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# FIT FOR THE PRESIDENCY?

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# Fit for the Presidency?

*Winners, Losers,  
What-Ifs, and Also-Rans*

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SEYMOUR MORRIS JR.

Potomac Books

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## PREFACE

The story of U.S. presidents begins when they take the oath of office. Yet a key part of their lives took place *before* they reached the pinnacle, when they were candidates. What had they accomplished? What signals were there to suggest their future performance? How impressive were their résumés?

More than almost any other country, the United States has perfected the art of personnel selection. We apply stringent criteria when selecting a leader for a corporation or nonprofit institution: we require a detailed résumé and carefully check personal and professional references, a process known as “due diligence”; when the candidate comes in for an interview we ask difficult, probing questions. We want complete and accurate information, and we want to be objective and make a decision free of personal bias.

Electing a president is not the same as choosing a CEO, yet in many ways the process is comparable to the sorts of hiring decisions made every day by top managers and boards of directors of companies and nonprofits. It therefore seems reasonable to apply the same degree of discipline and analysis to filling elective offices. In *Fit for the Presidency?* I examine résumés and perform due diligence for the office of president just as a professional recruiter would do to fill a company’s executive position. How does the candidate measure up on key criteria such as integrity and judgment? What in the candidate’s past suggests his potential success or failure as a president? Is there a good fit between the candidate’s skills and the needs of the country at the time? Is there anything in his



background that he might not want publicized? This examination is in no way invasive or unreasonable. Voters, said John Adams, have “a divine right to the most dreaded and envied kind of knowledge [concerning] the characters and conduct of their rulers.”<sup>1</sup>

Important prior positions like governor or secretary of state invite inquiry about what exactly a potential president has accomplished. We once had a presidential candidate with a sterling job history: he had been a state legislator, diplomat, secretary of state, congressman, and senator. Unfortunately he was a man always one step ahead of his résumé—an example of “the Peter Principle” at work.<sup>2</sup> By the time he became president and had to perform serious diplomacy and negotiation in the prelude to the Civil War, James Buchanan fell short. “The road to leadership, as well as to wisdom,” says one management consultant, “is to err and to err and to err again but less . . . and never to make the same mistake twice.”<sup>3</sup> Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from prior bad judgment; this is why experience can be the best teacher. As every executive recruiter knows, one should beware of the star performer who has an unblemished record of success, who has never known failure or disappointment.

In evaluating a candidate for a top position, executive recruiters are careful not to accept prior success at face value but to analyze the types of organizations that have employed him, the reasons for his success, and whether he can translate his success to a different culture and organization. Wendell Willkie, for example, had no political or government experience, but his work as head of an electric utility dealing with regulators and the public qualified him for the presidency because it’s very similar to what a president does. George Marshall, even though he spent his entire career in the military and had never run for public office, demonstrated superb strategic thinking and personnel management skills worthy of a president.

...

In this book I present the résumés of presidential candidates and all the important information known about them at the time they

ran. Would you have voted for this person? Did he demonstrate the qualities we should look for in today's candidates?

In choosing candidates to profile, I sought a reasonable balance of insiders and outsiders, Republicans and Democrats, visionaries and doers, liberals and conservatives, candidates well-known and candidates not well-known. No judgment is meant to be implied by the selection. Avoiding any attempt to label the candidate as one extreme or the other, I have endeavored, eschewing all gossip, legends, and opinions, to simply detail facts and professional character references for which we have hard evidence. If the result is to show a candidate in a better or worse light than is commonly perceived, it is not due to any desire to whitewash or smear him but simply to let the evidence speak for itself and let you draw your own conclusions.

Some of these candidates turned out to be giants of the presidency; others are now largely forgotten; and a few probably should have won—our nation's loss. Five candidates made it to the White House, and ten did not (a few of whom didn't even make it to the nomination, though they were considered top candidates). My examination of each candidate begins with a brief background and a detailed résumé, followed by an assessment of qualifications and a summary rating—outstanding, excellent, fair, or poor—based on the key criteria of accomplishments, intangibles, and judgment and a category named “Overall” that encompasses all the information we have on the man. Each chapter closes with a review of what happened after the election. In almost every case the candidate's future performance could have been predicted (Abraham Lincoln being a major exception).

All high achievers, no matter how impressive, are human beings with quirks and foibles that form an essential part of their potential fitness or nonfitness for high office. A person able to control his passions? Two of our candidates challenged their enemies to a duel. One of them even challenged his father-in-law. (Luckily the older man—who later became president—had more common sense and told him to cool it.) Personable and charming? Another candidate preferred to spend his spare time trout fish-

ing so he could “talk to the fish.” When he talked to people, his favorite sound was “uh.” Despite his lack of personal charm, he still managed to become president.

How about the candidate who proposed to a fabulously rich but rather plain young lady on their second date? Would you give him an F for being a gold digger, or would you give him an A for being decisive? His name was George Washington.

Almost all the candidates had a deep respect for learning. One man spent ten years as a recluse, reading books. Another graduated from college at age seventeen (and gave the college commencement speech in Latin). At the other extreme are the college dropouts. Two of them became multimillionaires. A third one became a “Top Gun” pilot who flew dangerous rescue missions over the Himalayas and mastered no fewer than 170 different kinds of aircraft—and went on to write the best-selling political treatise since Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*.

Not all candidates who managed to finish college were academic standouts. One, who majored in a subject called “varsity football,” went on to write two best-sellers. Another attended a third-rate college and never studied finance or accounting, but after becoming president he studied the tax code so thoroughly he could talk on an equal level with the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. Still another, who barely finished college, spent most of his time in the nation’s capital chasing the girls and dancing all night at nightclubs—and creating the Federal Reserve System.

The star, the pride and joy of his parents? One candidate, 100 pounds and 5-foot-8 compared to his famous 240-pound, 6-foot-4 father, was mocked by his despairing mother as “the runt of the litter.” He stormed into the White House in one of the biggest landslides in history. The proud father-in-law? Not this president. When his son-in-law challenged him for leadership of the Democratic Party, he withheld his support and prevented the younger man from winning the party’s nomination.

Success or failure in business rarely correlates with success or failure in politics. Two of the candidates almost went bankrupt

in their early business career. A third proved there are all kinds of interesting ways to make money: his major claim to fame was his design of a new brand of men's underwear overprinted with large red ants, called "Antsy Pants."

Donald Trump? One of our candidates built the largest real estate complex in the world, covering twenty-seven acres of office space. Move aside, Donald. Brilliant lawyer? Samuel Jones Tilden, one of the top lawyers in the country, had his carefully drafted will overturned after his death because he hadn't paid attention to a fundamental rule of estate law. Another brilliant man insisted on writing his own will without consulting anybody and made a colossal foul-up: by promising that his slaves would be freed after his wife died, he practically invited someone to murder her. The only reason it didn't happen is because Martha Washington, fearing for her life after hearing "talk in the [slave] quarters of the good time coming to the ones to be freed after she died," quickly released the slaves on her own.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the candidates were born poor; some tried to appear so. One candidate came from a family that owned the most magnificent plantation in America, yet he won election because the public believed he lived in a log cabin. (His huge home had a closet door hiding the walls of the original cabin.) Another candidate admitted to being born "in a log cabin equipped with a golf course, a pool table, and a swimming pool."<sup>5</sup> Other candidates made no bones about being rich—very rich. One had a summer job as a young boy selling newspapers from the backseat of his parents' chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce; another was the richest man in the world for men his age (late thirties). One former vice president of the United States accomplished more for humanity than many presidents or Nobel Prize winners do: his patented invention saved the lives of over a hundred million people. He also left his children an estate eventually worth two billion dollars.

On this list of candidates are two governors of the biggest state in the union, a senator, a mayor, three generals (two of them active in politics), a former congressman, two wealthy businessmen, and five cabinet officers. The cabinet officers were widely considered

“the best ever” secretary of war, secretary of the treasury, secretary of agriculture, secretary of commerce, and attorney general. Only one of them became president.

...

The best predictor of future performance is past accomplishment. People do not suddenly reinvent themselves the moment they step into the Oval Office. In all candidates the signs of potential greatness—along with potential problems—are there if you look close enough. Does a great résumé predict a good president? More often than not it does, when the jobs and accomplishments are significant enough to reveal character, integrity, clarity, persuasiveness, and certain intangibles that define a leader.

Some voters say the presidency is such a unique job that a candidate’s past doesn’t really matter. This is a rationalization. Lack of qualifications is not a qualification. Nor is popularity or celebrity. Opined the 1872 Republican candidate Horace Greeley: “Fame is a vapor, popularity an accident.”<sup>6</sup>

In describing the job of president, Henry Adams, the great nineteenth-century historian, wrote, “The American president resembles the commander of a ship at sea. He must have a helm to grasp, a course to steer, a port to seek.”<sup>7</sup> Would you board a ship headed by a captain who had never commanded before? Who has no principles to support his grasp? No vision of where he wants to go? On-the-job training sounds reasonable, except that it is not supported by history. Almost every one of our two-term presidents had a difficult second term. If a candidate needs further seasoning by the time he gets to the White House, it’s probably too late. The presidency is a job for which we expect the winner to hit the ground running. He has a hundred days to make a good first impression and four years to show his leadership capabilities so he can win a second term hopefully as good as his first.

So before getting on the boat, check out the résumé—not how famous he is or what he claims he will do, but what he has done already.

# Introduction

## *What Our Founding Fathers Looked for in a Potential President*

At the Constitutional Convention, in their deliberations concerning the newly created office of the presidency, the Founding Fathers listed only two qualities a president should have: *experience* and *fortitude*.<sup>1</sup> In the *Federalist Papers*, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay describe the ideal candidate as having *experience*. (The word appears no fewer than ninety-one times.)<sup>2</sup> In their view, truths are taught and corroborated by experience. They speak of “unequivocal” lessons from experience and the “accumulated experience of ages.” “Experience is the parent of wisdom,” declares Hamilton, and Madison is in total agreement: “Let us consult experience, the guide that ought always to be followed whenever it can be found.” In sum, the primary qualification for president is “the best oracle of wisdom”: deep experience.<sup>3</sup>

Delegates to the Constitutional Convention defined *fortitude* as a combination of courage, steadfastness, firmness, trustworthiness, and integrity. Most were thoroughly educated in religion and the classics and had read St. Thomas Aquinas, the thirteenth-century Catholic theologian who taught that prudence and justice are the virtues with which we decide what needs to be done, and fortitude gives us the strength to do it. A great president would combine experience with fortitude.

There was a third qualification the Founding Fathers hoped a



What might have been: George Washington VIII.

candidate would meet, though it was never recorded in writing: he mustn't display any desire to become a king. Here they were most fortunate: in the first go-round they had a candidate, a man of experience and fortitude, who had no sons—clearly a sign of divine providence. So they slept well at night, knowing that in creating the presidential office they were not creating a hereditary dynasty. There would be no string of Washingtons to follow.

There had never been a job like the presidency of the United States. All other countries were ruled by kings, queens, emperors, emirs, or other monarchs. Yet there would be no catalogue of presidential qualifications in the U.S. Constitution for the simple reason that “it was impossible to make a complete one,” asserted John Dickinson, who went on to say that the job would require “great Talents, Firmness and Abilities”—whatever they may be.<sup>4</sup>

“The first man at the helm,” said Benjamin Franklin, “will be a good one. Nobody knows what sort may come afterwards.” Everyone in the meeting room of the Constitutional Convention knew who he was talking about; the Convention's chairman,

Gen. George Washington, was sitting at a table in the front, facing everyone. Franklin continued: “The Executive will be always increasing here, as elsewhere, till it ends in a monarchy.”<sup>5</sup> Despite objections that they were creating a government that would some day consist “only of an emperor and a few lordlings, surrounded by thousands of blood-suckers and cringing sycophants,” the delegates went ahead and ratified the new job position.<sup>6</sup>

In *Federalist 69*, Hamilton insisted there was nothing to worry about: “Executive authority, with few exceptions, is to be vested in a single magistrate. This will scarcely, however, be considered as a point upon which any comparison can be grounded; for if, in this particular, there is to be a resemblance to the king of Great Britain, there is not less a resemblance to the Grand Seignior, to the khan of Tartary, to the Man of the Seven Mountains, or to the governor of New York.”<sup>7</sup>

Forget the governor of New York: the job of president eventually became much more akin to the job of grand seignior. During the Civil War Secretary of State William Seward offered this job description: “We elect a king for four years and give him absolute power within certain limits, which after all he can interpret for himself.”<sup>8</sup> After World War II the job expanded even more, to “leader of the free world” (though most citizens of the free world never voted for him).

The job description may change over the years, but traits of great leadership do not. Bookshelves groan under the weight of books on leadership and so-called secrets of effective people. What makes a great leader? Intellect, character, charisma, accomplishment, leadership, courage, wisdom, judgment . . . the list goes on and on. It’s impossible to list all the traits because we can’t know what future challenges the president will face and what particular strengths and skills will be called on. Every decision, every act of leadership takes place in context. The kind of leadership needed in times of crisis or great peril is different from the kind is needed in times of peace and economic prosperity. When choosing a president should we be looking for a rebel or someone who will maintain the present course? Do we go for a “Black



Swan” risk taker, recognizing the possibility of failure, or do look for a more predictable executive? Every choice demands trade-offs.

Leadership is notoriously difficult to define and comes in many shapes and forms, and all great leaders are exceptions to any single rule. But there are certain qualifications we can pretty much agree a president of the United States should have, regardless of his political views. The most obvious one is accomplishment. The candidate should be a repeat high achiever, not a one-shot lucky wonder. Repeated success is a reasonable assurance that he can handle whatever surprise or unforeseen crisis may come his way as president. And his list of achievements (whatever they may be—career, political, financial, overcoming a personal handicap or near-death encounter) should include one that is of the magnitude he is sure to face in the Oval Office. It’s the difficult decisions he had better be good at. The easy ones rarely make it all the way to the president’s desk; they get solved by others.

A candidate with good judgment possesses the imagination to anticipate emerging issues and address them before they escalate into a crisis. He makes difficult decisions at just the right moment: not too soon, not too late. Just as fear and greed are the enemies of sound investing, they have no place in the presidency. A worthy candidate is not fearful of making a decision lest he be proven wrong, nor is he so greedy for the glory of appearing decisive that he acts without thorough consideration. (A third alternative—doing nothing—can sometimes be the best decision.)

Also important are the intangibles. To overcome the gridlock that characterizes Washington today, it is not enough to exhort others to be bipartisan; a president must demonstrate bipartisanship himself. This requires integrity. The best candidate combines personal humility with intense determination. By being incorruptible and honorable, he gains the respect and admiration of politicians on the other side of the aisle. He communicates his political goals with clarity: he is straightforward when need be and avoids being a flip-flopper. And he loves the give-and-take of politics, building personal relationships, and working with others to cut a deal. He has what is called “a fascination

for the process”—an appreciation of the small details one must have in order to do a job well.

In his 1888 book *The American Commonwealth*, the British jurist and later ambassador to the United States James Bryce argued that aside from the heroes of the Revolution, the only president to display stellar qualities was Lincoln. Then Bryce asked a brilliant question: Would we know Lincoln today if he had *not* become president? No, he said. Of the eighteen presidents from James Monroe to Grover Cleveland, there was only one man who would still be remembered if he had never been president: Gen. Ulysses Grant, the war hero and most famous man of the nineteenth century.

“Why are great men not chosen president?” Bryce asked. His answer: “Great men have not often been chosen, first because great men are rare in politics; secondly, because the method of choice does not bring them to the top; thirdly, because they are not, in quiet times, absolutely needed.” He went on to explain what a president does and what we should look for:

A president need not be a man of brilliant intellectual gifts. His main duties are to be prompt and firm in securing the due execution of the laws and maintaining the public peace, careful and upright in the choice of the executive officials of the country. . . . Four-fifths of his work is the same in kind as that which devolves on the chairman of a commercial company or the manager of a railway, the work of choosing good subordinates, seeing that they attend to their business, and taking a sound practical view of such administrative questions as require his decision. Firmness, common cause, and most of all, honesty, an honesty above all suspicion of personal interest, are the qualities which the country chiefly needs in its first magistrate.<sup>9</sup>

More than a century later this is still an accurate statement. The best candidate will bring to the office a record of proven experience and fortitude. He must be strong, as the Founding Fathers noted, lest he become “but the minion of the Senate,” yet not abuse his power so that we end up in “a monarchy.”<sup>10</sup> He will have demonstrated his strength either by overcoming adversity or by occupying a position of high power responsibly. The can-

didate will have proven his executive ability and leadership skills and have had experience in politics running for elective office. He will have the confidence borne of success, tempered by modesty and knowing that “no man could be found so far above all the rest in wisdom.”<sup>11</sup> He will be a person of action, capable of “vigorous execution.”<sup>12</sup> And, not least, he will conduct himself in a manner consistent with the symbolic importance of his office, evoking “dignity and respect.”<sup>13</sup>

Impossible to find such a candidate in the current population? Hardly. There were 3.9 million people in the United States in 1789, and 85 percent of them were ineligible to vote (voting being restricted to white males owning property). Today there are over 320 million people, and the great majority can vote. Out of such a vast pool, is it not reasonable to expect great presidents?

Using history as a guide, let us now examine the qualifications of major candidates for our nation’s highest office.