other way presidents lose the trust of the public is, of course, by lying. Richard Nixon and Watergate come to mind, particularly that famous press conference when Nixon said, “I’m not a crook.” His presidency ended that day, because if you have to tell the country you’re not a crook, it ruins your ability to lead.

Bill Clinton also made a terrible mistake. Not only did he carry on with Monica Lewinsky in the Oval Office, but then he lied to the country about it when he said, “I did not have sex with that woman.” Ultimately the country didn’t want to throw him out of office, but this breach in credibility will follow him forever. His lying seriously blighted his historical reputation.

Sixth, judgment. Presidential effectiveness revolves around good judgment. On June 22, 1941, in the midst of World War II, the Nazis attacked Soviet Russia. Although Congress had passed the lend-lease program in March, Roosevelt’s military chiefs and advisors urged him not to provide the Russians with lend-lease supplies.
Everyone knew what the Nazis had done to the Poles, overrunning their country in a matter of weeks. Everyone knew how the Nazis had defeated the French, the greatest land army in Western Europe. Everyone thought the Nazis would overwhelm the Soviet Union too. But Roosevelt knew some history. He remembered how the Russians—with the aid of their greatest ally, winter—repelled Napoleon's French army. Therefore, Roosevelt decided to use his own judgment and gave the Soviets lend-lease supplies.

In contrast, in 1950 Harry Truman accepted Douglas MacArthur's proposition to have U.S. troops cross the thirty-eighth parallel in Korea. MacArthur assured him that the Chinese would never fight the United States and that the boys would be home by Christmas. And I keep asking, which Christmas? They're still in Korea. Judgment. Truman showed faulty, faulty judgment there.

John Kennedy's handling of the Cuban missile crisis provides another good example of the importance of judgment. In October 1962, Kennedy's military chiefs urged him to invade and bomb Cuba. But he resisted and instead resorted to diplomacy, a blockade—a "quarantine," as he called it—which worked. We know now from reviewing Soviet materials that we came dangerously close to a nuclear holocaust, to a nuclear war with the Soviets. Only Kennedy's good judgment at that point prevented it. I don't claim that he was a saint. It was partly his fault that we got into the Cuban missile crisis in the first place. The CIA's secret plan, dubbed Operation Mongoose, was designed to topple Castro. Khrushchev convinced Castro to let him arm Cuba with missiles as a way to defend Cuba against American aggression. But Kennedy's judgment at a critical point spared the United States from a nuclear war. And so, I would say, judgment is yet another essential element for effective presidential leadership.
Finally, there is the element of luck, happenstance, chance. Napoleon once said, “Give me generals who know something about tactics and strategy, but best of all, give me generals who are lucky.” I wouldn’t want to push this point too far. After all, TR and William Howard Taft faced similar circumstances, but because of their different responses to their circumstances, they experienced quite different outcomes. History treats TR as at least a near-great president and Taft largely as a failure. Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt faced similar circumstances in the Depression; Hoover comes down to us as a failure, and Roosevelt as a great presidential leader. And so, yes, luck is important. But even more important are those other elements—vision, pragmatism, charisma, consensus, trust, and good judgment—that combine to enable presidents to exercise effective leadership.

In conclusion, let me say a word about the current state of presidential leadership. This morning I read a Zogby poll that asked the public to rate presidents. George W. Bush was ranked in the lower third of American presidents. I was surprised, not because I necessarily make a case for him as a good president, but because, having just won reelection, I thought the public would be more sympathetic to seeing him as an effective president. But I think the country is in a state of demoralization about the presidency. After the elections of 2000 and 2004, the country is badly divided. There’s been talk that Bush won a mandate in this past election. Frankly, this is nonsense. Analyze the historical record: Bush’s margin of victory in the popular vote was 2.7 percent. It was the smallest margin of victory in the popular vote ever won by a second-term president. Wilson won by 3.1 percent; Truman won by 4.4 percent; Roosevelt, Johnson, Nixon, and Reagan, all won by larger margins than Bush did. I think the country is demoralized about the presidency.
People have become somewhat cynical. The 2004 election saw a boost in voter participation over the 2000 election when only 51 percent of the electorate turned out. Compare that to the 68 percent who turned out to vote during one of Roosevelt’s reelection bids. There was a time when 70-75 percent of the electorate would vote. People don’t attach the same importance to voting that they once did. Why? What’s going on? I think cynicism has increased as a consequence of Kennedy’s assassination, Watergate, Vietnam, Iran Contra, the Clinton and Monica affair. But at bottom I’m an optimist who believes that things will turn around. I think when the country elects a woman as president people will become more engaged in the political process again.

Cynicism will decline because the election of a female president will be seen as a great departure. When John Kennedy won the presidency in 1960, it was a breakthrough—the first Catholic in the White House. Does anyone now dwell upon the question of whether a presidential candidate is Catholic or Protestant? It’s become largely moot, relatively unimportant. Likewise, I think the question of gender will no longer be an issue once a woman becomes president. And by the way, I’m not making a case for Hillary Clinton—I don’t want you to get me wrong. The really salutary result of having a woman president—whether she’s successful or not in her role—will be the doubling of the pool of potential presidential candidates. And God knows, in my judgment, the country needs better candidates than it has been getting.

Thank you for your attention. I’m happy to answer questions.

MEMBER OF THE AUDIENCE: You spoke of luck, sir. To what extent do presidents make their own luck, perhaps with all those other factors you mentioned?
DALLEK: I think in a sense that's what I was saying: Presidents make their own luck; they seize upon circumstances to advance their presidency, to lead the country. Theodore Roosevelt, comparing himself to Abraham Lincoln, once said that he couldn’t be a truly great president because he didn’t have a war to wage. But Roosevelt had the Russo-Japanese crisis during his term in office, and he seized upon the circumstances to assert himself in effective ways. Presidents William McKinley and William Howard Taft, by contrast, didn’t have TR’s imagination, and consequently, didn’t achieve his near-great status. Some presidents respond effectively to the circumstances of their day and others don’t. That’s the test of their presidential mettle.

History judges presidents on the basis of their performance, a process which can take years. Look at Harry Truman. When he left office, his approval rating hovered around 32 percent, 33 percent. Now people remember him as one of the near-great presidents of American history. Circumstances change. America’s eventual victory in the Cold War largely vindicated Truman’s containment doctrine. Many historians now view Truman as the architect of America’s Cold War success. So it sometimes takes decades to reach a conclusion regarding presidential effectiveness.

Presidents also are served or ill-served by who precedes them and who follows them. Ronald Reagan was very well served by the fact that he succeeded Jimmy Carter. Carter, of course, has been brilliant in his post-presidential incarnation, but as president, he was less than sterling. I love that story about how Jimmy Carter wanted to imitate FDR when he came to the White House. He said he was going to give a fireside chat. So he gave a speech on national television while sitting by the fireside in the White House wearing a cardigan sweater, and everybody went to sleep. He simply didn’t.
have what it took; he said himself he wasn’t a great speechmaker.

So those presidential qualities we’ve discussed are so important. But how do you identify these qualities during a presidential campaign? How do you know that someone will be good or great, effective or ineffective, as president? It’s so difficult to sort that out. It’s something of a mystery. I also find it a mystery that anyone wants to run for the presidency. These days, I think the office has become something of a magnet for neurotics.

MEMBER OF THE AUDIENCE: You talk about a mystery. Do you ever hear that the media or the people have a love affair with Bill Clinton? I often hear that if he ran again today he would win. How do you explain that?

DALLEK: I think people in this country were forgiving about the Monica business, because they saw it not as a violation of law or public policy, but as a private transgression. And at bottom, this country is an egalitarian society. On the one hand, we need heroes, we want heroes, we want to elevate people we look up to. On the other hand, we love to find out that our heroes have feet of clay, because it makes us feel better about ourselves. That prominent figure went through a divorce or had marital problems. That one had problems with his children. It rings, it echoes, so powerfully. So Bill Clinton’s flaws in some ways endeared him to millions of people. Also, he was so charismatic, so appealing. He’s very bright, very articulate.

Somehow, when presidents leave office, much of what they did falls away. Richard Nixon, for example, lived quite a while after leaving office and went through a kind of rehabilitation in the public’s mind. Johnson, who died four years after serving as president, never had the
chance to do that. Given his temperament, I don’t know if he could have done it anyway. Reagan, of course, lived a long time after his term in office, and people had enormous sympathy for him based on the suffering he endured as a result of Alzheimer’s disease.

It is fascinating to observe how the public interacts with various presidents. American society needs heroes. But it also loves to gossip about people’s flaws and limitations. As a result, the public can be very ambivalent about presidents.

MEMBER OF THE AUDIENCE: You did not mention Jimmy Carter until the Q&A. Would you quickly rate Jimmy Carter on the characteristics you discussed tonight?

DALLEK: Certainly. He wasn’t among the most distinguished of our presidents in terms of charisma. He was a man of vision, but he was overwhelmed by circumstances. Somehow or other he didn’t have the wherewithal to create the impression that he was in command, that he was in control. Recall the Iranian hostage crisis and the problems with oil prices and OPEC. There was a sense that the country was adrift, that he hadn’t mastered his position and the situation, that he was not an effective leader.

Then along came Ronald Reagan who had the capacity to communicate in pithy, simple ways. We who are academics decry this. Frankly I’m pained and offended when I hear George W. Bush mumble and fumble through some extemporaneous comment. It bothers me, but I’m an academic. Obviously, it doesn’t bother the great bulk of the country, a lot more people than are on my side. They don’t mind it. They find him more understandable. You know, he’s the guy next door.
Adlai Stevenson didn’t appeal to the majority of Americans. They called him an egghead, a very unflattering designation. People thought he was too cerebral. I’m reminded of a scion of the Adams family, Brooks Adams, an intellectual who wrote a book called *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* in which he criticized American democracy.

Perhaps Winston Churchill stated it best when he said, “Democracy is the worst possible system, except for all the rest.” And so we blunder along. I would love to come back in a couple hundred years to see what’s happened to this country.

**BURNS:** Thank you for a wonderful talk. As a historian, how do you deal with a president like FDR whom you greatly admire, but who made at least two egregious mistakes, at least in my view? One was putting Japanese Americans into what we politely called “relocation camps,” but, which, in my view, were concentration camps. Not death camps, but concentration camps. The other is a more difficult question—one I am still trying to figure out myself—concerning Roosevelt’s subterfuge. Considerable data point to the fact that Roosevelt secretly instructed the U.S. Navy to help the British navy protect the lifelines between the United States and Britain at a time when Britain so desperately needed aid. This proved to be problematic on two levels: First, it transpired before the bombing of Pearl Harbor when the United States was officially still neutral. Second, Roosevelt did not inform the American people of his actions. How do you deal with this as a historian?

**DALLEK:** Jim, it’s a wonderful question. I wrestle with this all the time in dealing with all these presidents. The way I try to judge this is by asking myself, how did things turn out? Roosevelt misled the American people and went behind their backs, so to speak, in 1941 in his
dealings with Britain specifically and in how he handled America's response to the burgeoning war more generally.

But in the final analysis, he was right—I'm not referring to the way he misled the public, but rather to his assessment of the country as being fervently isolationist, or at least determined to avoid war. And I think he was right in understanding that the United States could not escape this conflict. This was a contest between fascism, Nazism, militarism, and our democratic values, our constitutional principles, our rule of law, our system of government. So although I don't celebrate his deceptions, I give him some leeway in terms of the judgment he exercised.

However, he was dead wrong on the incarceration of Japanese Americans. It was a terrible, egregious error, because the rationalization for it—that Japanese Americans endangered or threatened American internal security—was ill-founded. The Supreme Court later said this was the greatest violation of American civil liberties in the country's history. I think the court was absolutely right. And I think Roosevelt will always have to bear the burden of making such a bad judgment, a real mistake. He can't escape the fact that he let Secretary of War Henry Lewis Stimson sign the order to incarcerate Japanese Americans. He was president, and in the words of Harry Truman, "The buck stops here."

I'll give you another example of presidential judgment that I've often contemplated: What would have happened if Franklin Roosevelt had sanctioned the assassination of Adolf Hitler in 1940-41? Suppose he had sanctioned it in 1939 before the war broke out, and it later came to light in historical documents. How would we feel about it? In principle I'm dead set against presidents sanctioning the assassination of a foreign leader. It's so at odds with the rule of law, with American constitu-
tional scruples. And yet it would be very difficult to condemn Roosevelt for wanting to have Hitler assassinated. So that hypothetical scenario poses one of the toughest questions.

I think John Kennedy and his administration made a terrible error in judgment in their plots to assassinate Castro. It was shortsighted. It was stupid. Kennedy knew that he had erred in the Bay of Pigs operation. Afterwards, he walked around asking, how could I have been so stupid? The contrast to how he responded to the Cuban missile crisis is striking.

So scholars line up this way and that way when judging U.S. presidents. But if I write a book that offends both a president’s acolytes and critics, then I know that I’ve done my job. John Quincy Adams once said that the historian’s principal religion should be the truth. Everyone knows how hard it is to record the truth, but at the very least, we should aspire to do so.

I am working now on a book about Nixon and Kissinger. I find certain admirable qualities about both of them, and I find lots of other qualities that are really quite offensive, off-putting. The Germans have an expression that roughly translates to “tell history as it actually happened, tell both sides.” I don’t mean to be too self-righteous here, but that’s what I strive to do, that’s what I try to achieve. It’s difficult, but it’s something we’ve all dealt with. You struggle to be fair, evenhanded. That’s what you want.

MEMBER OF THE AUDIENCE: Do you think if Margaret Thatcher were over here she’d make a good president?

DALLEK: She would stir up a hell of a lot of interest. I’ve got two suggestions: One is that Margaret Thatcher and Mikhail Gorbachev come over and run against each other. And the other suggestion is that we amend the
Constitution to permit the Republican governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, to run against the Democratic governor of Michigan, Jennifer Granholm. Both of them seem to be very interesting politicians, and it is disappointing that as naturalized citizens, neither can run for president.

MEMBER OF THE AUDIENCE: Do you think that TV has had the effect of increasing the influence of presidential charisma and perhaps decreasing the influence of other attributes a president should have?

DALLEK: It’s a very good question. I’ve wrestled with this issue myself. In many ways television has had quite a pernicious effect on our politics. It’s put a premium on shouting and negative ads. TV shows like Crossfire generate a lot of heat and, in my judgment, shed almost no light. It’s a piece of theater, a kind of drama. It doesn’t add anything to the discussion and certainly doesn’t contribute to the dignity of politicians and politics. TV programming often undermines the ability of presidents and politicians to practice sensible, effective politics.

People in politics are so cynical themselves. For example, recently Tom DeLay and the Republican caucus said that if DeLay is indicted, he could still remain in the party’s leadership. As a late nineteenth-century slobomman said, “Nothing is lost save honor.” Americans used to pride themselves in having honorable people in public life. Public service should be something that’s honorable, that’s attractive.

There are so many bright, talented young people in this country. When I teach classes, I urge them to think about going into politics. I don’t care about my students’ political persuasion. But I do care if they demonstrate integrity and a commitment to the larger national well-being, as opposed to a strictly self-serving agenda.
Reading the papers of these presidents makes me cynical in some ways, because I get behind the facade they put on for the country. When you see the real men operating behind the scenes, it really is not a lesson in traditional American civics. You see how manipulative and dishonest they can be. Occasionally there are some honorable politicians—I don’t mean to condemn all politicians. But clearly we need to attract more people of integrity into politics. I’d like to see more politicians thinking in terms of the larger interest. I hope I will see this happen in my lifetime, but I’m somewhat skeptical.

RUSCIO: Well, Bob, you’ve established a very high standard for those who will follow you in the Burns Lecture-ship series. We’re thankful that all of you in the audience could join us for this inaugural lecture, and we hope to see you back here for many others.
ROBERT DALLEK is an eminent historian of the American presidency and an award-winning author. His critically acclaimed biographies include *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*, published in 1980; *Lone Star Rising* and *Flawed Giant*, both on Lyndon Johnson and published in 1991 and 1998 respectively; and *An Unfinished Life* on John Kennedy, published in 2003. He is currently working on a book about Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger.

After receiving a bachelor’s degree from the University of Illinois, Dallek earned both a master’s degree and a doctoral degree from Columbia University. He taught history at Columbia University from 1960-64 and at the University of California, Los Angeles, from 1964-94. He fulfilled visiting professorships at the California Institute of Technology, the University of Oxford, and the University of Texas. Most recently he taught history at Boston University.

The Jepson School of Leadership Studies welcomes him as the inaugural speaker in the James MacGregor Burns Lectureship in Leadership Studies and Biography.
JAMES MACGREGOR BURNS, a renowned historian and presidential biographer, launched the leadership studies field in 1978 with the publication of his book *Leadership*. He articulated his ground-breaking theory of transformational leadership in this book, emphasizing the moral responsibilities of good leadership. Since then, he has continued to make significant contributions to this emerging discipline, including serving as a founding faculty member of the Jepson School of Leadership Studies, speaking and writing widely on the topic of transformational leadership, and for the past few years, working with other scholars to develop a general theory of leadership.

Highly regarded for his scholarship on the U.S. presidency, Burns garnered considerable recognition for his two biographies on Franklin Roosevelt, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (1956) and *Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom* (1970), receiving the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for the latter. In addition, he has authored or co-authored books on the presidencies of George Washington, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Bill Clinton as well as books on democracy and the political system in the United States.

Burns earned a bachelor's degree from Williams College, followed by a master's degree and a doctoral degree in political science from Harvard. In 1941 he joined the faculty of the political science department at Williams College, where he taught until 1988, at which time he was named professor emeritus. He has served as senior fellow at the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond from 1990-93 and again from 2001-04 and as distinguished senior scholar of leadership at the Burns Academy of Leadership at the University of Maryland, College Park, from 1997-2001 and again from 2004 to the present.
Burns has exercised considerable influence on the Jepson School during its formative years, both as a mentor and a senior fellow. In remarks he made immediately prior to Dr. Dallek's lecture, he referred to the Jepson faculty as "the most heralding, helpful, sharing group of scholars I've ever been associated with."

The Jepson School takes considerable pride in naming the James MacGregor Burns Lectureship in Leadership Studies and Biography in honor of a man who has contributed so much to both the field of leadership studies and the study of American politics.