**What Makes a Great President?**

By [Sean Stewart Price](http://www.scholastic.com/browse/contributor.jsp?id=1006)

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You have probably heard the old saying that "anybody can grow up to be President." But, not everybody is cut out to be President. It takes a special kind of person, someone tough, smart, and driven, just to run for the job. It takes still more talent and character to hold up under the pressures of life in the White House.

**Great Expectations**

Americans expect a lot from their Presidents. Understandably, they want the President to take quick action on problems facing the nation, such as crime and drug abuse. However, the U.S. Constitution limits the President's power to act. Only Congress can pass legislation, and Congress sometimes moves slowly. The President can only approve or veto (reject) legislation that Congress passes. Even then, Congress can override a veto and make it the law. The Supreme Court can also limit the President's power by ruling that a law or action violates the U.S. Constitution. "The President has less power than the average voter thinks he does," says presidential expert Paul Boller. "He can't simply by himself make major domestic policies."

In dealing with foreign countries, the President has more freedom. That is because he must react quickly to threats and opportunities from other countries. Even so, Congress and the courts can limit the President's actions. Also, the President must get Congress to approve any big decision, such as declaring war or approving a treaty.

**The "Bully Pulpit"**

Despite these limitations, Presidents have incredible power. Much of that power is informal, meaning it is not spelled out anywhere in the U.S. Constitution or laws. For instance, President Theodore Roosevelt (in office 1901-1909) said that his office gave him a "bully pulpit" a powerful platform that lets him draw attention to key issues.

Theodore Roosevelt was an expert at using the bully pulpit to drum up support for his policies. So was his cousin, President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945). Franklin Roosevelt led the U.S. through two of its greatest crises: the Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II. His radio addresses, called "fireside chats," drew huge audiences. Before one speech, Roosevelt asked people to buy maps so that they could follow his explanation of World War II events. His request produced a nationwide run on maps, and about 80 percent of Americans listened to his speech.

**Facing Crises**

Franklin Roosevelt is considered one of the best Presidents, in part because he was so good at communicating with the public. What other skills do you think a President needs? Consider these three crises faced by past Presidents:

* **The Louisiana Purchase:** In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809) had an opportunity that came in wrapped in a big problem. France had offered to sell the U.S. a huge chunk of land west of the Mississippi River for just $15 million. That was a bargain. The problem was that the U.S. Constitution gave Jefferson no authority to make the purchase. But Jefferson went ahead and bought the land, nearly doubling the size of the U.S. He later admitted that he had "stretched the Constitution until it cracked." Congress later approved the purchase.
* **Risk of Civil War:** Abraham Lincoln was elected President in November 1860, but he did not take office until the following March. During that time, seven Southern states voted to secede (leave) the Union because they feared that Lincoln would abolish slavery. The new President had to choose: Should he oppose secession and risk civil war, or should he let the Southern states secede and see the U.S. break apart? Lincoln chose to oppose secession. The U.S. Civil War began one month after he became President.
* **The Berlin Airlift:** After World War II ended in 1945, the German capital city of Berlin was divided. West Berlin was occupied by troops from the U.S. and its allies; East Berlin was occupied by troops from the Soviet Union. The whole city was located in Soviet controlled East Germany. In June 1948, the Soviets cut off all land routes to West Berlin, trying to force the Western powers out of the city. U.S. President Harry S. Truman (1945–1953) could either back down and lose the respect of his allies, or stand firm and risk starting a war with the Soviets. Instead, he chose to go around the blockade by sending supplies by air. Within a year, the Soviets ended the blockade.

**Who Is Best Qualified?**

How can voters be sure that a candidate will hold up during those kinds of pressure situations? The short answer is that they can't. Even so, a candidate's character often gives clues as to how the person will react under stress. People disagree about what character traits are most important in a President. But there are some commonly accepted things that people look for, such as integrity, strength, and caring.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, who grew up near New York's Hudson River, said that his character was rooted in his childhood. "All that is in me goes back to the Hudson," he once said. Youthful experiences are also credited with shaping Bill Clinton and Bob Dole. Experts say that the misfortune that both faced at a young age helped make them very determined men.

For instance, 14-year-old Bill Clinton was a star student in Hot Springs, Arkansas. He seemed to excel at everything he did. Yet his sunny attitude and good grades masked terrible problems at home. His stepfather was an alcoholic who abused Clinton's mother. Clinton testified at their divorce trial that he had tried to stop his stepfather's violence. In response, he said, the older man "threatened to mash my face in."

On the other hand, Bob Dole was a shy, athletic boy who grew up during the Great Depression in a poor neighborhood of Russell, Kansas. At 18, he joined the U.S. Army to fight in World War II. When he was 21, Dole was wounded twice. His wounds almost killed him and they left his right arm useless. "I do try harder," Dole once said. "If I didn't, I'd be sitting in a rest home, in a rocker, drawing disability [pay]."

**Washington's Struggle**

Experts say that adult experiences can be just as important in shaping a future President. "It's their adult experiences that help them form their [political] opinions," says presidential expert Joan Hoff. For instance, during the American Revolution, General George Washington struggled to keep the Continental Army going. He received little help from the 13 states, and the Continental Congress had no power to force the states to pitch in. As a result of that experience, Washington pushed hard while he was President (1789–1797) to create a central U.S. government.

Paul Boller says that it sometimes is difficult to compare modern candidates with the candidates of the past. In the first place, technological advances such as television allow the press to follow every move that a modern candidate makes. Second, Boller says, people's attitudes about both Presidents and candidates often become more romantic with the passage of time. "George Washington is rightly considered a model character," Boller says. "[But when he was President], he had enemies who didn't think he had any [good qualities] at all."

**Passing the Test**

How important is character in deciding which candidate to vote for? Some experts say that voters today worry more about the issues: what the candidates plan to do about crime, health care, education, and other problems. From now until next election day, the major candidates for President will be talking about their plans for dealing with the major problems facing the country, and will certainly have different ideas for dealing with issues ranging from violent crime to the growing use of tobacco by young people.