

A PRIMARY PRIMER

By Michael Ventura

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Most people, even the highly intelligent ones, are incapable of taking seriously any fact or idea that doesn't satisfy them emotionally.

That, alas, is the weakness of democracy.

I don't say this from a perch of superiority – I too am one of democracy's weak links. I hate it when one of my pet notions is flatly contradicted by a fact or seriously undermined by an idea. I would rather vote my wishes than my reason. I may trust my car only to experienced mechanics, and I may trust my body only to experienced doctors, and I may want the kids I love to be taught only by qualified teachers – yet I too have entertained the notion that, in these dire times, inexperience may be the only right experience for the presidency. For who in their right mind wants more of the same? And who, in this media-saturated world where what might be called "the authority of the image" reigns supreme, doesn't fancy that merely the image of a woman in the Oval Office, or an African-American or even a populist, would cause fundamental change? It's an exciting (if somewhat ungrounded) concept. Might even be true, right? And that would be wonderful. Feels, to me, very satisfying emotionally. Yet once in the Oval Office, he or she must act. No way around that. And he or she will act upon his or her experience. In fact, people have no choice but to act upon their experience – or someone else's. Which is where fancy ends and the messy stickiness of life takes over.

All the ways that presidents screw up fall into two categories: domestic and foreign. Domestic screwups can be addressed, often fixed, by the next administration. But foreign screwups – which, as screwups go, are always the most catastrophic – hobble the next administration with severe limitations and often gruesome options.

Everyone makes mistakes, the experienced and inexperienced alike. The difference is dependence. Presidents inexperienced in foreign affairs must depend upon their advisers – and advisers usually have agendas. So the inexperienced John F. Kennedy listened to advisers and embarked upon the pathetically misplanned Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. He fired those advisers, then heeded much better advisers the following year during the Cuban Missile Crisis, a life-or-death-of-the-world event that would probably not have happened but for the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs. Like Kennedy, George W. Bush was another foreign-policy virgin dependent upon experienced but agenda-crazed advisers. And if our next president is Barack Obama, John Edwards, or any Republican save John McCain, that person will take on the biggest foreign-policy mess in half a century utterly dependent if not on the kindness of strangers, then certainly on the expertise of people whom he hasn't had time to know well.

Lost in our election-year demolition derby of crashing head-on rhetoric, images shining and/or dented, charge topped by countercharge, exaggeration answered by misstatement, and more poses than a runway line of high-fashion models – lost, I say, in the media battle of the bands that is an American election is a simple, humble question: What does a president do?

Just for fun, we'll imagine a president who behaves pretty much lawfully, that is, with the advice and consent of Congress and within the limits of presidential power as defined in the Constitution. So, what does a president do?

The president is commander in chief of the armed forces and is the only elected official empowered to conduct foreign policy, both in his or her own person or through secretaries and ambassadors whom he or she appoints. For about a century, foreign policy has usually become a president's prime function, whether that president likes it or not – events demand it, events that are always unpredictable. In addition, the president is called our "chief executive," his or her term of office is called an "administration," because it's the president's job to execute policy and to administer the largest organization in the world: the U.S. federal government. Just as importantly, the president initiates domestic change, partly through the (overestimated) "bully pulpit" and mostly through prioritizing economic resources and sponsoring legislation. Put this way, it sounds unromantic, even dry. Put any way, it's a lot of work and a mind-boggling responsibility.

Ideally, to be qualified for the presidency, one needs, first and foremost, hands-on familiarity with foreign affairs and, almost as importantly, skills in administration and the crafting of legislation. Presidents can't administer everything, but they must know what complex administration requires when delegating people to do it for them. Presidents don't write the legislation they submit to Congress, but they'd better understand the small print or be at the mercy of their crafters. That's the nuts and bolts of the job.

Would you want to take on that job without sufficient experience? I sure wouldn't. I can only marvel at the ego of anyone who would and wonder more at that person's grasp of reality.

In this election, for the first time, it's possible for a citizen to hit the Internet and view the candidates' records on websites, Wikipedia, and congressional documents (national and state). Try it. Here's pretty much what you'll find.

Foreign affairs: No Republican candidate but John McCain has any experience worth mentioning, and most of that comes from his 22 years in the military, plus dealing with foreign affairs during his two terms as a congressman and 21 years in the Senate. (McCain is the ranking member of the Senate Committee on Armed Services, but that's not quite a hands-on foreign-policy job.) On the Democratic side, Barack Obama has served only a year on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (his second year as senator, he's been running for president and hasn't put in much time on his job). John Edwards and Dennis Kucinich have no experience save voting for or against this or that. Hillary Clinton has her experience as first lady (whatever that was) and the near-but-not-quite experience of serving on the Senate Committee on Armed Services and the U.S. government's Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. On the other hand, Chris Dodd was in the Peace Corps in Latin America for two years, speaks fluent Spanish, and is considered an expert on Latin American affairs; in addition, he's served on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Bill Richardson has been our ambassador to the United Nations and has been nominated four times for the Nobel Peace Prize(!), partly in recognition of his successful diplomatic efforts in (prewar) Iraq, North Korea, Cuba, and the Sudan. And Joe Biden has long been on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and has authored studies and analyses on missile defense, homeland defense, Putin's policies, bioterrorism, Afghanistan, HIV/AIDS, and homeland security. Biden, Richardson, and Dodd are qualified – as the others clearly are not – for the most important responsibility of the presidency.

Administration: Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee, and Bill Richardson were or are governors; Rudy Giuliani and Dennis Kucinich were mayors. (Huckabee's record as governor is exceptional and surprising.) John McCain, Ron Paul, Duncan Hunter (Ann Coulter's choice for president), Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, Joe Biden, and Chris Dodd have never administered anything larger than their offices – though it's fair to add that Clinton, McCain, Biden, and Dodd have especially extensive experience dealing with our federal bureaucracy, which is a president's main headache.

Legislation: In John Edwards' one term as senator, he left no lasting mark. Barack Obama is still a novice U.S. senator, but his record in the Illinois Legislature is generally impressive. In their various capacities, all the other candidates have wide experience as legislators, but Joe Biden's record stands out both for its range and its depth.

You can find serious blemishes on the records of every single one of 'em (as you can for anyone who's lived awhile and done much). More on that another time.

The most qualified are, in descending order: Joe Biden, Bill Richardson, and Chris Dodd. A Hispanic will not be elected president in 2008, so Richardson is out. In terms of achievement and hands-on experience across the board in what a president needs to know, Joe Biden and Chris Dodd are head and shoulders above the others.

But, as a country, we don't care too much about that, do we?

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