

Measuring Presidential Courage

An address given to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council
on June 6, 2007 by

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One of the problems with this line of work as a historian, especially writing about presidents, you run a real risk of turning into a replica of the person that you're writing about. One of the people I wrote about, not a president but a vice president, Hubert Humphrey, was known for speaking in increments of three hours or more. He's sort of a negative role model for any after-dinner speaker. He once gave one of his three-hour performances and even he knew he was going too long and he yelled out to the audience, "Anyone here got a watch?" and someone yelled back, "How about a calendar?"

This is sort of a problem if you've just spent five years writing about one president, for instance. You're reading his letters and his diaries, you're observing the way he operated and talked so you can run a real risk of becoming him. I wrote on Lyndon Johnson. My wife was a bit nervous when I began this project at the idea that I would take on all of Lyndon Johnson's characteristics—some of them are ok but not all of them. It's not much of a problem I had with this book which about nine presidents most of whom had qualities that probably everyone would like to emulate. The idea was that I wanted to write a book about two hundred years of American history—George Washington on up to 1989, writing about episodes in history where you had a president who wanted to do the right thing but the cost of doing the right thing might be to look into the abyss, and take the chance of doing something that would make Americans very angry and might cost him his popularity or the next election, or as in the case of Abraham Lincoln, his life. The whole point of the book is to say that if you live through two hundred years of American history, as I've tried to do in this book, I think you'll conclude with me that presidential courage has really been essential and if you take that out of the mix we would not be here, many of us, and this country would not exist.

The way I start the book is with a scene in 1795, and it shows George Washington at Mt. Vernon, sitting at his study. There are biblical torrents of rain outside, lightning, and the beaten weathervane on the roof is spinning around and Washington is reading and writing letters and scratching with his quill pen. He is angry, he is tormented and he is anxious—a very different Washington from the one that I mainly think of in life—and the reason he was so upset was that for the first time in his life a lot of Americans reviled him. They were furious at him; they were making his life miserable and the reason was something that he had done to himself. He concluded in his sixth year as president that there was a big danger that the Brits were going to invade the United States, conquer the United States and kill the United States before it reached the age of 20 or 25. To literally save his country he made a treaty with Britain. He sent John Jay to London. Jay came back with a treaty that Washington endorsed which got the British to leave us alone but the cost was a lot of concessions that Washington knew most Americans would find humiliating and they did.

When John Jay came back he was burned in effigy all over the place. Jay said he could walk the entire length of the United States at night merely by the light of all of his burning effigies. There were cartoons in the newspapers of John Jay and Washington crawling to the British king with

poems saying that the British king something like “in lavish fashion I surpass your majesty with my lavish kissing of your blank. Blank was in the newspaper but it rhymes with surpass.

Washington was not used to this so sitting in that study with the rain coming down outside, he was reading these letters, some of them saying he should be assassinated, others saying he should be impeached, others said we hate you. This is not what Washington was used to. He was used to being elected unanimously to the presidency twice. When he went into a room it used to be that children’s faces would light up and people would say, “The hero comes.” Now, most of that was gone. He left the presidency heartbroken and Martha Washington thought that the ordeal hastened Washington’s premature death. He died at the age of 67 which was very young for a man who was very physically fit.

So, the question is why did Washington do all this? When he was in his sixth year as president he had every excuse to say, “Well, I don’t want all this heartache why not defer this to my successor and let him handle it.” He did for two reasons: One, he felt that only he with his great prestige could get Americans to accept this necessary treaty and literally save the country. And he was right because he knew that our military could not defend us against the British and he said that if we had about 20 years we could build up our defense and then if we had to fight the British we’d win. And he was right on target because you go forward in history 20 years, the War of 1812, and by then we did have the military defense and we were able to win. That was thanks to Washington’s presidential courage.

But the other thing was more profound and that was that everything George Washington did, he knew he was establishing a tradition for how his successors would operate as president. If you read the Constitution there are some basic things that it asks the president to do but one thing it doesn’t say is that if you’re president there may be a moment of crisis in American history when the American people will expect the president to make a sacrifice just like the one that George Washington did -- that’s what presidential courage is and that’s what the book is about.

I’ll just quickly go through the presidents I write about to give you a sense of the flavor.

John Adams, succeeded Washington. His party was desperate to go to war with France because they hated the French; they thought it would be good for their party, they’d become a national security party, and for a while John Adams agreed and sort of got into it. He’d always been jealous of Washington’s military reputation and when he went out to give a speech he would wear a military uniform, he began wearing a gleaming sword at his side and looked sort of dashing. People would say that President Adams shines like a god, he’s even better than Washington, and Adams was enjoying this very much. Then finally it was almost like a guy waking up with a hangover. He said to himself, “What have I done? The French are attacking some of our ships but they’re not an imminent threat to the United States and I’m building up this big army.” So, he went to his party leaders and he said, “It’s not a time for war with France.” And he said something that has some resonance nowadays, “Great is the guilt of an unnecessary war.”

Adam said that a democracy must never go to war unless there’s a definite and immediate and imminent threat. For his troubles his party was furious with him and said they were going to retaliate by doing very little to help him when he run for reelection in 1800 and they caused his defeat by Thomas Jefferson. And that’s another key to presidential courage because what Adams essentially said to himself was, “I wanted more than anything to get a second term so that I had a chance in history to be the equal of General Washington. Now that’s gone, but I can go back to Massachusetts and feel that my sacrifice was for something important and I still have my wife,

Abigail,” with whom he was so close, and his children and his farm and his books and his good friends from the Revolution, and he lived on for 26 more years.

That’s the key when we look for candidates for president. If you want someone who is capable of presidential courage I would say one thing to look for is whether this person is just desperate to be president and hang on almost at all costs, or is he someone who, if there is a moment requiring presidential courage and were to give it all up had something else in his or her life—family, other interests, or better yet convictions, and feel that he gave it up for doing the right thing.

Andrew Jackson, 1828. He was elected after one of the dirtiest campaigns in history, a campaign in which handbills were handed out saying that his wife was an adulteress and a prostitute. He loved her and kept this away from her, but after the election she accidentally saw one, collapsed and very soon thereafter died; she was literally driven to her grave by Jackson’s political enemies. Jackson was not exactly above revenge. He came to office determined to strike back and the form this took was against the Bank of the United States, which was in Philadelphia, led by the notoriously corrupt and arrogant Nicholas Biddle, and which threatened to extinguish all of our liberties. Biddle and his bank had bought up many senators and members of the House, many members of the press and tentacles of power that led who knows where. So for Jackson to take on this bank that was growing in power by the day, he was taking a big risk because with that kind of power who could know what it could do to destroy him. In this struggle Jackson won.

Abraham Lincoln in the summer of 1864. It’s not very well known but he spent about a quarter of his presidency three miles up the hill from the White House. It was basically Lincoln’s Camp David. It was a 14-room cottage and Lincoln took his family up there every summer for about four months and would commute to the White House each day on horse back or by carriage. In those days the president’s family bedrooms in the White House were intermingled on the second floor with the president’s offices, so he would come out of his bedroom in the mornings in his long white night shirt and stumble over people who wanted favors from him or a job for their brother-in-law, or something like that So Lincoln was very happy to get up to this cottage as soon as possible and stay there for a long time each summer.

In August of 1864, he was in that cottage all alone because his wife was gone and so were his sons and there he met what I think was the supreme political ordeal of his life. His political aides came in his room and said, “Mr. Lincoln, this fall you’re going to be running for reelection against General McClellan and you’re going to lose. You’re not even going to carry your home state of Illinois.” And the reason, they said, was that many northern voters were willing to fight the Civil War and support Lincoln to bring the South back into the union but said they didn’t get into the Civil War to free the slaves and now you’ve issued the Emancipation Proclamation and you’ve said that this horrible war with all its trauma and struggle will not end until the slaves are freed. They don’t want that and you’re going to lose.” They said that the only way he was going to win the election was if he renounced the Emancipation Proclamation and say he didn’t mean it about freeing the slaves.

I should mention that one reason I got into this history business was growing up in Illinois when I was about eight my parents took me to the Lincoln sites in Springfield, Illinois and I remember seeing Lincoln’s house and I was shown the chair in which Lincoln read to his children. I remember asking the guide—this is what an eight-year-old is interested in—“When Lincoln’s boys were naughty, did he spank them, what did he do?” The guide was really disgusted. He said, “You know, Lincoln didn’t believe in discipline. He just let his kids run wild through the house.” When I heard that Lincoln was the man for me. I thought that was wonderful, so I started reading everything I could get my hands on about Lincoln and then other presidents and

that has a lot to do with why I originally got into this. But when I was a kid, given how I idealized Lincoln I never could have imagined what actually happened when Lincoln was there in his cottage, getting this advice from his political aides.

When they told him to distance himself from the emancipation he said, “Well, maybe I should do that.” He was a lawyer and he began thinking up legalistic language he might use to show that he wasn’t nearly so serious about this. But pretty soon he did the right thing. He said to himself essentially, “I can’t be Abraham Lincoln and do such a bad thing as say I really didn’t mean it about ending slavery.” Plus, he said to himself, “I think I’m going to go down in history as a liberator of a race and that’s really more important than even reelection, although the election to McClellan would be a disaster.” As it happened, thanks to the timely help of General Sherman arriving in Atlanta, Lincoln did win the election but in the end he paid for this courage with his life. You remember that the man who murdered Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth, hated him for freeing the slaves. That was his price.

Theodore Roosevelt (TR), 1901. He became president after William McKinley was murdered. Suddenly this radical young reformer was the president of a party that was essentially owned by Wall Street and J.P. Morgan. TR was desperate to get renominated and elected in 1904 and had he been crass and opportunistically minded he would have said, “You didn’t realize it but I’ve always been sort of a William McKinley in disguise. I’ve really been a conservative.” But instead, what did he do? The first major thing that TR did as president was to sue J. P. Morgan’s Trust, Northern Securities, the biggest trust in the world, and he began going after Wall Street. He knew it would antagonize his party but he thought he was doing the right thing. On election night, 1904, it was almost like John Adams—he voted on Long Island, his house, took the train down to Washington for election night. He came to the White House and there standing at the front door was his wife, Edith, with whom he had this wonderful marriage, and he said, “Edith, I’ve had a vision on the train. I’m desperate to be reelected but this is my vision. If I lose it tonight I still have you and the children. We’re content with one another. I think of these children, each of them I feel is my special friend and I have this wonderful interest in my ranch in the Dakotas” and he had these amazing friends, Buffalo Bill, Rudyard Kipling, and he would box in the East Room. He had other things in his life so that had he lost he could have gone back. He would have been disappointed, but it was not so terrible that he couldn’t conceive of doing the right thing.

Franklin Roosevelt in 1940 was running for a third term. He was very eager, always competitive with his cousin, Theodore. He wanted to get the third term which Theodore never had—a very competitive man. At the same time his aides were telling him in 1940 “You want to get reelected, Mr. President, this country is 70 percent isolationist so you’d better stop talking about defense and standing up to that Adolph Hitler.” And Roosevelt with great principle said, “There’s a worse alternative and that is if I don’t build up our defense I’ll be the last president of the United States because we will lose the next war.” So, with great guts he talked about defense, he didn’t lose the time of the election campaign in trying to build up our military. Maybe the snap shot that showed what guts he had was he felt that a draft was necessary. A more timid politician would have waited until after the election. Roosevelt felt that was something the voters should know in this very close race between him and Wendell Willkie so he had the first draft lottery ceremony scheduled exactly a week before the election. Democratic leaders thought he was out of his mind and they said, “If you won’t at least postpone the ceremony, make sure it’s not on national radio” which was what Roosevelt insisted on, “at least make sure you’re not there so that people don’t identify you with this unpopular draft.” With great guts Roosevelt not only attended, but was standing right next to the Secretary of War when he drew the first number on national radio.

There were mothers in the room who screamed because they knew it would be their sons who'd be the first to go to war and die. That's the kind of courage that Roosevelt had.

Harry Truman, 1948 and the creation of Israel. When he was contemplating what to do about the creation of Israel, his Secretary of State George Marshall said essentially, "If you do this I think it's the wrong thing. I may well resign and blast you." Truman was terrified. He was running for reelection and said, "I can't afford to lose General Marshall."

Another influence was his wife, Bess, who was a lovely woman in certain ways but I discovered she was also a bigot. It turned out that she did not let Jewish guests in the Truman home in Independence, Missouri. I came across this story. Remember the talk show host, David Suskind? He was interviewing Truman in his retirement and he would pick Truman up every day. He finally said, "Mr. President, every morning I come to see you at your house to take you off to the library to do these interviews. Why don't you ever invite me in?" Truman said, "Well, David, you're Jewish and this is Bessie's house and there's never been a Jewish guest inside." That's what he was getting at home.

On the other side, Truman had this old business partner, Eddie Jacobson; they had a haberdashery that was famous. Jacobson, was an old army buddy with Truman had kept in touch, a very close friend, and at a crucial moment went to the White House, tears streaming down his face and said, "Harry, my people are suffering. There are holocaust survivors who are still in camps in Germany of all places. My people might face another Hitler. They need a home after 2,000 years."

That made an impression but also—and you might expect me to say this—Truman was a history reader and this made a difference. Again, I don't want to pump for my own profession, but it really had a big influence on him. When he was growing up in Missouri Truman was terribly nearsighted, he had these coke-bottle glasses, his family was poor, and they told him he couldn't do football or baseball because if he broke his glasses they could not afford to replace them. Truman spent a lot of time reading and it has been said, and I think this is true, he read just about every book in the Independence Library. I'll qualify that by saying that the Independence Library did not have many books at the time, but he probably read almost all of them. The one he remembered most of all was a book with a terribly politically incorrect title, *Great Men and Famous Women*, the idea that women could not be great but only famous. The subtitle was from Nebuchadnezzar to Sarah Bernhardt. But the story that Truman remembered the most was a story that he read probably when he was ten or twelve years old and then remained all these years later of Cyrus the Great, the ancient Persian king who brought the Jews back to Zion two thousand years before. Remember I was talking about Lincoln seeing and freeing the slaves as his place in history, Truman, because he had that framework, realized that if he helped to see the state of Israel born that might be his place in history. After he left the presidency in 1953 he was speaking to a group in New York and he was introduced by his old friend Eddie Jacobson who said to the audience, "Here is President Truman who helped to create the State of Israel" and Truman almost pushed him aside and said, "What do you mean *helped to create*? I am Cyrus," he said. It moved him deeply in his later years.

John Kennedy and the Civil Rights. There is a picture in the book of Jackie Robinson and Richard Nixon. In 1960 Jackie Robinson was campaigning for his preferred presidential candidate and it wasn't John Kennedy—it was Richard Nixon, and there was a reason for that. In the late 1950s John Kennedy for a long time thought that if he was going to be nominated for President in 1960 the way it was going to happen was for him to court the white segregationist South so he went from one horrible segregationist governor in the south to the next, had some of

them for breakfast in his house in Georgetown trying to do it secretly so that people wouldn't find out about it. That's what he thought his route to the White House would be. Black leaders found out about this, including Robinson and Martin Luther King refused to even answer a letter from Kennedy asking for a meeting. Jackie Robinson ran into Kennedy at a dinner in New York and Kennedy said, "Jackie, how about a picture together?" Jackie turned his back and walked away. He knew the game John Kennedy was playing at that point.

Then in 1960, John Kennedy is elected President with about 90 percent of the Black vote after having promised to end discrimination in America as he said "with the stroke of a pen" if he were elected president. Well, by the spring of 1961, Blacks and others were sending Kennedy pens in the mail because not much was happening and the reason for that was that Kennedy knew that he had been elected in 1960 with the help of about a half a dozen southern states. In fact, the state that went for Kennedy by the biggest margin of all 50 states in 1960 was Georgia by 66 percent and those were not Black voters because there were not many Black voters even able to vote at that point and they were not civil rights voters. Kennedy knew there were people who loathed civil rights and expected him to stop the marches for civil rights. And so, as someone who wanted to get reelected in 1964 with at least those southern states, for about two and a half years he did very little for civil rights. This was a guy who'd written a wonderful book called *Profiles in Courage* but was not practicing what he preached and I must say to his credit it embarrassed him because people said, "Where's that profile that you wrote so nicely about?"

Then he changed because in the spring of 1963, Martin Luther King had been organizing demonstrations in the south, there were riots in Birmingham, so Bobby Kennedy finally had to go to his brother and said, "Jack, unless you act this summer there will be cities in the north and the south that may go up in flames and people may well ask 'why isn't the President doing something to get this civil rights revolution out of the streets and into the courts?'" As a result, Kennedy reluctantly sent to Congress the biggest civil rights bill in a century to integrate hotels and restaurants. In doing so he thought that there was a very good chance, and I think he was right, that he would lose the election of 1964 and he said, "It hurts because I think this may be my political swan's song," he told Bobby but he said, "if we have to go down at least do it for something as important as the civil rights." Just what you'd want to hear from a president even though it was so late in Kennedy's case.

The final story I tell is the story of Ronald Reagan. I have a lot of Democratic friends who, when they heard that Ronald Reagan was going to be in this book were horrified, until I told them why. The reason he's in the book is that I tell the story of what Ronald Reagan did to end the Cold War. I tell the story, many of you will remember this, that in the late 1980s Ronald Reagan was the one who said to many of his most hard-line Cold War supporters, "I think Mikhail Gorbachev is for real. This is not just a new Brezhnev with a smile on his face. I think I can work with him to end the Cold War."

The interesting thing about history is that you can tell stories that were not visible at the time and I found that Reagan's big move to try to end the Cold War had a lot to do with three women. One was his mother who died in 1962. She was a very religious woman, a lay preacher and everyone describes her as "saintly." One of the things she told Ronnie was after the development of the atomic and nuclear weapons was that she thought these things were immoral. She said, "Ronnie, if there's anything you can do to abolish these terrible immoral things you should do that." It was something he always remembered and in 1981 when he was shot he said to his family, "I think God spared me for a purpose" and the purpose was to try to work to abolish nuclear weapons.

In 1984 came the second woman to influence him and that was Nancy Reagan, who was worried that the Cold War was getting so overheated and there was such tension between the two powers that there actually might be a hot war and she also was worried that this would jeopardize his reelection and she basically said, “Ronnie, it’s getting out of control. There is intelligence information that the Russians think that you’re going to actually do a first strike nuclear attack against Moscow. It’s time to simmer down.”

One thing Nancy did was to bring into Reagan’s life the third woman I was talking about, who is a woman named Suzanne Massie who is now probably in her late 70s. She wrote a book that some of you may have read called *Land of the Firebird* about Russian culture under the czars. Nancy Reagan brought her to see her husband in the Oval Office and her hope was that Suzanne would begin to talk to Reagan about the Russian soul, about the Russians as human beings not just as geo-political targets. She also began to talk to him about if there was a Russian leader who really wanted to end the Cold War how do you establish trust, how do you create relationships and how do you connect with him? Reagan immediately connected with her; it was just as he was looking for and the interesting thing was that after the first meeting he said Suzanne reminded him of his mother. It brought all that back. And so finally, when Mikhail Gorbachev came along, Suzanne saw him before every summit—she probably saw him four dozen times before that presidency was over and tried to guide and help the relationship and established a bond of trust that really allowed Reagan and Gorbachev to work together and end the Cold War.

The last scene in the story of Reagan I have in the book is the last meeting of these two leaders which was at Governor’s Island just off Manhattan at the end of 1988 just before Reagan left office and it’s almost iconic. The two men met for the last time and they stepped out onto a big platform for a photo opportunity and there Reagan was photographed showing Gorbachev the skyline of New York and Reagan pointing at the World Trade Center, almost as if he’s pointing to the next great problem of the future, 13 years before 9/11.

The scene I actually close the book with is to say that as we choose candidates these days in a system that I find completely atrocious, it forces all of us to evaluate these people’s character. One thing I would really ask is that we look at them in terms of the stories in this book and say, “Is this someone who is like these courageous presidents?” because in the next five years we may very well need that. If we happen to elect a president who doesn’t understand the need for presidential courage you might take that person out to Mt. Vernon, which as you know is very well restored, and you can see that study where Washington sat that night in 1795 with the rain coming down while he was so tormented by the anger at him, or even better yet, take him up the stairs to see Washington’s bedroom and there is that four-poster in which Washington died in 1799. There Washington looked into the kindly worried face of his doctor and spoke three words and they were almost his last words on earth, and I sort of think about them as Washington’s message, both to later presidents and also later American generations all the way through two centuries up to us and the three words he spoke were “don’t be afraid.”

Thank you all very much.

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