

Will the Bush Administration Unravel?

by
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A knowledge of history can draw lessons, forecast behavior in the White House and, perhaps, avoid mistakes of the past. In the 1960s, for example, the political scientist James D. Barber described a type of driven, control-oriented, active-negative President who became rigid and self-destructive when publicly challenged. One of Barber's historical examples was President Woodrow Wilson and his failed battle for the League of Nations: shortly after the book appeared Richard Nixon, with a similar character, waged and lost a self-destructive war against his enemies in Watergate.

A contrasting character type, the active positive Presidents with fewer personal demons, enjoyed political life. When they fought political battles, they seemed to achieve better outcomes. President Clinton, for example, was an active-positive: as the historical evidence predicted, he was impeached and survived - a more successful outcome than achieved by Richard Nixon, despite Richard Nixon's well-deserved reputation for hardball political acumen.

For the current Administration there is another forecast: George W. Bush belongs to a different category of Presidents. He likes people and spends a great deal of time being social. He masters briefs, but he does not do much homework. Beyond a few issues that he cares about, he has no drive to dominate the domestic political process, or the Executive branch, or the world. He thinks that people should work together. He wants people to like him. Among Presidents he is positive, but toward the passive end of the scale.

These character traits match President Warren G. Harding. The comparison raises a warning about unexpected trouble.

If history does repeat itself, the country is at serious risk for emerging scandals involving mal-administration, bribery, and conflicts of interest of public officials. And of losing

control beyond the water's edge, as the camaraderie of summits and the President's sincere beliefs that people should be decent, respect one another, compromise, and work together, remain unconnected to the hard daily work of shaping the world's political forces.

Today, we see Warren Harding through the lense of scandals. But in the early 1920s he was well-regarded. He won the Presidency with a landslide of 60.3%. He was candid and self-deprecating about his limitations. Like George W. Bush, he reassuringly appointed distinguished people who were more competent than himself to several key Cabinet positions - Andrew Mellon at Treasury, Charles Evans Hughes at State, Herbert Hoover as Secretary of Commerce.

Harding, like George W. Bush, was essentially social. He had a few good ideas, but not many. He wanted people to like him; he had an optimism that appealed to his times; his deepest political philosophy was that people should get along. Once he enunciated these views, he thought that he had a foreign policy - and though he had been (as Senator) a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, few of the specifics of the world beyond the water's edge seemed worth remembering, past this basic point. At home, against the background of World War I, people felt assured by his idea of return to normalcy and his Republican slogans like less government in business and more business in government.

Harding was betrayed by friends (they're the ones who keep me walking the floors at night, he said, as the cheering began to stop.) Too many of his appointees accepted public office to pursue their own agendas, rather than the President's (who had none.) The new era of peace, prosperity, and economic boosterism of the Roaring 20s contributed to a naive trust - and not simply by the President, but among wheeler-dealer lobbyists who had raised money to put Harding in the White House and who apparently did not believe that they would get into trouble by doing and accepting favors. It was only in the 3rd year of the Administration, before Harding's death in August 1923, that the possibility of serious problems (e.g., the Teapot Dome oil leases, involving Interior Secretary Bernard Fall; and

many further problems involving Attorney General Harry Daugherty) became known to the public, and several years later before their full extent came to light.

Under Harding's inattention and misplaced trust the administration of the federal government suffered from neglect. But the President also was a role model. His percentage of the popular vote was the highest in American history until the Presidential election of 1920; in 1923 he was eulogized as a perfect American. He established a tone for the country in the Harding Era of the early 1920s. If we find, in the first years of the 21st century, that effective and visionary leadership is missing in many American institutions, or that there is an alarming rise in the number of people in hospitals, or auto repair shops, who think that politeness and being a good person is a substitute for high standards and doing their job, we may be seeing, once again, wider effects of Presidential character.

In a comparison of Warren Harding with George W. Bush, there are differences in President Bush's favor. Harding was later revealed as a womanizer who drank heavily with his cronies, even as President during Prohibition. President Bush has overcome his earlier drinking, developed executive abilities, has a stronger moral character, and has used a capable Vice President and White House staff to fill-in for his weaknesses and manage early, important initiatives.

The dangerous choices will be in the months ahead, and there will be sharp questions for the Senate, which must confirm the nominees: Who will come to Washington to fill the many remaining posts in the Administration, and why will they come?

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