Does Experience Matter in a President?

Hillary Clinton and John McCain are arguing that Barack Obama is too green for the job. But history shows that among Presidents, experience doesn’t guarantee success.

By DAVID VON DREHLE

A STORY IS OFTEN TOLD AT TIMES LIKE THIS—TIMES when American voters are choosing among candidates richly seasoned with political experience and those who are less experienced but perhaps more exciting alternatives. Once upon a time, the torch was passed to a new generation of Americans, and a charismatic young President, gifted as a speechmaker but little tested as an executive, was finding his way through his first 100 days. On Day 85, he stumbled, and the result for John F. Kennedy was the disastrous Bay of Pigs. For scholars of the presidency, Kennedy’s failure to scuttle or fix the ill-conceived invasion of Cuba is a classic case of the insufficiency of charisma alone.

Barack Obama basks in comparisons to J.F.K., but this is one he’d rather avoid. Obama’s relatively light political résumé—eight years as an Illinois legislator and three years in the U.S. Senate—continues to be the focus of his rivals’ attacks. Hillary Clinton advertises her seven years in the Senate and two terms as First Lady, saying “I am ready to lead on Day One.” And the message has gotten through: by clear margins, voters rate her as the more experienced of the two candidates. The fact that this hasn’t stopped Obama’s momentum doesn’t mean he’s heard the last of it—not with John McCain, who has spent 26 years on Capitol Hill and is the likely Republican nominee. “I’m not the youngest candidate. But I am the most experienced,” says McCain. “I know how the world works.”

Obama’s credentials would be an issue in any election year. He would be sworn in at age 47, making him one of the youngest Presidents in history, and would arrive in the Oval Office with less executive experience than most of his predecessors. Depending on what your leanings are, you could compare his work history—lawyer, state legislator, Washington short-timer, orator—to Abraham Lincoln’s, or to a thousand forgotten figures in politicalgraveyard.com. The question of experience takes on added bite this year, though, because the next...
President will inherit a troubled and menacing satchel of problems. From the Iraq tightrope to the stumbling economy, from the China challenge to the health-care mess, from loose nukes to oil dependence to (some things never change) Cuba policy—the next President will be tossed a couple dozen flaming torches at the end of the inaugural parade, and it would be helpful to know that this person has juggled before.

But if one moral of the Bay of Pigs is “Beware of charisma” or “Timeworn trumps inexperience,” what do we make of the mistakes and miscalculations of deeply experienced leaders? Franklin D. Roosevelt’s failed court-packing scheme, for example, or Woodrow Wilson’s postwar foreign policy? For that matter, Kennedy would not have faced such a harsh early tutorial if the venerable warrior and statesman Dwight D. Eisenhower had not allowed the Cuba-invasion plan to be put in motion during the last of his eight years as President.

Wouldn’t it be nice if time on the job and tickets punched translated neatly into superior performance? Then finding great Presidents would be a simple matter of weighing résumés. But it has never worked that way, which is why Lincoln’s statue occupies a marble temple on the Mall in Washington, while his far more experienced rival William Seward has a little seat on a pedestal in New York City. “Experience never exists in isolation; it is always a factor that coexists with temperament, training, background, spiritual outlook and a host of other factors,” says presidential historian Richard Norton Smith. “Character is your magic word, it seems to me—not just what they’ve done but how they’ve done it and what they’ve learned from doing it.”

Was it Franklin Roosevelt’s experience as governor of New York that gave him the power to inspire in some of the nation’s darkest hours? Or was that gift a distillate of his dauntless battle with polio? All of life offers lessons in how to lead, inspire and endure. Richard Nixon served as a Congressman, Senator and Vice President; he watched from the front row as Eisenhower assembled one of the best-organized administrations in history. When Nixon’s turn came, though, his core character—insecure, insincere, conspiratorial—led him to create a White House doomed by its own dysfunction. Experience, in other words, gets its value from the person who has it.

When Americans pass over the best-credentialed candidates because their heart or their gut leads them elsewhere, they are only reflecting a visceral understanding that the presidency involves tests unlike all others. They are, perhaps, seeking the ineffable quality the writer Katherine Anne Porter had in mind when she defined experience as “the truth that finally overtakes you.” An ideal President is both ruthless and compassionate, visionary and pragmatic, cunning and honest, patient and bold, combining the eloquence of a psalmist with the timing of a jungle cat. Not exactly the sort of data you can find on a résumé.

**Questions**

1. What factors argue in favor of electing a President with extensive experience?
2. What are some counter-arguments against the belief that a strong President must be experienced?