Three Questions for a Presidential Candidate

What We Want in a President
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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.

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.

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