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Presidents: How Do We See Ahead

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Some scholars of the presidency get annoyed at mere political journalists because they say that we, during a campaign, don't tell the American people enough about how a candidate will act if he wins the office.

Like everybody else, we have our full quota of imperfections. But this particular complaint is unfair on two counts.

In the first place, with all due respect to the scholars, there really is no way to predict specific presidential behavior on the basis of prior performance and known traits of character and personality.

Few if any people could have foreseen that the rather unexciting governor of New York, Franklin D. Roosevelt, would in 1933 and thereafter galvanize and give hope to a despairing, depression-ridden nation with astonishing dramatic flair.

No digging into Lyndon Johnson's Texas background, or his long years in Washington, could have prepared us for exactly the kind of response he made to the Vietnam dilemma he faced in 1964-65.

What scholar, liberal or otherwise, would have told us that it would be Richard Nixon, perceived by so many for so long as a "Communist fighter," who would make the first significant approaches to Peking and Moscow?

Obviously, what a president does in office is the product of an interaction between his make-up and experience, and the situations and problems he encounters—most of which cannot be foreseen when he is seeking office.

Yet, further in newsmen's defense, it is not true that they give no cues at all to a public looking for guiding impressions.

Before he assumed office, Johnson had been fairly well portrayed by perceptive journalists as a man of roaring energy and out-sized ego, who in his days as Senate majority leader maneuvered, cajoled, wheedled, and bulldozed his way to successful management of legislation.

It was not too far a jump from that to a Johnson who, in the White House, treated the presidency almost as a personal possession, drove furiously for the passage of Great Society bills, managed and developed the Vietnam war as if he were a commander in uniform planted in the map room.

He was a natural-born intervener, down to the point of designing the tickets politicians would use to board his southern-bound "Cornpone Special" train in his 1960 campaign as Democratic vice-presidential nominee. His command of such details, and his enormous pride, were well-told stories. Was it, then, all that much a surprise when he would say, in mid-war:

"I don't propose to let North Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh sit in Saigon!"

As for Mr. Nixon, though there could have been no sure forecasting of his conduct toward the Communist world or toward some economic problems, many reporters took note of the special irony that this man who clearly loves politics and government never in his life had given evidence that he could master the art of "human relations" which lay at their core.

It was a pretty thoroughly known thing that Mr. Nixon disliked the ordinary give-and-take of political contact, that he was painfully ill at ease in small talk, that he had to contrive his performance at these levels.

Again, where is the real surprise when, free finally of the need to electioneer any more, the President throws off this uncomfortable burden and walls himself off?

Mr. Nixon's interest in politics and government is at a level at least once removed from direct human links. Though he can of course see all those connections, he is happy only when treating problems in their more abstract form. He is a mover of pieces on the board, who leaves to others the translation of his moves into more basic human terms.