

## **Rotary Club of Wilmington, Delaware**

**September 29, 2011**

**By Tom Evans**

“We need to start listening again to one another — that’s the spirit we need to foster throughout the country and indeed the world.

I’ll try to cover briefly all the American Presidents in the modern era, with some concentration on three with whom I worked closely. There are many lessons learned that are useful in this increasingly polarized time we live in, and there were many similarities and great differences.

All had successes and failures and all made mistakes. All were concerned with their legacies. All had crises during their tenures. All, to some degree, mistrusted the media and all had a circle-the-wagons mentality, especially in times of crisis.

All, of course, had vice presidents, some of them close, some powerful; most all were qualified, and, in my view, Joe Biden is the best.

All the presidents loved getting away from Washington and most loved to play golf. Some were lucky and some were not. Some endured events over which they had no control that changed the course of their presidencies.

And how their campaigns were conducted is very instructive.

I’ll start with Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR). No one, other than Lincoln, inherited more difficulties. He was elected during the Great Depression that followed the ’29 crash. Millions were out of work — many Americans found themselves wiped out with no safety net to protect them. President Roosevelt moved aggressively and concentrated on jobs, jobs, jobs!

He gave people hope. He established the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). They employed huge numbers of workers. In 1935, he established the Social Security Administration, and was criticized for establishing a socialist state. Does that sound familiar?

In 1937, there was a cutback on programs and the economy had a relapse — kind of like not finishing all your antibiotics because you’re feeling a little better. (There’s certainly a lesson here.) Then came World War II. It was transformational. America came

together like never before. Everyone served and everyone sacrificed, whether it was overseas or here at home. Every American played a role in the war effort. We could use that same spirit today with the challenges we face. Five hundred thousand Americans died, but they and their comrades were not forgotten.

After the war, we established the G.I. bill. It built the middle class in America, and was the greatest education program in the history of the world.

We also established the Marshall Plan and, for the first time in history, the victors helped the vanquished. The benefits from these two programs were incalculable, but I wonder if they could have been established in the environment in which we live today. Thank God there were no Tea Parties then, as we looked at the long-term benefits for America and the world. There were some wonderful lessons learned from World War II and the years following.

FDR did a lot for America, as did his successor, Harry Truman. Under Truman's watch, the G.I. bill and the Marshall Plan were enacted. He also made the courageous decision to drop the atom bomb.

Harry Truman also displayed great courage in firing Douglas McArthur for insubordination, thereby confirming the principal of civilian control over the military. Truman was known for saying the "buck stops here." History has treated him well.

Dwight David Eisenhower was swept into office with widespread popularity in 1952. He might not be nominated by the Republican Party of today. President Eisenhower ended the Korean War and established the interstate highway system. He brought a businessperson's approach to the Oval Office, and thought about the needs for the future. It's made a huge difference for the United States — our economy and our national security. Another lasting contribution was his farewell address, where he warned of the military industrial complex.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy took office very young with a young, intelligent and attractive wife, Jackie, and two young children. JFK lifted our spirits, much like President Reagan. He established the Peace Corps, resolved the Cuban missile crisis and utilized our friends and allies to avoid a nuclear confrontation. His biggest failure was not providing promised air cover for the freedom fighters who landed in Cuba, known as the Bay of Pigs fiasco. America's word was brought into question. Is there a lesson here?

Lyndon Baines Johnson loved politics. Americans viewed him as tough and demanding, but effective in getting legislation passed. He ran against Republican Barry Goldwater and won in a landslide.

At the time, the Republican Party was divided. Conservative Republicans were rude and contemptuous of those who disagreed with them, like fellow Republican candidates Nelson Rockefeller and Bill Scranton. It's fair to ask — is history being repeated?

Johnson's campaign focused on the benefits of a series of anti-poverty programs touted as the Great Society, and defeated Goldwater in all but five southern states. However, with Goldwater's rejection of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the beginning of the southern strategy of the Republican party emerged. Later in life, Senator Goldwater moderated his views, but his followers did not.

LBJ made tremendous contributions during his time in office. Most notably, he passed the Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act, Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Medicare during his tenure.

However, despite the myriad of domestic achievements, escalation of the Vietnam War eclipsed everything else. The notion of guns and butter (domestic initiatives versus military spending) didn't work. Ultimately, the increasingly unpopular war took its toll on Johnson, and he chose not to run for another term. The question was — were our strategic interests so important that it was worth the price we were paying? That's a good question for today.

1968 marked the election of Richard Nixon. After serving as Director of Economic Development in the state of Delaware, I became co-chairman of the Republican National Committee. I even had a White House pass with access to the Situation Room. Nixon had asked me to hit the Democrats hard, but I insisted on accuracy and fairness. To this day, I've always felt that yes, winning is important, but how you play the game is even more important.

Nixon was complex, brilliant, fascinating and world leaders trusted him. During his time in office, he made tremendous contributions: renewing diplomatic relations with China, establishing the EPA and OSHA and his tremendous support and funding for the National Endowment for the Arts.

The president's resignation created tremendous doubts about the survival of our constitutional system. It's likely Nixon wouldn't get the nomination today. He made a huge mistake in the Watergate cover-up, but historians may yet treat him more kindly. Later on, he and I and John Mitchell developed friendships.

Many were vying to be selected as vice president by President Ford — especially George Bush! I met with Governor Scranton of Pennsylvania, and he asked me to put in writing my reasons for suggesting Nelson Rockefeller. Ford ultimately did select Rockefeller, and that helped bring stability and confidence to the country. It calmed markets around the world. Much later, in 1992, Bob Woodward, under the Freedom of Information Act, printed my letter of recommendation on the front page of the *Washington Post*.

To his credit, Ford also pardoned Nixon after his loss to Jimmy Carter. Later Nixon and Ford became friends, and that's a good lesson.

President Carter's experience in government was limited, but he was very intelligent. He served as Executive Officer of the first nuclear sub. While in office, he placed emphasis on the "alleviation of human suffering around the world." He was a quick study, but didn't delegate well.

He was unlucky and hurt by our botched rescue effort in Iran, during which helicopters were crippled in a sandstorm. He lost the election to Ronald Reagan because of it, coupled with a bad economy, high unemployment and the unpopular Panama Canal Treaty that ceded control of the Panama Canal.

President Carter has done more after his presidency than virtually any former President. His work in the environment, Habitat for Humanity, human rights, pancreatic cancer research and promotion of fair elections around the globe, is impressive.

Now to Ronald Reagan — good on T.V., great experience as governor, headed Screen Actors Guild, great storyteller, great sense of humor and married to a very influential wife. Ronald Reagan won two elections, both by fairly large margins. But he lost the Iowa caucuses, and his campaign was floundering. I called a meeting of our Core Group the day after the loss in Iowa. The Core Group was about a dozen of his strongest supporters including Trent Lott, Carroll Campbell, Henry Hyde, Paul Trible, Bob Walker, Mickey Edwards, et al.

I met with Reagan on a plane from East Orange to Greenville-Spartanburg, S.C. I suggested a change in the appearances he was making. Based on that, he started going out to talk with people after speeches and making himself available to the media. His campaign manager, John Sears, was fired a short time later.

For months our group had been working very closely with Ed Meese, Dick Allen and others, and we intensified our efforts. We set up task forces on all the major issues. They then became the nucleus of Reagan's policy positions. No one communicated with Congress better than Ronald Reagan, and we set that example in the campaign. Reagan not only gave soaring speeches but he really listened well! Besides ending the Cold War, President Reagan lifted the spirits of the American people.

George Bush beat Michael Dukakis handily in 1988. He knew world leaders, and they respected him. He built a real coalition in 1991 with Operation Desert Storm in a battle with Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

Despite popularity in the polls due to the victory overseas, he lost the election because of a bad economy. He blamed Alan Greenspan for mismanagement of the Federal Reserve policy. Adding to problems of an eroding economy, the independent candidate Ross Perot siphoned off many votes from the incumbent. In an ironic repeat of history, Ralph Nader, on the Democratic side, gave Bush's son George W. his victory by siphoning off Gore votes in Florida in the 2000 presidential election.

William Jefferson Clinton, a charismatic governor from Arkansas, won in 1992. Initially, he was very unpopular, partly due to his inexperience and Hillary Clinton's push for healthcare reform. Our economy prospered after Clinton raised taxes. Millions of jobs provided a substantial surplus in U.S. coffers for the first time since 1969, and continued for several years.

I believe his greatest contribution was welfare reform. His policies took away the disincentive to work, which pleased the Republicans. Only a Democratic president working with a Republican majority in Congress could have passed it. It required cooperation. That's a major lesson.

Today, Bill Clinton is arguably one of the most popular living politicians. The Clinton Global Initiative, founded in 2005, convenes leaders to "create and implement solutions to the world's most pressing challenges."

That brings us to the campaign of 2000. The primary between John McCain and George W. Bush may have been the dirtiest I've ever seen. After the South Carolina primary, Karen Hughes, a senior advisor, was asked if Bush would work with McCain. Bush's answer: he lost. We won. End of story. There's a huge lesson here about the need to work together.

In the general election against Al Gore, Gore won by 590,000 votes nationally, but the election came down to Florida. In the debate over whether to do a statewide recount, I was compelled to write an op-ed in the *Washington Post* (included earlier in this book) titled "Count them all again!" The U.S. Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favor of letting the votes stand as originally counted, despite widespread acknowledgment of a different outcome had the state recounted votes. With that decision, George W. Bush became our 43rd President. Although the weeks following the election filled the country with strife and division, his motto became "I'm a uniter not a divider."

After the tragedy on September 11, 2001, Bush had the support of the world. Unfortunately, it was politicized. Huge tax cuts, especially at upper income levels, left an unsustainable budget in place and a widening gap between rich and poor. And due to the almost total lack of regulation, our financial system was on the rocks. The Bush presidency also gave way to the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan as retribution for the 9/11 attacks, despite no evidence of "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq at the time.

This eight-year period was filled with a lot of "live for today and don't worry about tomorrow." It was a rather long, gaudy night on the town and, in the clear morning after, we had to pay for our excesses.

In 2008, Barack Obama was elected. He took over in virtually unprecedented times. I don't believe anyone in history inherited more difficulties — crumbling financial institutions, the car industry on the edge of default, and an economy on the brink of another depression — with the exception of Abraham Lincoln. President Roosevelt also inherited many difficulties, but Democrats and Republicans listened to each other and were willing to cooperate.

That's not the case today, and we are living in extremely difficult times around the globe. Here at home, high unemployment and debt, very little credit available and lack of trust and confidence rule the day. Uncertainty abounds, almost throughout the world. The

European debt crisis and problems in other parts of the world plague our own security, plus tremendous competition from other nations, especially India and China.

All of this persists in an atmosphere that is increasingly polarized. Our political system desperately needs reform. Political consultants focus on the negative and instigate conflict instead of relieving it. And we have instantaneous communication with the internet, cable news (24 hours a day) Facebook, YouTube, Bloggers, Twitter, etc., and very little accountability for the accuracy of anything that's said. It's a breeding ground where narrow special interests often prevail.

With all these challenges we face, we do indeed have a wonderful country.

We've faced monumental challenges before. We have an incredible Constitution that gives us the rule of law. And, we are the most generous nation on earth. Think of the Marshall Plan, when our country helped rebuild a broken Europe. Think of the hundreds of thousands of Americans who have given their lives in the cause of freedom. Remember, we may not be perfect, but millions of those outside our shores dream of making America their home.

We will always have conflicts, as our Founding Fathers certainly envisioned. They had some of their own. But there must be respect, cooperation and some degree of compromise! Our system doesn't work without it."