

## **How to judge a president to be**

Owen Harries

Australian Financial Review

1 September 2008

P. 55

Now that the conventions are over, the endgame in the US presidential election campaign begins. In a little more than two months John McCain or Barack Obama will be elected the 44th president of the United States. What kind of president will either of them make?

Despite endless analysis on the subject we have little idea of the answer. The record shows that neither previous career performance nor the judgement of experts are reliable guidance on such matters. Here are three examples.

- In 1932, Walter Lippmann, the most distinguished commentator of the day on American politics, wrote of the Democratic candidate in that year's election: "Franklin D. Roosevelt is a highly impressionable person, without a firm grasp of public affairs and without very strong convictions. He is a pleasant man who, without any important qualification for the office, would very much like to be president." FDR was ranked with Washington and Lincoln as one of the three indisputably great presidents.

- Roosevelt's immediate predecessor, Herbert Hoover, was the possessor of the most glittering resume of any candidate in modern times. A Quaker of humble origins, he became a successful mining engineer and businessman. He served in a senior position in the federal government in World War 1. He accompanied the president, as personal adviser, to the peace conference in Paris. He had an outstandingly successful spell in charge of reorganising Europe's war-shattered economy. After that he was secretary of commerce for eight years. At the same time he authored *American Individualism*, which was good enough to be described by *The New York Times* as "among the few great formulations of American political theory". It is hardly surprising the distinguished judge Louis Brandeis predicted he would "do wonderful things in the presidency". Unfortunately this did not prove to be the case: he was a resounding flop and was ousted after one term.

- Before the event, Harry Truman ranked as one of the least convincing presidential prospects in modern times. He lacked any tertiary education and had failed as a farmer and a storekeeper. He owed his position as senator to the corrupt Pendergast machine which dominated the politics of Kansas City. And he was chosen as running mate by Roosevelt in order to avoid having to make an invidious choice between two stronger candidates. No one rated his prospects as president very high. He had no foreign policy experience whatsoever. Yet Truman was one of the near-great presidents, with an outstanding foreign policy record that included the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the Berlin Airlift.

Part of the difficulty of predicting a new president's performance is that while his office is certainly the single most powerful component of the American political system, it is not the only one. In more or less normal times an "iron triangle", consisting of an entrenched Congress, a federal bureaucracy and a powerful system of lobbies, sets severe limits on what a president can do, however soaring his rhetoric and however genuine his ability.

A serious crisis such as 9/11 may, temporarily and substantially, free a president from this constraint by creating a mood of national unity and a demand for immediate and decisive action. But by its very nature such a crisis is likely to require improvisation rather than a premeditated plan.

In either case - business as usual or crisis - the fate of a president, like that of any political leader, will depend at least as much on the circumstances they face as on their will and ability. As the British prime minister Harold Macmillan responded when asked what was most likely to upset the best laid plans of a government: "events, dear boy, events".

But "events" can work both ways, can play into a leader's strength as well as expose their weakness.

Given that the respective strengths of Obama and McCain are so different, one's preference should turn on which set of qualities one believes will be most relevant to the events that one anticipates will determine the contours of the next four years.

Owen Harries is a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute and a senior fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies.