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The Presidency: Myth and Reality Combine

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The president of the United States stands at the podium in the American Capitol, facing us all Congress, the Cabinet, a television audience of millions. He struggles for the right words to restore the public's faith in his office.

A nation awaits. Will he resign? Will he implicate others? Will he act as the leader of the planet's most powerful country should?

"There are," he begins, "certain things you should expect from your president."

Since the moment in 1789 when a Revolutionary War hero named George Washington recited a 35-word oath, Americans have expected certain things from their presidents. For good reason: In a society that has mythologized itself from its earliest days, the president is the high priest of the national identity.

For 219 years, the institution has become burdened with legend, and the expectations exceed the grasp of any mortal. Americans' notions of the presidency come from cultural cues we've been conditioned to notice from the traits of past presidents, from novels and TV and movies and spin artists who predate the telegraph and the photograph.

From ourselves.

That president standing before Congress and telling the nation about expectations is neither Richard Nixon in 1974 nor Bill Clinton in 1999. In fact, his words were dreamed up by screenwriter, not speechwriter. He is Dave Kovic, the regular-guy doppelganger who accidentally sits in for patrician President Bill Mitchell in the 1993 movie "Dave."

Kovic, played by Kevin Kline, continues: "I ought to care more about you than I do about me. I ought to care more about what's right than I do about what's popular. I ought to be willing to give up this whole thing for something I believe in. Because if I'm not, then maybe I don't belong here in the first place."

In 2008, once again, Americans must decide who belongs in the White House. It is one of the most pivotal elections of our age. But while ours is an era of unparalleled information, it is also one of deep confusion, and we see our presidents through a foggy prism of expectation and paradox.

We demand a leader who represents our loftiest ideals but who is, or appears to be, our peer. We expect competence and smarts, but not intellectualism. We want a hardened defender of our interests who can be gentle when it comes time for us to grieve or endure. We want the impossible: lower taxes and higher benefits, tighter security without fewer liberties, success with little sacrifice. We seek cowboy and pioneer, handyman and orator, statue and loving parent all wrapped up in the perfectly tailored suit of a CEO.

Sometimes we pick our leaders not for who they are but for who we are. Thinking about a presidential election usually means focusing upon candidates and campaigns, strategies and polls and ads. But American culture itself offers an equally compelling and just as illuminating window into how the people shape the next presidency.

So before the ballot, some questions:

How did this office in this particular country become such a repository of everything we want to be? More important, how does this potent mix of myths and realities, of things existing and wished, help us elevate the next leader of the American secular faith?

If anything embodies America's soul, it is the presidency. Pull back the curtain and find pure old-time religion: It's iconic. It smacks of larger things. It's fierce and noble, unifying and divisive. Even in its basest moments, it summons larger ideals about the kind of human beings we want to be.

In it, we are offered a living symbol of sacrifice to greater causes, of empathy, honesty and moral certitude a figure who can protect, inspire and unite, who can make us feel better about ourselves and our persistent dream of a shining city upon a hill. Who, we believe, can save us.

You think the presidency is about politics? Sorry. It's the values. No wonder we expect so much. No wonder we create goals that our leaders can never meet. No wonder that, in the end, we're usually disappointed. "People," says historian Richard Norton Smith, "think that presidents were born on Mount Rushmore."

Dave's fictional oratory rings true truer, really, than reality. While its details might be concocted, the mythology is an authentic reflection of what we seek and expect.

Because in America, land of big stories, the power of myths is real.

"Honest Abe is the first thing that comes to mind he was known for his honesty." So says Rebecca Schmidt, who lives in the town where Abraham Lincoln practiced law, raised his family and ran for president. Her comment suggests something intriguing: Even in Springfield, where Lincoln facts are everywhere, Lincoln myths are potent.

Schmidt and friend Randi Clausen have just emerged from the house where Lincoln lived from 1844 until he left for the White House in 1861. In Springfield, capital of the state that bills itself as the Land of Lincoln, these tours and places and icons make up the economic and cultural fabric from the tomb north of town to the recently shuttered El Presidente Burritos a few doors down from his law office.

Here, expectations rival or even overshadow reality. The transaction between fact and parable, between presidents and legend, blurs. "Lincoln became a legend," artist Jay William Thomas says in a film at the city's Disney-influenced Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum. "And that's the problem. We haven't seen him clearly since."

For every dispassionate debunking like "A lot of people don't realize he didn't go out of the log cabin and straight into the White House" (Susan Haake, curator of Lincoln's house), there's a counterbalance of romantic grandiosity like "Fortunately for us, his dreams were not as small as that log cabin was" (historical interpreter Jason Collins, who gives tours of the place).

Both are necessary in Springfield. And both are necessary in the myth of the presidency.

Making myths from raw material has always been part of the national character. In America, quickly and sometimes consciously, reality is retrofitted to match the values we hold dear and the people we wish to be. We took economic and capitalistic motives and shaped them into ideals that we've packaged, distributed and even sold. It took more than 1,000 years to spread Christ's gospel far and wide; the American presidency did it in 200.

Consider Lincoln. Drew Gilpin Faust, writing about the Civil War, calls the parallels between Lincoln and Christ "powerful and unavoidable." And author David Gelernter says "Lincoln transformed "Americanism into a full-fledged, mature religion not by causing America to embody its noble ideals but by teaching the nation that it ought to embody them."

On his own and through the words of biographers like Carl Sandburg, Lincoln taught us to expect certain things from a president. Among them: self-made gumption, grassroots folksiness, eloquence that is profound but not grandiose, an invocation of godly ideals, steely commitment in the face of unthinkable odds and even martyrdom. Would JFK's taut, stirring inaugural be remembered as it is had there been no Gettysburg address?

The president we envision in our mind's eye today that figure of limitless ability stitched together from sundry legends and truths comes from many such myths.

From Thomas Jefferson, we get the romance of pastoral America; from James Monroe, a sense of national supremacy. Andrew Jackson embodies hardscrabble populism, and James K. Polk manifest destiny.

Theodore Roosevelt made the presidency a bully pulpit. The Depression stopped with Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the buck stopped with Harry Truman. Just as Lincoln's courting and curbing of newspapers made him the first new-media president, Ronald Reagan mastered the mix of frontier nostalgia and Ward Cleaver reassurance that made him a sound-bite natural. And Bill Clinton well, now we demand a president who cannot only fix our pain but feel it, too.

That doesn't begin to describe the fictions and dramatizations sewn into the body of the Frankenstein president. Washington didn't chop down the tree and tell the truth; a man named Mason Locke Weems made that up. Lincoln did split rails, but he also had a handler in the 1850s who realized the branding oomph of a lanky, long-legged guy with a hatchet. William Manchester's JFK exuded youthful "vigah," but the real Kennedy at times could barely walk from back pain.

"We want somebody that is as we see ourselves: We're likable, people want to have us around, you're an intellect, you make good decisions," says John W. Matviko, editor of "The American President in Popular Culture."

Who could possibly meet all these expectations? Only one president, and no surprise he's not real. For seven seasons at the dawn of the 21st century, Martin Sheen's Josiah Bartlet in "The West Wing" emerged as the modern one-size-fits-all president, the guy who managed to be compassionate and tough, liberal and hawkish, fatherly and progressive, educated and plain. Except for one serious ethical misstep (lying about his multiple sclerosis), he is, in a word, perfect the supreme vessel of all American aspirations.

And that is what voters want in 2008. No matter that they'll never find it in the real world; even in primary season, they've made clear that they expect perfection with all the appealing ingredients of past chief executives mortal and mythical.

Listen to Randi Clausen, still reflecting on Lincoln and history after emerging from the tour of Honest Abe's home. Today's presidents, to hear her tell it, could use an infusion of those timeless traits.

"I would like to see some of the characteristics that other people had Jefferson, Washington, Adams. But I don't see that much," she says. If those early leaders could see the modern American presidency in action, she says, "they'd be turning over in their graves."

There's another of Springfield's familiar faces, a lawyer, who is pretty partial to Lincoln. He says this:

"Part of what was so powerful for me (was) to see somebody who was our greatest president but who genuinely was rooted in the humblest of circumstances," he says. "It reaffirms a basic truth about America, which is that people can make something of themselves regardless of circumstances. ... That's part of the mythology, but there's a strong element of truth to it, and it's part of what makes this country such a special place."

That's Barack Obama, who you may have heard is running for president.

The Illinois senator deploys the Lincoln mythology as a foundation of his campaign. He mentions the 16th president in almost every speech; when critics charge that Obama is raw and overly ambitious, he notes that both he and Lincoln were inexperienced, little-known Illinois politicians when they set sights upon the White House.

Obama's hardly the only candidate sifting through the presidency's DNA for the myths of 2008. Name most any presidential gene, and odds are it's already being cloned (though Chester A. Arthur's pool probably remains un plundered).

The other Democratic frontrunner, Hillary Rodham Clinton, has a head start on presidential legend; she's already part of it. With Clinton, it's not "I," it's "we" when she describes and often mythologizes her role in the policy successes of her husband's 1993-2001 administration.

John McCain is a latter-day Teddy Roosevelt, a swaggering, barrel-chested reformer in an era of societal transformation and cynicism toward public institutions. Mitt Romney, tall and handsome with a movie star's smile, likes to bask in Ronald Reagan's aura. Andy Jackson might appreciate Mike Huckabee's economic populism. At the same time, some mythologies might need a rest: As an unpopular Bush hobbles off into the sunset, no candidate this year is playing the cowboy.

Even as they burnish their images with old mythologies, the candidates today are building new ones narratives based in fact but served up to represent something bigger.

Of course, Clinton and Obama are the first woman and black, respectively, with a serious shot at the presidency. Their gender and race cards are not always played openly, but everyone knows they're in the deck. It was no accident that female voters lifted Clinton to victory in New Hampshire after she tangled with two male rivals and an emotional response to a question put her vulnerability on rare display.

McCain has built his own mythology with a memoir about his naval heritage and grueling experiences as a prisoner of the Viet Cong. John Edwards' book emphasizes his son-of-a-millworker roots and casts himself as a Southern Perry Mason who tilts at windmills on behalf of "people like my father." Rudy Giuliani can't give a speech without mentioning 9/11.

Today's campaign-trail rhetoric. And building blocks for the presidential myths of tomorrow.

When it comes to distinguishing fact from fiction, ours is a challenging era.

We've been spun to for generations, and it has hardened us into a nation of cynics who live in a time when "truthiness" has actually become a plausible notion. Because those weren't just advisers in Vietnam. Nixon was a crook. Clinton did have sexual relations with that woman. Saddam had no weapons of mass destruction. Brownie wasn't doing a heckuva job.

Our faith has flagged in our schools, our churches, our media, our corporations and, of course, our president. Lies and manipulations, the kinds of calculated untruth that are different from myths, have come close to owning the day. But they don't.

Technology has made the lies slicker and more pernicious, but it has also rendered them impossible to hide. We have more tools to make informed decisions than any Americans who came before. Now we can rewind, download, parse every manipulation on YouTube over breakfast. Every quote is archived, every snippet ready to be retrieved for today and endless tomorrows. If we miss it, Jon Stewart is there for us. We don't trust the fake, and sometimes we don't trust the authentic either.

That's where myth can come in. The gospels of the presidency the books of Weems, Sandburg and Manchester are not odes to saints and gods. They may not be entirely facts, but neither are they entirely lies. They are eloquent, practical guidebooks to our culture not quite "The American Presidency for Dummies," but road maps toward the goals we want our leaders to pursue and the values we want them to embody.

To take the measure of America in 2008, you need more than facts and figures and polls. To truly find its soul, you need to channel the American imagination, too. And on Election Day, whoever harnesses that power of mythology most adeptly has the best chance of becoming part of the myth.

Then, only reality can get in the way.

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