

Tone-Deaf in the Oval Office

A President of the United States should listen to the people, not in on them, and should evoke—not command or coerce—the consent of the governed.

by James David Barber

Franklin Roosevelt was fond of quoting "the missus" to his Cabinet—sharing with them Eleanor's reports on typhoid fever in this district and unemployment in that town. H. G. Wells admirably called Roosevelt "a ganglion for reception, expression, transmission, combination, and realization." In other words, FDR *listened*—and having listened, he adroitly undertook the politics of persuasion.

By contrast, Presidents Wilson, Hoover, and Nixon stand as "active-negative" chief executives, Presidents who work very hard but find the work punishing. Such men are little given to "listening" and even less given to persuading the country to go along with their politics.

The present deep crisis in our presi-

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dential system traces directly, it seems to me, to just such *tone-deaf*, "active-negative" attitudes in the Oval Office. If this country is to avoid more presidential crises, we need to elect Presidents who enjoy the politics of persuasion—the process of evoking consent, rather than commanding or coercing it. Further, our chief executives should be people committed to working within the balance of institutional roles we have inherited from the constitutional tradition.

Such presidential listening, persuading, and role balancing are of course more easily talked about than practiced. For one thing, the volume of data Presidents should keep abreast of is awesome: President Nixon once told Theodore White, "I had to build a shield around myself." He meant a shield to keep away the overwhelming flood of information a President can get lost in, as Harding did. But Nixon carried this protective isolation far beyond the ordinary—screening out whole categories of information (such as the television news), walling himself in behind the rows of buses on Moratorium Day, and, at least by his own account, existing month after month oblivious of the swirl of corruption flooding his campaign. If we are to believe the Watergate witnesses, particularly John Mitchell, the President's curiosity was radically retarded: He lived with hints and clues and indications but was not particularly moved to action when one of his officials told him of political wounds that might be mortal. The solution is more than a matter of propinquity—of rubbing shoulders with congressmen. The President (or any successful politician) has a positive need to know, to ask, to find out, as Kennedy had learned by the time of the Cuban missile crisis. Breakfast with the congressmen could do that—if the President set the right questions and insisted on straight answers. But however many meetings he has, Nixon, like Wilson near the end, has had a record of meeting not to learn but to instruct.

The politics of persuasion rests on the politician's readiness to represent the real world in his arguments. If he is the President, a politician can get by for a season on a daddy-knows-best basis. But continual appeals to his authority and special knowledge soon lose force, and the politician has to make his case with facts. Faith in presidential authority erodes steadily as the honeymoon fades. Lyndon Johnson found that out,

though too late. In the real world Johnson turned a minor mission into a major war. His repeated denials of the facts about Vietnam only served, as F. M. Kail puts it, "to declare that the conventional rules of language had been suspended."

Nixon has sustained and strengthened this Johnsonian tradition. One among many examples is the whole series of false reassurances about Cambodia. The first-degree crime was the killing itself, but the lying—eventually revealed—helped to cut away such remaining shreds of political integrity as Nixon had left. In the larger sense, the politics of persuasion simply cannot work—the Constitution cannot work—with the Big Lie stoutly maintained. Here, concealment and falsification become one.

The obligation to get and give facts is, at its base, an agreement that objective reality exists and is relevant. When that agreement lapses, we get the world of Bishop Berkeley—where you have your reality and I have mine, and the twain meet only by accident. Then a contagious political insanity can take hold. The "problem," as that term was used in the White House by the top Nixon advisors, is always a public-relations problem—the problem becomes not, What is the reality? but, How can we make our perceptions plausible? There will always be fakery in politics, but when lying becomes a way of life in an administration, real political discourse is no longer possible.

Misrepresenting the facts about what he means to do can also undercut a President's credibility. Thus, trust broke down for Lyndon Johnson partly because he had, through the campaign of 1964 and thereafter, given the public to understand that he was bound and determined not to escalate the war in Vietnam. That was his ardent purpose, he said, and the public elected him by a landslide over his war-hawk opponent. The subsequent disillusionment was due to revelations not just that the President had lied about the facts but also—and significantly—that he had misrepresented his own profound intentions, his own basis for action. Similarly, Nixon in 1968 had made it clear that he intended a regime of calm—remember "lowered voices"?—an open administration in

which power would be shared and publicity easy to come by. It is not just that his presidency turned out differently (that was easily predicted from his character and style) but also that his actions were apparently based on diametrically opposite intentions. The wild rhetorical exaggerations, the win-at-any-price atmosphere that led Nixon's forces into Cambodia and Watergate, the hiding and running and pretending and bullying—all this represented Nixon's *operative* intention much better than did his pre-presidential "principles."

The contrast to Eisenhower is striking. Ike was often incredible in the short run, especially in press conferences, as when he invited Congress to cut the budget he had just submitted. But over the long haul, he managed to hold public confidence and support longer than any other modern President. He came across as "sincere" even when he was not doing much as President, and he sustained a sense of continuity of intention. Nixon in the short run—for instance, in any particular speech—sounds convinced of his own convictions, strong in his intentions. But time after time he undercuts his credibility by switching from one stance to its opposite, as if he could segregate his audiences for different speeches. His Oval Office address explaining Watergate—steady sounding, "responsible," conciliatory, almost apologetic—was followed a few days later by a rip-roaring diatribe delivered before the VFW in New Orleans. How in the midst of such charges and dashes could the public, or other politicians, get a grip on where the President wanted to lead the country—on what he *meant* to do?

The politics of persuasion works when the persuader and the persuadee are identified, known to one another. Only in that way can we tell who is accountable and responsible for what arguments. For the American political system is built around a double process—persuasion on issues and persuasion of men. We have so tied the two together that they cannot be pulled apart without seriously distorting the meaning of debate.

The contemporary examples are obvious. We have a surfeit of unattributed leaks by anonymous whistle blowers—largely because the President has made open dissent risky. The President sends an ambassador—his press secretary—to treat with the emissaries—the press—who represent the public. All this indirection obscures who is talking to whom, as when Mr. Ziegler declared the past "in-

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operative," Mr. Warren spoke for a President he rarely saw (much less talked to), and, at the other end, broadcasters Cronkite, Chancellor, and Smith decided what the news was.

As lying about facts and intentions escalates, public trust in the front page of the newspaper erodes. Readers turn to the editorial page to see what the columnists say is *really* going on. The old way to make it in the newspaper game, by scooping—finding and reporting new facts—tends to give way to the interpretative scoop, the new slant or angle on facts already known. The pressure on the three-times-a-week columnist to come up with novel interpretations is, I think, an important contribution to discontinuity in political discourse—and to the somewhat faddish shifts of mood and focus and attention that fray the public's nerves. But at least the columnist and the television analyst speak for themselves.

Public persuasion raises no particular problem about who's listening; but private persuasion does, and no democracy has ever managed to get along without private conversations. If all the government's business were transacted out in the open, it would place burdens on human nature that few politicians could carry; it would turn them all into PR men, and we've got enough of those already. The practical meaning of privacy in political discourse is a contract about who gets to know. That has nearly broken down among senators, for example, and the secret wiretap makes a mockery of privacy.

Amid the furor over whether or not Nixon should have released the tapes, sight should not be lost of his main offense—making the tapes. Every head of state, congressman, bureaucrat, and reporter and party leader and "confidant" who thought he was talking to Nixon alone was wrong. It is hard to imagine how we can ever again have confidence that talks will be private, for it is perfectly possible now to bug even the trees in the woods at Camp David and the sand on the beach at San Clemente. A man who would bug his own brother is unlikely to stop short of such measures, should he think them "necessary."

CONSIDER, TOO, what has happened to the purposes our institutions are meant to serve:

The Congress is meant to exercise authority over government spending through the appropriation process. The Nixon practice of impoundment, con-

demned by the courts in case after case, subverts that process.

The Senate was meant to play at least a reasoned, consenting role in foreign policy. After the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (if not before) the President took nearly complete independent control. In the Nixon administration, war in Cambodia was undertaken without the Senate's even being informed. A small country was bombed into oblivion while the Senate believed the President's assurances that it wasn't happening.

The law-enforcement agencies, including the courts, supposedly operate under law. Nixon organized his own secret police, allowed them to break the law repeatedly, offered high office to a judge in the midst of a trial the President wanted won for the government, and at least implied that he would not obey an ordinary decision by the Supreme Court.

The Cabinet is meant to be a council of chief administrators responsible for their several departments, subject to Senate confirmation, and responsive to congressional inquiry. The Nixon presidency replaced that Cabinet with another one operating out of the executive office, chosen by him alone, bearing no formal responsibility to anyone but him, required to explain nothing to anyone.

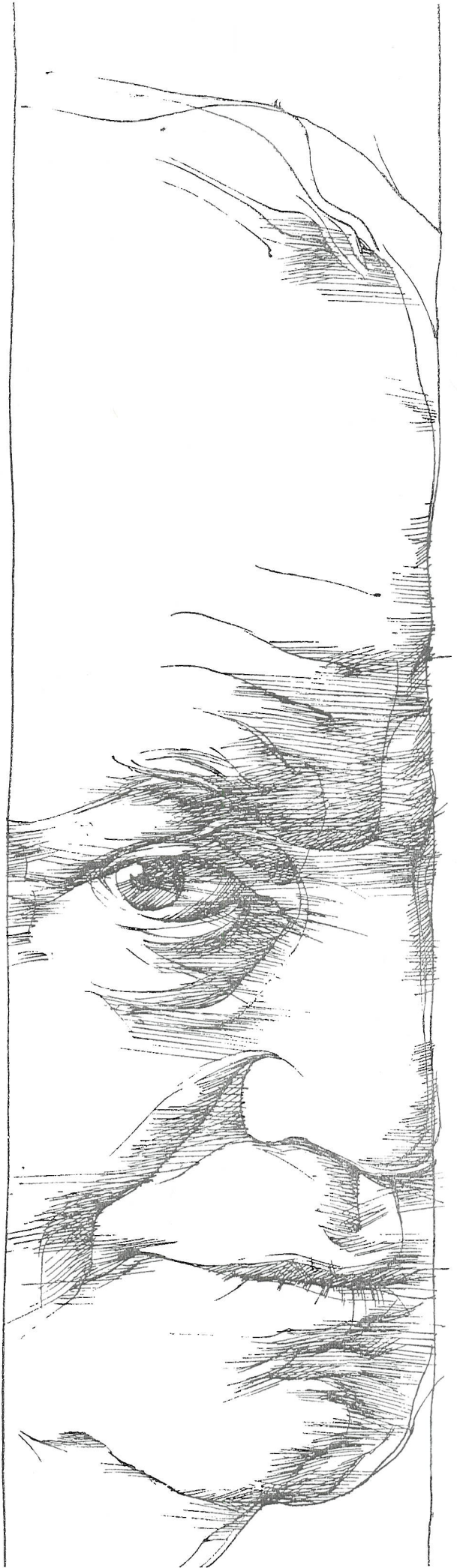
The Vice President ought to be first and foremost a potential President. The Nixon administration's twice-chosen Vice President is now a convicted felon.

The political parties are supposedly permanent organizations linking candidates for, and incumbents of, many different offices; parties, especially the party leaders, are expected to play the main role in recommending presidential candidates to the electorate. Nixon let his party go hang, while he organized a separate personal cadre, which collected (in a variety of ways) huge sums of money and spent them in part to effect the nomination of a weak opposition candidate.

In at least these ways, Nixon as President has undercut the expectations politicians have traditionally been able to count on. These traditional distinctions need restoring. That can be done without revolutionary changes in the existing procedures. For example:

The Senate was originally a small council—nearly a committee—whose most important role was advising and

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checking presidential power in foreign affairs. That role has nearly disappeared; Nixon's contempt in informing only a few of his most ardent Senate allies about the secret Cambodian bombing shows that—if indeed even they were informed.

The restoration of Senate power cannot proceed until the Senate itself stops shoveling its authority into the White House, as it has in surrendering the treaty-making power, the decision to go to war, and control over military spending. No new constitutional provision would be required for the Senate to reassert these constitutional duties. What would help would be a purposeful coalescence of the Senate leadership. The Senate as a whole is now too large to operate as a foreign-policy council, and the Committee on Foreign Relations is too specialized and unrepresentative, peopled as it is with the accidents of seniority. The internally elected leadership could take the reins, could learn to operate as a forceful, unified, authoritative, and representative body to develop and press a Senate policy perspective.

The Senate has imitated the House in the hyper-specialization of its committee structure. The ordinary scene in the Senate is a nearly invisible flux of small-group gatherings to consider the technicalities of legislation. Floating above all that are the presidential candidates, who emerge from time to time with some Ciceronian sentiments. The general dullness is relieved occasionally by a televised investigation, which confirms the public impression that policymaking, like Perry Mason's adventures, is a matter of identifying guilty individuals and rooting them out.

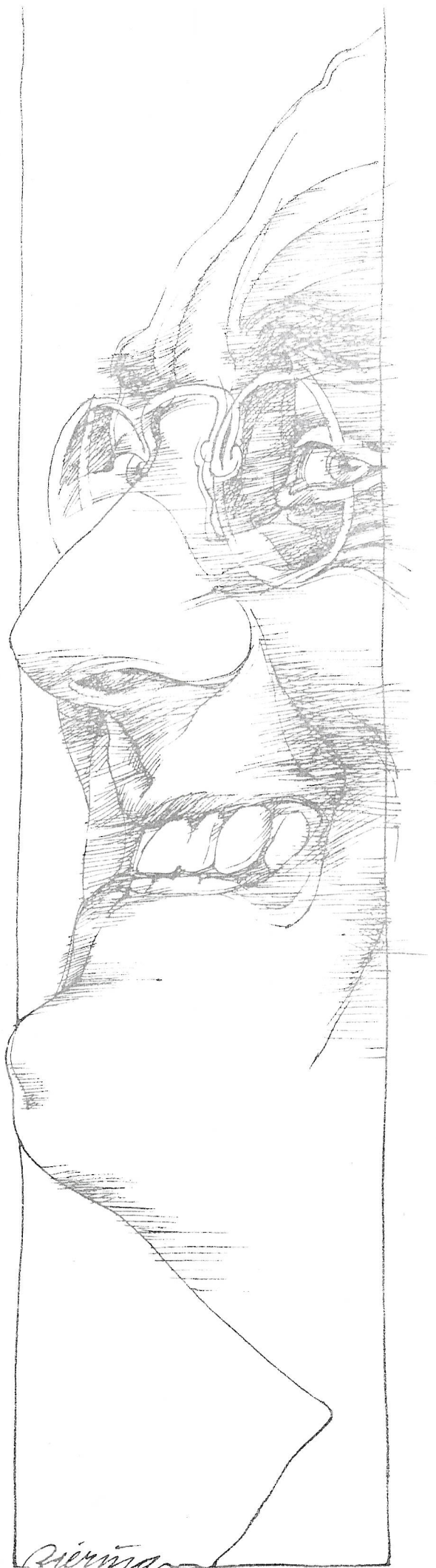
THERE IS NO MEANINGFUL general debate in the Senate. In fact, the closest thing to focused, continuous public debate in our whole system now takes place on the evening television news—a woefully inadequate, fad-fraught substitute. The Senate could, I think, restore meaningful debate in part if the leadership insisted that in each session some few major legislative issues be pulled up out of the flood of routine and special measures and thoroughly debated on the floor in times set aside from the scheduling of committee meetings. Because human nature is what it is, Senator Byrd's suggestion that debates be televised should be given very serious consideration. A Senate so strengthened would perhaps be able not only to check the President when he is wrong but also

to support him effectively when he is right.

That fossilized albatross of our election system, the electoral college, was originally meant to be a collection of respected community leaders elevated by the people to choose a President, exercising in that choice their own best independent judgment. As a practical matter the system was a failure, but the idea persisted in the role of party leaders in nominations. The general need for revitalizing the parties has long been urged by such perceptive analysts as James MacGregor Burns; that need still requires urging, for without a strong organizational base the role of leadership is meaningless. Such a leadership could, if it would, take over the task the Founders set for presidential electors. It could, that is, become "men most capable of analyzing the qualities adapted to the station, and acting under circumstances favorable to deliberation, and to a judicious combination of all the reasons and inducements which were proper to govern their choice. A small number of persons, selected by their fellow citizens from the general mass, would be most likely to possess that information and discernment requisite to such complicated investigations." Their task would begin long before the season of the primaries, long before considerations of "winnability" were clearly enough defined to overwhelm their own judgment of potential candidates' presidential qualities. They would take responsibility, like the old bosses and kingmakers, for "bringing along" candidates—for *enhancing* the winnability of those best suited for the stresses and opportunities of the presidency. Better than any panel of psychiatrists, the party leadership could, if they put their minds to it, assess—from their intimate experience with the political habits, the operative philosophy, and the life-stance of their fellows—which "man who" had it in him, if not to reshape the world, at least to leave it in the shape he found it.

In some such ways, we might be able to restore the procedural constitution. No revolution is possible or necessary. No reliance on paper reorganizations after the fact is required. The basic functions the institutions are meant to serve, kept clearly in mind, can guide reform—if

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those responsible for making it work want to do so.

NO REFORM is more necessary than assessing the character, world view, and style of the next President and those who will succeed him. Our chief executive shapes his regime with only the sparest of guidance from the formal Constitution. In the presidency as in no other political place, the man makes the office. Unless we are willing to let our casualness once more throw up a Johnson or a Nixon, it is time to take thought, time to consider in the most serious and conscious way how we can identify, before a man is locked into the presidency, what he is likely to do there. That is the fundamental task of those who recommend

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Presidents, primarily the party leaders and the press. How might that task be done to avoid yet another fiasco of judgment following on the three we have so recently engaged in—1964, 1968, and 1972?

We should begin, I think, conservatively. The presidency is a dangerous place, a dangerous weapon in the hands of one human being. History shows how hard it is to constrain Presidents by law. History also shows, when we think back on it, that a President can do enormous harm—can wreck a Cambodia or preside over the misery of a Great Depression, for example. The question is not, from the start, how to decide which candidate will be “great” as President, but which is less likely to do us in.

That might seem to argue for a passive President. From time to time, and we may now be running into such a period, the public seems to want nothing so much as a rest, and there will always be Hardings and Coolidges to offer that. The trouble is that our periods of presidential drift always have to be paid for later. The society does not cease to move, the tensions to build, the cleavages to widen. The centrality of the President in the system means that if he abdicates in office, the government abdicates, and his successors must pick up the pieces as best they can. Therefore whatever public propensity there is, by 1976, to recover

from the emotional wounds of the Sixties and Seventies by choosing a quieting President, the choice of a caretaker or a high priest or a balm dispenser must be resisted.

If that is so, we are left with activists. But how to choose an undangerous, maybe even a creative, activist?

The first criterion, strange as it may seem, is to find someone who *enjoys politics*. We may think that any person who has been in politics long enough to be considered for the presidency, and who aspires to spend at least four years in the White House, must enjoy political life. But that turns out not to be the case. For at least four twentieth-century Presidents, the politics of persuasion was more a burden to be borne than an opportunity for happiness. Wilson suffered fools ungladly; Hoover, as William Allen White said, was “constitutionally gloomy, a congenital pessimist who always saw the doleful side of any situation”; Lyndon Johnson, who could appear so ebullient at times, hung on the wall of his Senate office this quotation from Burke:

Those who would carry on great public schemes must be proof against the worst fatiguing delays, the most mortifying disappointments, the most shocking insults, and worst of all, the presumptuous judgment of the ignorant upon their designs.

As for the fourth of these active-negative Presidents, Richard Nixon, the evidence is overwhelming that his stance toward his political experience has been—from the start—that of the suffering striver, the man who sacrifices enjoyment in the name of a higher cause, gives up the gratifications of politics today for some ever-receding day of joy in the future.

What tends to happen to such martyrish politicians as Presidents (as I have tried to show in detail in my book *The Presidential Character*) is a progressive rigidification. The best prediction is that such a President will, eventually, freeze around some adamant stand—as did Wilson in the League of Nations fight, Hoover in refusing relief to Americans during the Depression, and Johnson in the Vietnam escalation. Increasingly, as his stance rigidifies, he will see compromise as surrender, justify his cause as sacred, plunge into intense and lonely effort, and concentrate his enmity on specific enemies he thinks are conspiring against him.

To find an activist President who will not meet (or *seek*) that kind of tragic drama requires close attention—not to this or that little incident or statement,

but to his longtime attitude toward his political experience. Typically, day-to-day, does he find politics fun? If so, deeper and more extensive explorations of his character are likely to reveal a pattern of self-confidence, a readiness to try hard while he retains a certain detachment and humor about his performance, and enough flexibility to know when to change course.

Layered above the President-to-be's character—his basic constitution—is his world view, his understanding of the way politics works. There is much to that; for example, we should look with a special skepticism at those contemporary Rough Riders, those politicians who are forever advertising how tough they are, who see life as a fight in the jungle. A genuine devotion to the politics of persuasion—a belief in that—will serve our needs much better than a sense that the only way to win is to destroy the opposition.

Beyond the politician's philosophy (his ideology, by contrast, turns out to be much less significant) is his political style. We need to assess his habits in politics, particularly as those bear on the work every President must do. Every President must do at least some of these tasks: speak to the nation at large, negotiate with other politicians, and learn the critical details of the processes and issues he confronts. Hoover failed at rhetoric—as could have been predicted from his past. Nixon, the loner, has desperate difficulties with bargaining. Harding got lost in the complex issues he had to master. Franklin Roosevelt, by contrast, excelled at all three tasks, drawing on habits he had learned long before he came to the White House. Of all the elements of a President's personal constitution, his political style, in these terms, is the easiest to discern and predict. Here especially, the party politicians and newsmen should be able to make a careful assessment, using this or a similar simple checklist of core presidential tasks. If they delve deeper, they will find—unless I am wrong—that the best clues are to be found in the candidate's early political life, that time when he emerged as a young leader and found a way to win.

Focusing on these matters may not satisfy the typical American urge to organize belief and will and character out of politics. These qualities take a long time to understand. Yet the task is worth the time, worth the effort; for in the end, it is the hearts and minds of humans that count in making the Constitution live. □