

WHO'S GOT THE CHOPS?

By Michael Ventura

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Two weeks ago I documented the George W. Bush attack on the Bill of Rights: his USA PATRIOT Act, new FBI guidelines, and his imprisonment of American citizens without charges, trial, or judicial review. His second-term intentions are clear: His State of the Union called for buttressing the PATRIOT Act (we know Ashcroft plans an even worse Patriot II). I'm no fan of the present Democratic Party, but it's indisputable that Democrats, at the very least, let the Bill of Rights be; occasionally they even fight for it – a fundamental difference between the parties that Nader and the Greens ignore. As long as the Bill of Rights is intact, it's possible to address everything else. Without it, we haven't got a chance. So it is crucial for a Democrat to win in November.

But which Democrat? As jazz musicians would say, "Who's got the chops?" Who has the skills, the experience, to best do the job? Our federal government is the largest, most powerful organization in the world. Skills required for its leadership are hard to come by. Good intentions won't cut it. Jimmy Carter had some, but, though he had a Democratic Congress to work with, his initiatives went nowhere. Bill Clinton made a mess of his first two years: Not only did he fail in his push for universal health care, but his ineptitude handed Congress to the Republicans in 1994. This so-called "master politician" couldn't get Congress back, with devastating results for our liberties, our environment, and our economy. Carter and Clinton didn't have the chops.

How do you get those chops? Look for the answer in our most effective modern presidents. (By "effective" I mean presidents who set goals and achieved them; whether I agree with their goals is not the point at the moment.)

Republican Theodore Roosevelt was just 42 when he took over the presidency from the assassinated William McKinley in 1901 – still our youngest president. He regulated the financial industry and the then all-powerful railroads (comparable to today's oil industry), passed the first laws to inspect food and drugs, created more than 150 million acres of national parks and forests, helped end the Russo-Japanese War (for which he won the Nobel Peace Prize), *and* built the Panama Canal (which cemented the United States' military and economic reach). How did he learn to do all that? He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard, went to Columbia Law School, and became the youngest member of the New York state Legislature; he wrote books on history (among other subjects) and ran a cattle ranch in North Dakota; he held a high post in the Navy Department, which he quit to lead a volunteer military unit, the Rough Riders, in the Spanish-American War; then he was governor of New York, the nation's industrial and financial center, a state as large as a European country. Thus he entered the presidency experienced in all forms and functions of government: economic, military, legislative, and administrative. Chops.

Democrat Woodrow Wilson had quite a first term (1913-1917): He achieved major tariff and antitrust reform, passed the Federal Reserve Act, and created the Federal Trade Commission – foundational changes that are still part of our system. His résumé: a political science Ph.D. and governor of New Jersey, which was then a major industrial state (smaller than New York, but still as large as many European countries). He was well-prepared for his economic agenda, but when the first World War (1917) thrust him

into international affairs in his second term, he failed miserably; he had no experience, no chops, for that. Chops count.

Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the most influential president since Lincoln. In passing the Social Security Act (one among many achieved and/or attempted programs), he redefined the responsibilities of American government toward its citizens: Farmers, workers, the unemployed, and the aged were *owed basic protections* – still a new idea (at the time) for capitalist America. Through his radio "fireside chats" he was the first to utilize what we now call "the media" to establish a two-way relationship between government and citizenry. President from 1933 until his death in 1945, he led the United States through the Depression and the second World War. His résumé: Harvard and Columbia Law School, New York state senator, assistant secretary of the Navy during World War I, Democratic vice-presidential nominee in 1920 (the ticket lost), then, after recovering from polio, governor of New York. He came to the job prepared with major legislative, executive, and military chops.

As president, Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower ended the Korean War; defined the policies of the Cold War; cut the defense budget; expanded Social Security; created the Department of Health, Education and Welfare; and devoted huge government resources to public housing and freeways. Résumé: West Point, military career, supreme allied commander during World War II (leader of the largest Western force in history), Army chief of staff until 1948, NATO commander in 1950. Again: major executive and military chops.

Democrat Lyndon Johnson was a disaster in foreign affairs, but his domestic achievements in the mid-Sixties were stupendous: the Equal Opportunity Act, the Education Act, the Medical Care Act (Medicare), and the Voting Rights Act. Résumé: Elected to Congress in 1937, he was the first congressman to volunteer for the second World War, and in combat he won the Silver Star; elected to the Senate in 1948; Senate majority leader in 1955. His intimate knowledge of Washington's ways achieved some of the most beneficial legislation in U.S. history.

I suppose I must include Republican Ronald Reagan, who managed to overpower a Democratic Congress because he really was a "great communicator" (trained in Hollywood) and he'd had the experience of two terms as California governor – the equivalent of governing France or Italy. Chops, in a word.

Compare the ineffectiveness of Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. Carter had been governor of Georgia, population roughly 7 million, not as big a job as the mayor of New York City. Clinton was governor of Arkansas, population 2.5 million – a little like being borough president of Brooklyn. Neither state is a major economic entity. Carter had military experience; Clinton famously didn't. Each faced a Democratic Congress, yet in their first (and Carter's only) term they were virtually helpless when it came to implementing their stated goals. Not enough chops.

Howard Dean was governor of New Hampshire, population roughly 1.2 million – the equivalent to being mayor of San Diego. No Washington experience. No international experience. No experience managing a large, diverse polity. In spite of his meltdown in Iowa he's a man to respect; his good intentions are genuine; but if he suddenly found himself chief executive of the largest outfit in the world, facing a Republican Congress? He might protect the Bill of Rights, but as far as initiating anything useful ... history says he'd be road-kill.

John Edwards is a man to watch. Eloquent and genuinely devoted to economic justice. But he's a one-term senator and former trial lawyer, has no military or

international experience, and he's never held a major executive position. A term or two as vice-president, or a few more terms in the Senate, and he'd be ready; but he's not ready now; all the golden gab in the world can't make up for that. As for Joe Lieberman: His policies define the liberal wing of the Republican Party (when there was such a thing), but why would Democrats elect him?

Sen. John Kerry knows the military, knows Washington, has executive experience as a lieutenant governor, and has served for 18 years on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (so he doesn't need a primer on international affairs). It's unlikely he'd be a great president; to be great, history teaches, you need either more significant executive experience or the spiritual dimensions of an Abraham Lincoln. But Kerry might be a *good* president, which is more than we've had in quite a while.

Wesley Clark has had both combat and (as a general) major executive experience; NATO commander during the Bosnian affair, he's had significant international experience. He'd need a vice-president who knows Washington (Kerry) and/or who has a gift for gab (Edwards), but he and Kerry are better qualified for the nuts-and-bolts of the job than any Democratic nominee in decades. Kerry-Clark or Kerry-Edwards would be a tough and able ticket; so would Clark-Kerry or Clark-Edwards. They'd have a chance to win, and the chops to govern. And they'd protect the Bill of Rights. In these dangerous times, that's worth a vote.

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