

Learning From The Presidents I

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As the old saying goes, “There are two things I never discuss— religion or politics.” Among some Christians, “politics” is a dirty word. Well, in this installment and the next one, we are going to combine the two. An effective leader is a life-long learner. As long as you are learning, you are leading and living. When you stop learning, you stop both truly living and being able to lead effectively. A leader (or anyone for that matter) who wants to grow will be eager to learn. Proverb 18:15 in the Living Bible says, “The intelligent man is always open to new ideas; in fact, he looks for them.” A truly successful learner can learn from anybody at any time under any circumstances — even from the “dirty” world of politics. As we scroll back through the 42 men who have reached the highest office in the land, we have mixed emotions. It is like reviewing the kings of Judah and Israel in the Old Testament. Some were good, some bad and some really bad. As we think of our presidents, we can learn a lot. Romans 15:4 tells us that “Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us.” As we look back, I am confident that we all have our favorites for various reasons. Some like the brashness and directness of Harry Truman where the “buck stopped.” Most deeply admire the honesty and courage of Abe Lincoln who was not afraid to tackle the tough issue of slavery; the communication skills of Reagan, the charisma of Kennedy, and so forth.

Time and space will not permit us to examine all 42 presidents; so I have selected three of them to see what we can learn and apply in the area of leadership, since that is our theme for all of these articles. The three I would like to focus on are Lyndon B. Johnson, John F. Kennedy and Franklin D. Roosevelt. What I have to share will not be political in nature. We are simply learning from three leaders of the past and putting the observations in the biblical arena for application as Christian leaders. I will not address their moral or family life, their faith or their ethics, but limit myself to “leadership” concepts we can draw from their time in office.

I once sat under the teaching of a pastor in Nebraska for a summer and he used to say, “Experience is the best teacher and fools will have none other.” Let’s use these three presidents and their experiences so we don’t have to make our own stupid mistakes and learn the hard way through our own experience.

I give credit to Doris Kearns Goodwin, from whom I have borrowed ideas. Doris is a best selling author who won a Pulitzer prize in 1995 and who also wrote an article for “Leader to Leader” in November 1998, entitled, “Lessons of Presidential Leadership.”

Here are two lessons we can learn from the combined experiences of these three presidents whose leadership styles are as different as night and day. In June we will consider three more lessons.

Leaders Learn from and Take Personal Responsibility for Their Mistakes and Failures

President Kennedy's biggest mistake while in office was the Bay of Pigs invasion. It was a disaster of the first order. It was ill-advised, ill-prepared and ill-executed. After the fiasco, he revamped his entire foreign policy decision-making structure. He also accepted responsibility for the failure and, interestingly enough, his public opinion ratings went up. He said, "I don't understand it. The worse I do, the more they love me." The public was not responding to his mistakes, but to his willingness to assume responsibility for them and not blame others. Someone has put it well in saying, "It is not whether you win or lose but where you place the blame." As a leader I want to face up to my decisions, admit when I am wrong to my wife, my kids and my co-workers. A leader is a person who makes decisions, some of which are right. When they are not, "fess up and admit it".

Once, during the middle of the war, Roosevelt told a friend, "When I go to sleep at night and I think of all the decisions that I've made that day, I say to myself "Well, old top, you've probably done as best you can." And I roll over and go straight to sleep." God doesn't demand perfection but He does require honesty.

When we look back at the Vietnam war and Johnson's unwillingness to admit mistakes, we see the cover-ups and lies which occurred to hide the truth from the American people. My prayer is, "Lord, make me a man of integrity in my decisions and in my relationships."

My father used to tell me, "Show me a man who never made a mistake and I will show you a man who never made anything!" I want to risk, to try new things, to go out on a "faith limb." But I also want to admit when I have done wrong, failed, made a poor decision and not blame others as is so prevalent in politics, business and in kingdom-work today.

Leaders Know How to Take Time for Important Relationships and Recreation

Franklin D. Roosevelt was the "fireside chat" president. He had great personal confidence in his ability to lead and he had great confidence in the American people to rise to the occasion when greatly outnumbered by the German machine. Prior to our entrance into World War II, we had 500,000 soldiers compared to six million in the German Army. There is no evidence that I know of that Roosevelt had a personal faith in Jesus Christ, but he did apply two biblical principles, perhaps without knowing it. 1) He drew strength from close friends and 2) He knew how to take time away from work to relax and recreate.

He drew sustenance from a remarkable group of people around him. These relationships were essential to Roosevelt's leadership. His conversations with the people who lived with him in the White House allowed him to relax and replenish his energies to face the struggles of the day. Today we call that fellowship, accountability, intimate friendships — relationships that sustain, nurture and prepare us for the battles of life. Being the "rock and island" of Simon and Garfunkel's music won't cut it in today's or tomorrow's

leadership . It was one of the secrets of the early church — part of the “one another(s)” of Paul’s letters.

In addition to relationships, Roosevelt knew how to relax and ready himself for the next battle of a country at war. In the midst of the war he went on several fishing trips, one of which lasted ten days (can you imagine that?). He sometimes got his best ideas while on one of his “getaways.” He knew how to structure relaxation into his working days. I am trying to learn that. To revive the habit of “Sabbath rest” in my ministry. In Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*, he has a wonderful rendering of Matthew 11:29,30; “Learn the unforced rhythms of Grace.” Lord, teach me what that means in my walk and in my work with You!

Recently, I ran across this in my local newspaper, “In the relentless busyness of modern life, we have lost the rhythm between action and rest.” There is a universal refrain: “I am SO BUSY!” As it all piles endlessly upon itself, the whole experience of being alive begins to melt into one enormous obligation. Sabbath time is a revolutionary challenge to the “violence” of overwork. Many of us, in our desperate drive to be successful and care for our many responsibilities, feel terrible guilt when we take time to rest. How are you doing on this one? Learn from Roosevelt.