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COMMENTARY

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What We Want in a President

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In the next six weeks Americans are going to pick the two finalists in the long job search for the most important CEO position on the planet. As someone who has served in three White Houses and been a Federal Reserve governor during a fourth, I have become a firm believer that the character traits someone brings to the job are more important than the issue papers or debate sound bites that get so much attention in the primaries.

Consider two examples. In December, Joe Trippi, a strategist for John Edwards, noted that polls showed a quarter of Barack Obama's own supporters did not think he would be qualified to be president. This says little about Mr. Obama, but it does say a lot about the process. These voters are not choosing someone to lead the country; they are trying to send a message about their own personal frustrations, or perhaps about another candidate.

Or consider the comments of a friend of mine and active fund-raiser about Fred Thompson, who is my choice. My friend agreed that Mr. Thompson was smart and well informed and had good judgment. But he felt that Republicans should definitely not nominate him because he was temperamentally unsuited to the campaign trail. Mr. Thompson probably would rather discuss the nuances of issues than shake hands or write thank-you notes to donors, two skills very important to the running. Polls now suggest my friend may be right. If so, all it means is that the process of selecting a president has little to do with the skills needed for the job.

By its very nature, the presidency involves a lot of on-the-job training. Some of our presidents have had to come up to speed quite quickly.

For example, John F. Kennedy faced the Bay of Pigs fiasco after just a few weeks on the job. No one would argue that he handled it well. Some serious historians have noted the links between that performance and our involvement in Vietnam

(having "lost" in Cuba, he was determined not to let it happen again), not to mention the Cuban Missile Crisis just 18 months later. Kennedy is remembered fondly for bringing style, grace and humor to the White House -- wedged between the boring Eisenhower and his graceless successors, Johnson and Nixon. But he was still learning on the job at a time when nuclear annihilation was a real possibility. Still more amazingly, with 14 years in Congress, Kennedy had far more national political experience than many now seeking the job.

As president, there is a lot to learn both factually and about the process of governing. Beginning on day one, he or she will have to confront a bureaucracy and a media establishment that has its own agenda, to hire expert advisers and administrators on a whole host of foreign and domestic policy issues, and to structure the whole operation in a way that carries out the will of the people. Our job as voters should be to select someone who will (1) know what he or she doesn't know, (2) get up to speed quickly, and (3) avoid making serious mistakes in the meantime.

A process driven by 30-second commercials prepared by the candidates themselves, and so-called debates that ask candidates to explain in 60 seconds how they would bring about world peace or national prosperity, does not help. Nor does media coverage that focuses on whose commercials are moving polling points and who performed well in the last inane debate.

But we voters can still do a respectable job in the CEO selection process. Obviously ideology and our visceral reactions to the candidates matter, since they are also part of job performance. There are, however, three other questions about a candidate's character that are likely to shed some light on whether that candidate will do well in the on-the-job training school of the Oval Office. These questions have nothing to do with party or ideology.

First, has the candidate faced a crisis or overcome a major setback in his or her life? A president's first crisis will teach two important lessons. The first is that bad things happen, in fact they happen on a regular basis. The second is that the real power of the office to affect, let alone control, events is far less than imagined. If the occupant of the Oval Office has faced this double whammy -- encountering a tragedy involving events over which he or she has had little control, yet finding a way to persevere -- the new president is far more likely to succeed.

Harry Truman, who made some of the toughest decisions of any president, overcame business failure. Teddy Roosevelt lost his first wife after childbirth. On the other hand, someone who got straight A's, never got turned down for a date, was never fired from a job or defeated in an election, is going to have a very rude awakening. The average voter can research this personal history quite easily.

Second, has the candidate had a variety of life experiences? The presidency is a job for a generalist. You never know what direction a crisis will come from: foreign

threats, economic calamity, civil unrest. It might even be a biological pandemic that involves all three at the same time.

A variety of life experiences or careers helps a person to understand that actions which make sense in one framework may have unintended consequences elsewhere. It also increases the chances that a president will think creatively and not get boxed in, and gain control of events rather than be controlled by them.

By contrast, someone who has only been an elected official is likely to interpret problems only in a political context. Again, whether a candidate has had a variety of experiences is something the average voter can easily discern.

Third, can the candidate tell the difference between a foreign enemy and a political opponent? A certain degree of ruthlessness is a necessary attribute for any successful CEO or president. But our liberty, which is ultimately our nation's greatest resource, requires that a president restrain this trait when acting domestically.

We should seek an individual who is ruthless about protecting us against others, but acts with charity toward all and malice toward none at home: a tall order. But this trait comes out on the campaign trail, and in the past job performances of the candidates. We should opt for candidates who are ruthless in debating real public policy issues but steer away from attacking the personal traits of their opponents.

No candidate is going to be perfect, and reasonable people can differ about whether a certain candidate possesses each of these traits. But these are a good filter.

Johnson and Nixon would never have passed the last two tests, and in Nixon's case, the line about not having "Nixon to kick around any more" was a sign he couldn't handle setbacks well. By contrast, Reagan had a variety of life experiences, and mastered the difference between domestic opponents and foreign enemies marvelously. He was also gracious in his defeat in 1976. Franklin Roosevelt's polio undoubtedly helped make him a success as president; and although ruthless, he also knew how to have a bipartisan cabinet and war effort.

Ultimately, when we make up our minds we should think about the qualities the candidate would bring to the Oval Office -- and not just whether or not they would make a good candidate.

Mr. Lindsey is author of "What a President Should Know . . . but Most Learn Too Late," which will be published by Rowman & Littlefield this month.

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